PATRIMÓNIOS ALIMENTARES DE AQUÉM E ALÉM-MAR

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Honey production in Attica, an antique excellence

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Abstract: Honey, like salt, wine and oil, is one of the main foods of the ancient world: it has been, since prehistoric times, the most used sweetener in the Mediterranean. In this basin, in fact, there are several areas of production, but, among these, one of the most famous is certainly the area of Mount Hymettus in Attica. Famous in antiquity, Hymettus honey is a production of excellence that is still much appreciated. Some interesting discoveries, since the 70s, allowed the archaeological validation of literary sources, highlighting places of production active from the classical to the Byzantine period. Index Fossil of these investigations are clay beehives, mainly horizontal, preserved in many sherds that are not always easy to identify. Thanks to the pioneering research of J. E. Jones and the great encyclopedic work on beekeeping of E. Crane, serious attention has been paid over the years to the findings that could suggest honey production in areas that are particularly significant such as Attica, but a work that gathers all the information available, especially those of the most recent excavations related to major projects such as the Athens metro and the construction of the new airport at Spata, near Mount Hymettus, has been lacking. This article aims to offer an overview of the honey production sites in the city of Athens and Attica, identifying the geographic areas most affected by the phenomenon and the different chronological periods. This paper aims to also investigate the ancient production technique, thanks to the comparison with other traditional areas of production and several contemporary examples from neighboring islands such as Andros and Naxos.

Keywords: Archaeology of production, Honey, Attica, Athens, Mount Hymettus

1. Introduction

Honey – like salt, wine and oil – is one of the main foods of the ancient world: it has been, since prehistoric times, the most used sweetener in the Mediterranean; sugarcane, in fact, took its place only during the Arab domination in Spain in the eighth century. Honey has always played a vital role in human life, and its nutritional characteristics and its natural origin made it eligible to be employed in various ways, in culinary, medical and cosmetic fields¹, not to

¹ See the diagram in Bortolin 2008: 17.
mention that its production is associated with wax, essential for several activities, from embalming to sealing, painting and weaving\(^2\).

As a sweetener, honey appeared both on modest and richer dinner tables, sometimes as a real sweet in the form of honeycomb\(^3\); it was used in several dishes of fish and legumes, was an important ingredient in sauces and seasonings\(^4\) and was obviously used in various fruit jams\(^5\).

1.1 Quality and economic value of honey

Honey could be distinguished according to the quality, depending on the different seasons, and the methods of harvest. Classical\(^6\) and Byzantine\(^7\) sources tell us that the periods for the collection were spring (May to June), summer (July) and autumn (September to October), when the honey matures perfectly, about forty days after the equinoxes\(^8\). Thus spring (μέλι ἐαρινόν in Aristotle, or vernal anthinum in Pliny) and summer (or ὡραιόν, aestivum) honey are obtained; summer honey was also mentioned by Pliny as particularly suited to medicines\(^9\).

The type of harvest, however, allowed a distinction between honey of first or second quality, obtained from the spontaneous dripping of honeycombs (the so-called virgin honey) or by squeezing them\(^10\). Depending on whether or not the fumigation was be used to facilitate the collection of combs, honey could absorb the smell of smoke or maintain its flavor, which according to Strabo made it much better\(^11\).

This distinction of the two qualities is known in ancient Egypt, where it was customary to indicate the quality of the honey on the pots that contained it\(^12\), distinguished on the basis of color and purity. These criteria are also followed by classical authors who often specify, for example, how the amber color and the fluid density of the product are an indication of richness\(^13\).

\(^2\) Chouliara Raïos 1989: 165–192. For the pre-classical sources that talk about honey’s exploitation and its symbolic value, see Bortolin 2008: 18-22.

\(^3\) Petron. 35, 5. Ov. Met. 8, 673–677.

\(^4\) Apic. 1, 29–31.

\(^5\) Colum. 12, 47, 3. See André 1981: 189.

\(^6\) In particular, Arist. HA 5, 22, 553b–554a; Arist. HA 9, 40, 626b; Colum. 9, 14, 10; Plin. Nat. 11, 14, 34–37.

\(^7\) Gp. 15, 5, 1.

\(^8\) Bortolin 2008: 33.

\(^9\) Plin. Nat. 11, 15, 38.

\(^10\) See Colum. 9, 15, 12–13; Plin. Nat. 11, 15, 38.

\(^11\) Μέλι ἀκάπνιστον or ἄκαπνον, Str. 9, 1, 23. See also the acapnum honey of Plin. Nat. 11, 15, 45 and Colum. 6, 33, 2. Lucian called it ἄπυρον instead (Nav. 23).

\(^12\) To the Thutmosi III period belongs a stamp with four bees that signals honey quality, see Crane 1999: 165; while two small jars from Tutankhamon’s tomb were stamped with the symbol for good quality honey, see Forbes 1966: 85.

\(^13\) Aristotle establishes the different sorts of honey according to sweetness, color and taste.