



Somewhere on the map of the Eastern Mediterranean the art of winemaking was perfected and wine culture was established for later generations. It is a sobering thought that this area was the France or Italy of ancient times in what was a golden age of wine.

The Middle East & Eastern Mediterranean was the cradle of the wine industry, and Canaan must have been one of the earliest countries to enjoy wine, over 2,000 years before the vine reached Europe. The oldest grape pips found in the regions of modern Turkey, Syria and Lebanon date back to the Stone Age period (c. 8000 B.C.E.).

The art of winemaking is thought to have begun in the area between the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Sea of Galilee. Indeed, the oldest pips of 'cultivated' vines, dating to c. 6000 B.C.E., were found in Georgia. The biblical Noah was the first recorded viticulturist who, after the flood, "became a husbandman and planted a vineyard." Here scientific evidence supports the Bible. Noah's ark came to rest in eastern Turkey c. 3000 B.C.E.

The vine traveled south, through Phoenicia and Canaan to Egypt, the world's first great wine culture. It is known that the Egyptians particularly prized the wine of Canaan. At this time the Jewish devotion to wine was clearly shown in their developing literature and law.

In about 1800 B.C.E. there was a communication which reported that Palestine was "blessed with figs and with vineyards producing wine in greater quantity than water." Micha's vision of peace on earth and harmony among men was illustrated with, "and every man will sit under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make him afraid."

In the Book of Numbers the story is told of how two men Moses sent to spy out the Land of Canaan came back with a great cluster of grapes which they carried between them. Grapes were chosen as a symbol of how the land flowed with milk and honey. (Today both Carmel Winery and the Israel Government Tourist Office use this symbol as their logo.)

In recent years excavations have uncovered ancient presses and storage vessels that indicate a well developed and successful wine industry existed in the area. Grapes, grape clusters and vines were frequent motifs on coins and jars found from ancient times. Coins have been found commemorating the victories of the Hasmoneans and Bar Kochba with grapes featured as a symbol of the fertility of the country. Many wine presses and storage cisterns have been found from Mount Hermon to the Negev. Inscriptions and seals of wine jars illustrate that wine was a commercial commodity being shipped in goatskin or jugs from ports such as Dor, Ashkelon and Joppa (Jaffa). The vineyards of Galilee and Judea were mentioned then; wines with names like Sharon, Carmel and from places like Gaza, Ashkelon and Lod were famous. Even King David's wine stores were so substantial that his court included a special official to be in charge of them! It is a measure of the importance of wine that anyone planting a new vineyard was exempt from military service, even in national emergency. The grape, one of the seven species of fruit for

which the Holy Land was renowned, was regarded as a blessing in ancient Palestine. The wine produced was not just for drinking ( it was safer than the water ) but also important for medical purposes, for cleaning out homes and dyeing cloth.

Winemaking in Palestine was at its peak during the period of the Second Temple. It was a major export and the economic mainstay of the era. However, when the Romans destroyed the Temple, Jews were dispersed and the once proud industry forsaken.

The Arab conquest from 600 C.E. and Mohammed's prohibition of alcohol caused many remaining vineyards to be uprooted,

The Crusaders briefly revived the cultivation of grapes in the Holy Land and grapes were planted in places like Bethlehem and Nazareth. The revival was short lived, but the Crusaders did return to Europe with many noble grape varieties which had their origins in the Middle East. (Varieties such as Chardonnay, Muscat and Shiraz are said to come from the region.)

In the Levant, the Ottomans continued to discourage wine because of Mohammed's prohibition of alcohol, but distilled spirits, invented by the Arabs in the 9th century, were ignored. Therefore, as arak became more popular, the remaining vineyards were placed under greater threat than ever before.

On the founding of the Ottoman Empire, the Middle East wine industry was finally obliterated because of the decline in wealth of the whole region and the wars and epidemics which greatly reduced and weakened the populations. Communities who had maintained the wine industry finally departed. Prices of wine rose, consumption fell. Hashish & coffee replaced wine as an affordable intoxicant.