

Oil for export? A comparison of Libyan, Spanish and Tunisian olive oil production in the Roman empire*

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Introduction

The ancient economy remains a controversial and intractable field, largely through the lack of ancient literary testimony.¹ Archaeology will never provide full answers to the many vital questions, but it is neglected too often by historians as a tool for shaping hypotheses. This article will attempt to present the range of evidence available on olive oil production and redistribution in three key areas of the western Roman empire. The underlying issue which unites the different sections of the paper is the impact of olive oil on the 'economy', at both local and imperial levels.

Of c. 800 million olive trees in the world today, 98% occur in the Mediterranean region.² We cannot estimate the numbers in antiquity, but it is clear that by, or during, the Roman period, cultivation of the olive had spread to virtually all the regions bordering the Mediterranean. Olive oil was a basic food source, the prime lighting fuel and the essential base for numerous medicaments, soaps, skin oils, perfumes and cosmetics.³ *Per capita* consumption of olive oil in the ancient world is likely to have been far higher than many believe or even than figures for modern use might suggest.⁴ The traditional peasant diet in

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- 1 A minimalist view still predominates in British historiography, M. I. Finley, *The ancient economy* (2nd ed., London 1985). Note, however, the more maximising nature of Italian scholarship, exemplified in A. Giardina (ed.), *Società romana e impero tardo-antico* 3 (Rome 1986) and the revisionist tendencies of K. Hopkins, *JRS* 70 (1980) 101-25 and in P. Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker, *Trade and famine in classical antiquity* (Cambridge 1983) 84-109. Good recent summaries (and alternative views) in Garnsey and Saller, *The Roman empire* (London 1987) 43-103; K. Greene, *The archaeology of the Roman economy* (London 1986); Peacock and Williams, *Amphorae* 54-66. An important article by C. R. Whittaker, *Opus* 4 (1985) [1987] 49-75, came to my attention too late to be fully taken account of here.
- 2 M.-C. Amouretti and G. Comet, *Le livre de l'olivier* (Aix-en-Provence 1985) 7-17; G. de Beir, *Produccion* I, 311-19.
- 3 Amouretti and Comet, *ibid.*; M.-C. Amouretti, *Le pain et l'huile en Grèce antique* (Paris 1986); J.-P. Brun, *L'oléiculture antique en Provence* (Paris 1987); J. Boardman in J. Hutchinson (ed.), *The early history of agriculture* (London 1976), 187-96; H. Forbes and L. Foxhall in *Expedition* 21.1 (1978) 37-47.
- 4 J. Pagnol, *L'olivier* (Avignon 1975) 27, cites the following modern figures (litres per person per year): Greece 20; Libya 16.6; Italy 12.3; Spain 10.6; Portugal 7.5; Tunisia 6.1; Syria 4.1; Turkey 2.7; France 0.5. Given the vastly greater Mediterranean population and the undercutting effect of cheaper vegetable oils, the figures are impressive.