

3.20.1: palm wine, Phoinician wine?

Legrand (ed. of Book 1, 1932) and Lawrence (1935) seem to have hit independently and more or less simultaneously on the idea that what had always been taken to be ‘palm wine’ in Herodotos should in fact be understood as ‘Phoinician’. The only *explicit* mention of ‘wine’ made from the palm is at 1.193.3, where we are told that the tree is exploited by the Babylonians for ‘food and wine and honey’ – a rather off-hand reference. In fact the adjective φ/Φοινικῆιος is exquisitely ambiguous. ἐσθῆς φοινικῆιη at 4.43.5 certainly means ‘clothing made from palm fronds’; but does it follow that φοινικῆιος οἶνος must similarly be ‘wine made from the palm’?

Three primary passages need to be analysed before the suggested reinterpretation can be accepted; I summarise the arguments deployed by the two scholars (‘Le’, ‘La’) in each case, using FO for the adjective where appropriate.

- 1.194.2: the coracles which the Babylonian merchants steer down the Euphrates have as their chief cargo βίκους φοινικῆιους . . . οἶνου πλέους, ‘FO containers full of wine’.

We do not know what *bikoi* are – ceramic jars, wooden casks? But fibrous palm-wood is utterly unsuited for making barrel-staves (La);¹ so adopt Valla’s correction φοινικῆίου (as do Legrand and Powell also), and understand ‘jars of FO wine’ (compare the pottery jars in which Phoinician wine is imported into Egypt, 3.6). I agree. This reading is still however open to interpretation as ‘palm-wine’ (Powell, Antelami) or ‘Phoinician wine’ (Le, La). But why ferry jars of palm-wine down the long length of the river when the tree grows in profusion in the heartland itself (Le)?² Ergo a product which has to be transported, and is valuable enough to be worth transporting, from the periphery down to the centre must be meant; ergo wine ‘from Phoinicia’.

¹Blakesley objects: ‘β. φ. There seems no necessity either to alter the latter of these words into φοινικῆίου, or to suppose that the expression βίκους φοινικῆιους should be rendered “casks of palm-wood.” β. φ. probably meant “palm-jars;” [?? ahg] and the words οἶνου πλέους are added to indicate that it was not the *empty* vassels which constituted the freight (as in the case mentioned i<i>i.6), but that they came to bring the wine in them.’

²Wess. refers to Xen. *anab.* 1.5.10 for palm wine as a common local product on the banks of the Euphrates; the context suggests cheap plonk.

- 3.20.1: the Persian king presents his Aithiopian oppo with φοινικηίου οἴνου κάδον, a firkin of FO wine.

The context requires that this gift be some kind of super-duper impressive item – at least as viewed from the perspective of the donor. And indeed it is brought forward not just as the climactic fourth of four offerings, but as the only one to be warmly received by the donatus. This makes the lower-case option look very unattractive, even for an unsophisticated teetotaler like the Ethiopian king. ‘Palm-wine was a miserable drink’ (Le);³ and as we have seen it warrants only a casual mention among the other products of the palm-tree in Book 1.

The Persian king himself, on the other hand, at least according to Poseidonios, drinks only ‘Chalybonian’ wine (Athenaios 1.51, p. 28d):

ὅτι ὁ Περσῶν βασιλεὺς τὸν Χαλυβώνιον μόνον οἶνον
ἔπινεν· ὃν φησι Ποσειδώνιος [FGrHist 87 F68, F 242 Kidd]
κὰν Δαμασκῶι τῆς Συρίας γίνεσθαι, Περσῶν αὐτόθι
καταφυτευσάντων τὰς ἀμπέλους.⁴

– and that is the kind of wine we might expect him to want to use to impress a potential ally, or rival potentate. And since Chalybonian wine came from the region around Damascus, it might qualify as *Appellation Phénicie Controlée*, even though ‘Syria’ (the DOC used by Poseidonios and Strabo) would seem a more natural description.⁵

Fraschetti translates ‘vino fenicio’, but Asheri is as silent here as he was on the Book 1 passage. Fraschetti has probably mechanically followed Legrand’s Budé.

- 2.86.4: Egyptian embalmers use οἴνωι φοινικηίωι (FO wine) to flush out the abdominal cavity of corpses.

This might sound like some industrial-grade fluid; but in fact Herodotos is describing the top-of-the-range mummification procedure, the Harrods/Rolls-Royce treatment which also uses the expensive spices myrrh and cassia and takes a full seventy days to complete. So there would be no objection

³Objective modern assessments of *Araq el-balah* are no more encouraging: the FAO website (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/t0681E/t0681e08.htm#a>) admits: ‘Dates are not an outspoken [sic] fruit for wine making; they lack natural acidity and the typical flavour and the slight astringency such as found in grapes.’

⁴Cf. Plut. *On Alexander* 342a8, Strabo 15.3.22.

⁵See Lawrence’s note on 1.194: ‘The best wine of western Asia came from Helban (the Greek Chalybon), near Damascus; from here “wine of Khilbunu” was sent to Nebuchadnezzar II, and Ezekiel [27:18] mentions “wine of Helbon” ... It may be the “wine of Byblus” of which Hesiod speaks (Works and Days, 580)’. On that last passage, West refers to Archestratos fr. 59, cited at length at Athen. 29bc.

on grounds of cost to employing chateau-bottled claret as a cleansing disinfectant, and it may of course have been a humble *vin ordinaire*. We know (Le) that the Egyptians did import large quantities of wine from Phoinicia (or rather, that H. thought they did) because he devotes particular attention to the question of what on earth happens to the mountain of empties at 3.6.⁶

All three passages, then, encourage the use of the upper-case letter; none speaks in favour of the humble palm wine. Transport down the Euphrates only makes sense for a high-value import (and Damascus would be a good point of origin); the King will be offering to his Ethiopian counterpart a small barrel of the same proto-Château Musar which he himself is accustomed to enjoy; and the high-class Egyptian morticians are mucking out the insides of their deceased clients with a superior irrigant.

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⁶Bizarre, then, that Legrand prints the lower case here in Book 2 and translates 'du vin de dattier', as if he had never thought about the earlier passage 1.194.2 or the later 3.20.1, or had never seen the necessary connection between the trio. Same goes for Fraschetti ('vino di palma' here, in spite of his 'vino fenicio' at 3.20.1). Lloyd shows no knowledge of the controversy in either the Valla ed. or his three-decker. Nothing in Waddell.