

Greeks uncorked French passion for wine

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(PhysOrg.com) -- The bottle sitting in your wine rack at home is probably labelled as a juicy, full-bodied French number, with dark berry flavours and a long, complex finish.

Rewind 2,500 years, however, and the original makers of Côtes-du-Rhône are more likely to have prided themselves on rather different qualities, such as Athenian sophistication, and perhaps just a soupçon of Spartan grit.

Writing in a new study, Cambridge University Professor Paul Cartledge suggests that the French, not to mention the rest of the West, might never have become the passionate wine lovers we are without the assistance of a band of pioneering Greek explorers who settled in

southern France around 600 BC.

Finding a sheltered port at the mouth of a major river system with natural hilly defences, the Greeks founded the city of Massalia, or modern-day Marseilles, and soon began to mingle and trade with friendly local tribes of Ligurian Celts, turning the settlement into a bustling entrepôt.

Within a matter of generations, Professor Cartledge says, the nearby Rhône became a major thoroughfare for vessels loaded with terracotta amphorae containing a new, exotic Greek drink made from fermented grape juice that would soon be taking the uncivilised tribes of western Europe by storm. Travelling up the river might even have constituted the original booze cruise.

The portrait of Marseilles' origins, which appears in a new book, *Ancient Greece: A History In Eleven Cities*, will, Professor Cartledge hopes, lay to rest an enduring debate about the historic origins of supermarket plonk.

Although some academics agree that the Greeks were central to the foundation of Europe's wine trade, others argue that the Etruscans (of modern Tuscany), or even the later Romans, were the ones responsible for bringing viticulture to France.

As Professor Cartledge points out, however, two points swing the argument firmly in the Greeks' favour. First, the Greeks had to marry and mix with the local Ligurians to ensure that Massalia survived, suggesting that they also swapped goods and ideas. Second, they left behind copious amounts of archaeological evidence of their wine trade (unlike the Etruscans and long before the Romans), much of which has been found on Celtic sites.

The story is just one of a number covered in the book with which

Professor Cartledge hopes to make a much more serious and wider-ranging point about where the boundaries of Ancient Greece really began and ended.

Rather than covering the geographical area occupied by the modern Greek state, he argues that we should understand Ancient Greece as having covered a far greater area, from Georgia in the east to Spain in the west.

"In a way, the title of the book is misleading, because there was no Ancient Greek state as we understand the term now," Professor Cartledge said.

"Instead, there were many, many Greek cities - perhaps a thousand of them at any one time. It is in these cities that we find a civilisation that is one of the major taproots of our Western culture and civilisation today."

Modern scholars accept that Ancient Greece was a conglomeration of cities such as Athens, Sparta and Thebes, but further-flung offshoots like Marseilles, Nice, Syracuse and Byzantium have typically been regarded as colonial outposts.

In fact, Professor Cartledge says, they were an extension of the Greek model, which had no sense of a wider state beyond that of the self-governing city and its hinterland, rather like Italian city states centuries later.

From 750 BC onwards, hundreds of these settlements and trading posts started to pop up around the shores of the Mediterranean - "like frogs around a pond", as Plato later put it - and in many cases they were as independent as Athens, Sparta, or any of their more famous sister sites.

The study argues that it is this idea of a Greater Greece which really

explains why the achievements of the Greeks in fields such as art, architecture, politics, literature and philosophy continue to affect the western world so profoundly thousands of years on. Greek influence can be found everywhere, Professor Cartledge argues, because Greece itself was all over the place.

Marseilles might not have contributed much, but it was the staging post from which wine won the west. Nevertheless, it still took a little French style to transform it into a European tippie of choice.

Greeks preferred to mix their [wine](#) with water and regarded drinking the concoction neat as barbaric. So when the enormous Vix Krater, a five-foot high bronze vessel, was given to a Celtic princess in whose grave archaeologists found it centuries later, they presumably meant for it to be used as a mixing bowl.

As Professor Cartledge points out, it took the forerunners of the modern French to realise that its 1,100 litre capacity could also be used for days of unmitigated - and undiluted - boozing.

Ancient Greece, A History In Eleven Cities, is published by Oxford University press.

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