

ANCIENT LESBIAN WINE, SIMILAR TO MODERN MADEIRA?*

by

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ABSTRACT: When describing Lesbian wine, Pliny the Elder referred to it as “mare sapit” (*HN* XIV 74), a phrase that is usually associated with wines mixed with sea water, a process typical for some other Greek vintages, but certainly not Lesbian. By approaching the literary testimonies regarding ancient wine making from the perspective of contemporary oenology, I will attempt to show that Pliny experienced a taste similar to that of today’s Madeira wine.

Thanks to the recent adoption of multidisciplinary approaches that draw together the full remit of literary, archaeological, experimental, archaeobotanical and genetic evidence¹, our understanding of past wines has been considerably expanded. However, we still know very little about the actual taste of ancient wines and archaeological evidence can hardly be expected to move this subject forward. Nevertheless, approaching the literary testimonies regarding ancient wine making from the perspective of contemporary oenology may shed new light on this issue.

While describing wine from Lesbos Pliny the Elder stated “Lesbium sponte suae naturae mare sapit”². This passage has often been interpreted as a reference to the practice of adding sea water to wines³ and was presumed to be a mistake on Pliny’s part, because, according to all other sources, Lesbian wine was not mixed with sea water⁴. One possible explanation for Pliny’s statement is that the taste he experienced was due to the salt that was added to the clay of ancient Lesbian amphoras (which is still done today)⁵, but if this was the case then the organoleptic characteristics of Lesbian wine should also be similar to wines

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¹ DODD 2022 is the most recent example.

² Plin. *HN* XIV 74.

³ WHITBREAD 1995: 155.

⁴ KOMAR 2020: 91–94.

⁵ The amount of sodium in ancient Lesbian amphoras is much larger than the average, which might suggest a similar practice in antiquity, see CLINKENBEARD 1982: 262.