VINICULTURE IN URARTU CIVILIZATION

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Abstract

This paper examines the viticulture in Urartu Civilization, which ruled Eastern Anatolia for over 3 centuries and analyzes the data obtained from the relevant literature and the interviews made with the local inhabitants, grape producers, and archeologists. This paper also attempts to determine the importance of viniculture in the eastern Anatolia within the context of Urartu civilization.

Archaeological excavations reveal that viticulture in Anatolia dates back to 6000-5000 BC. Urartu civilization, which was located near the region of Van, had remarkable competence about viticulture and wine production. Urartians, whose culture and civilizations were based on agriculture and trade, left numerous artifacts which are still functional. The most important ones which are unique to the Urartu civilization are the irrigation canals. During the Urartu period, agriculture depended on irrigation system. One of the most important projects, which is still considered important today, was the 51-km long Şamran (Menua, Semiramis) Canal built for the irrigation of vineyards. The length of this canal reveals the importance of grape cultivation and viticulture for Urartians. The Canal has been in service for 2800 years and is still in function. Inscriptions and wine cellars emerged from Ayanis, Erciş (Çeleşbağ mound 3000 BC), and Çavuştepe excavations show that wine consumption was widespread among the Urartians. This viticulture was inherited from Mesopotamia. After the collapse of Urartu civilization, Armenians sustained the viticulture and wine production. Our interviews with people of Armenian origin show that the grapevine was brought to France and today wine have been produced from these varieties.

Grape varieties in Van region have different color, shape, size and flavor. For instance while grapes cultivated in Erciş town are generally black, tart, adherent, round and with a rough texture, grapes of Van are white, soft, and more sweet. Erciş grape is the only grape vines that survived from the past in the region. Currently during the harvest time between September and October, some festivities are organized traditionally. Viticulture in the region in the past was so prevalent that many settlements were given names of the vineyards, such as Beyüzümli District, Çeleşbağ sub-district, and Şah Bagı village. Observations in the area and interviews with the local people, grape producers, and the archeologists in the excavation areas reveal the importance of the area in terms of viniculture and its great potential for the future.

Key Words: Van Region, Menua Canal, Urartu civilization, viticulture, wine

Introduction

Wine, which has been considered as a holy drink with gods dedicated to it, has been a means for joy and sharing and a symbol of abundance and plenty. Similar to wheat, grape held a special place in ancient mythology and was dedicated to Gods, including Dionysus, the God of wine and harvest, and Priapus, the protector of fruits, plants and gardens. The myths related with grapes can be traced back to the biblical flood (Aytekin, 2002). Archeological findings show that a species of grapevine, entitled ‘vitis vinifera’ has been cultivated in the area between the Caucasus and the Thrace since the Neolithic age and that the wine consumption can be traced back to 5.000 B.C.

Studies on wild grapevine shows that the southern Caucasus was the primary center for domestication of grapevine. According to the archaeobotanists, wild grapevine was cultivated in the area between Georgia, Armenia and Eastern Anatolia (Doger, 2004; vinotolia.com, 2015). Although some of the studies suggest that wine was first produced in today’s Georgia, recent studies have found that the Hajji Firuz Tepe, a Neolithic village located in Iran’s Zagros Mountains hosted the world’s first wines (Yalçın, 2006; Doger, 2004). On the other hand, some of the studies claim that it was the Anatolia in which the wine was first made. According to the Torah and the Holy Bible, wine was first made in the area surrounding the Mount Ararat after the biblical flood. The Torah expresses this with the verse “Then Noah began farming and planted a vineyard” (Aktan and Kalkan, 2004). According to the Persian legend, it was Iranian King Jamshid (2100 B.C.) that first discovered wine (Bursa Şarap Kültürünü sunum notları, 2007; Aktan ve Kalkan, 2004).

Paleobotanists have tried to find when the wild grapevine was cultivated by analyzing grape seeds found in archeological excavations conducted at Neolithic sites located in the Fertile Crescent (the geographical site between the Zagros, Eastern Taurus, Amanus, and the Lebanon Mountains). They have found lots of fruit, grape seed, and grape cluster remains.

Records of Assyrians who ruled the northern Mesopotamia between 900 BC and 700 BC provide important clues about the situation of viticulture. There are names of ten different wine types over the inscriptions belonging to the library of Ashurnasirpal II. Besides, the records belonging to the times of Assyrians king Sargon II show that wine cellars were constructed in the Urartian country located near the Van Lake (vinotolia.com, 2015, Yurt Aniklopedisi, 1985).

Wine in Urartian Civilization

First the Greeks and then the Romans developed the viniculture and started industrial wine production during the ancient times. All the information about viticulture techniques were produced by these two civilizations. In addition to these civilizations, the Urartians gave special importance to wine and considered it as a symbol of wealth and nobility. The Urartian country comprised of the Southern Caucasus region, the center of the Armenian and the Kardukhian grapevine, and the Mount Ararat, which was ruled first by the Nairi and the Uruadhi kings between 1274 and 585 BC and then the Urartu Kingdom.
Figure 1: Van Region

Archeological findings show that the Urartian Kingdom ruled a region that is now shared by four countries, including the Eastern Anatolia Region of Turkey, Armenia, Western Iraq, and the Northern Iraq, Karasu and Furat rivers in the west, Armenian mountains in the north, Savalan Mountains in the east and the Eastern Taurus Mountains in the south constituted the borders of the Urartian Kingdom. Written sources show that the kingdom ruled a region between the Van, Sevan, and the Urmie Lake (Zimansky, 2004, Koroğlu, 2011, Salvini, 2006).

Figure 2: Southern and Southeastern Kingdom of Urartu

Figure 3: Central and Southern Kingdom of Urartu

Source: Pnarcek, P., 2012, Urartu Krallığı’nm Tarihi Çografiyaian Hakkinda Yeni Önterler

The chronicles of Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II (883 BC-859 BC) on the attacks of the Assyrians on the Urartian country note that wine was among the taxes demanded from the Nairi tribes: “I accepted the carts, horses, mules, silver, gold, bronze pots, cattle, sheep and wine paid by the kings of Nairi tribes as tax. I obliged the Nairi tribes to carry them” (Doğer, 2004, Salvini, 2006). In another chronicle, Assyrian King Sargon II explains that the northern region of the Urmie Lake was composed of gardens and that his army destroyed the region: “I detached the cypress beams from the roof of your precious palace and moved it to Assyria. I opened the cellars full of wine and led my army to eat the plentiful cereal there. I entered their wine cellars and Assyrian soldiers drank the delicious wine stored in leather bags like the water of rivers” (Doğer, 2004, Salvini, 2006).

The inscriptions found show that the kings of Urartu civilization are proud of not only constructs such as dams or irrigation facilities, but also their vineyards and orchards. For example, Argesht I says “irrigation channel in the city of Taktumnia and the lands in Qurqak were not planted, there was no vegetable, fruit and grapevine gardens, no channel had been constructed there. God Khaldi ordered me to build all of them... By the omnipotence of God Khaldi, Argesht, the son of Menua, built this impregnable fortress and called it Argishtinil. The land here was arid. Nothing had been constructed there. I ordered the construction of four irrigation channels. I ordered the cultivation of vineyard and orchard...” Russia I says that “I planted fields, orchards and vineyards in my country” (Doğer, 2004, Zimansky, 2004, Koroğlu, 2011).

The total volume of the wine cubes found in the cellars of the Arnavir Fortress, which belonged to the Argesht I period, amounted to 160,000 liters. Calculation of the volume of the liquid storages found in the fortresses ruled by the Urartians indicate that a considerable amount of wine was stored at that time (Zimansky, 2004, Koroğlu, 2011, Yurt Ansklopodisi, 1985). There are reliefs and pictures of huge bronze boilers over tripods on the walls in the temples of God Khaldi. Assyrian King Sargon II tells that the wine dedicated to God Khaldi was carried with these boilers. Given the lack of fertile soil, Urartian winegrowers constructed artificial terraces to grow grapes. Such huge terraces are available especially around the Van Lake. Although the Eastern Anatolia was famous with its fine grape varieties and vineyards until the 19th century, they lost their importance at the moment (Zimansky, 2004, Koroğlu, 2011, Yurt Ansklopodisi, 1985, vinotolia.com, 2015).

While returning from Persia in the beginning of the 4th century BC, Xenophon saw wine storages in cemented cisterns in the city of Komes on the left side of Tigres. “For there was wine so plentiful that they had it in cemented cisterns” (Salvini, 2006, Doğer, 2004). Xenophon tells that the local inhabitants served them a strange drink, which was drunk in a strange way when the Greek army reached the region between Erzincan and Van: “There they had all possible good things in the way of supplies – animals for sacrifice, grain, old wines with a fine bouquet, dried grapes and beans of all sort. Here were also wheat, barley and beans, and barleywine in large bowls. Floating on the top of this drink were the barley-grains and in it were straws, some larger and others smaller, without joints: and when one was thirsty, he had to take these straws into his mouth and suck. It was an extremely strong drink unless one diluted it with water, and extremely good when one was used to it (Doğer, 2004).

Though the Urartians ruled a vast region, the most original constructions of the Urartian civilization are found around the Van Lake. Constructions such as irrigation channels, dams, roads, fortresses, palaces and temples were built especially during the reign of King Menua.

There is no doubt that the irrigation systems make the Urartian civilization a unique civilization. In fact, the Urartians are also known as the water civilization. Irrigation channels and dams were incorporated to the daily lives of people under the rule of the Urartians. It might be claimed that most of these channels were constructed to water the vineyards. Some of the irrigation channels constructed by the Urartians are still in function. The most important of these channels is the 51-kilometer-long Menua (Semiramis-Sharran) channel.
that starts from the Yukari Kaymaz village of Gürpinar district and passes through the Edremit district towards the Ereğ Mountain. The Shamram channel, which has been in function for 2800 years, gives life to an area of 500 hectares. Although some of the scholars of the Urartu civilization claim that the channel was constructed to water the Van plain, our observations in the region indicate that the channel does not reach to the Van plain. Hence, it might be claimed that the channel was constructed to vitalize vineyards around Edremit. In this sense, the Shamram channel is a valuable indicator of the importance attributed to the viticulture by the Urartians.

Within this context, it might be concluded that the city of Van and the surrounding regions have been one of the early viticulture centers not only in Anatolia but in the world. Analyses of the history of the Van region, where the first settlements date back to the 4,000 BC signify the importance of viticulture in the region. Excavations in the Hoşap Castle, located in Güzelsu village of Gürpinar district, revealed the fossils of grapes in the Iron Age. In fact, the Van region hosts numerous inscriptions pointing to the importance of viticulture throughout the history. The following can be given as examples to the inscriptions

Karağaç (İnantça) Rock Inscription (a), is found 5 km east of Ereğ district of Van province and belongs to Sarduri II (764-735 BC). It reads, "By the greatness of God Khalidi, Sarduri, the son of Argishti says: when God Khalidi gave me the Kingdom, I ascended the forefathers: throne. The same year, I set a vineyard. It is called the Sarduri Vineyard. With the greatness of God Khalidi, the son of Argishti, Sarduri is the mighty king, great king, the king of the land of Baniili, the king of the world, the lord of the city of Tuasha."

Karağaç (İnantça) Rock Inscription (b), is found 5 km east of Ereğ district and 200 meters east of the Karağaç (a) Rock Inscription. It belongs to Sarduri II (764-735 BC) and reads as: "By the greatness of God Khalidi, Sarduri, the son of Argishti set this vineyard. Sarduri says: any successor king .... If anyone changes or tries to change the name of the Sarduri Vineyard set by Sarduri .... Sarduri says: if anyone steals, then may God Khalidi, God Teisheba, God Teisheba, and (all) the gods remove him from before the sun"

Hazime Piri Rock Inscription, is located in the southwest of Elmah (Ziyanstan) village of Edremit district, 12 km southwest of Van central district. The inscription belongs to the reign of Ispuni (830-820 BC) and is read: “Ispuni, the son of Sarduri, planted these vineyards and orchards, and erected this inscription to his Lord (Khalidi)”.

Köşk Stella, Stella is found in Köşk village, located 7, 5 km southwest of Muradiye district. It belong to the reign of Menua (810- 785/80) and reads as: “The son of Ispuni, Menua built this stella for the God Khalidi. He built the Khalidi gates. He built a perfect fortress. He named it the city of God Khalidi. He built this vineyard and orchards. He named it Menua’s Vineyard. By the might of God Khalidi, Menua, is the son of Ispuni, the mighty king, the great king, the king of the land of Baniili, the lord of city of Tuasha. When vineyards ripen, one bull, three sheep shall be sacrificed in the name of God Khalidi. Wine shall be spilled in front of Khalidi Gate and this Stella. During grape harvest, qarmehi shall be made in the name of God Khalidi. Qarmehi shall be made in front of Khalidi Gate in the name of Arubani. Qarmehi shall be made in the name of God Khalidi”.

1 The rock inscriptions were read by Rauf Çavuşoğlu, Urartu specialist and academician at Yüzüncü Yıl University, Van.

Kademba (Katepunts) Rock Inscription, The inscription is located in the West of the Shamram Channel constructed by Menua in Kademba site, 3, 5 km southwest of the Edremit district. It is dedicated to a vineyard planted in the name of Taritia, wife of Urartu King Menua and reads as: “(It) is the vineyard of Menua’s wife Taritia. Its (vineyard’s) name is Taririañjaili (same sentences are repeated).

Viticulture in the Lake of Van and Abroad

Grapes around the Van Lake were cultivated as an economic activity during the rule of the Urartians, Medes, Persians, Romanians, Byzantines, Armenians, Arabs, Seljuks, Karakoyunlu and the Ottomans. While wine was produced since the Urartians, the grape production reached its golden age under the rule of the Armenians. Constructed by the Armenian King Gagik I over the largest island of the Van Lake in the 900s, the Akhtamar Church hosts numerous grape reliefs on its external walls (Photo 1).

Even though the height level around the Van Lake is not proper for viticulture, the Lake and the surrounding high mountains create a unique microclimate for the region. This unique climate created by the milding effect of the Van Lake provides the ground for grapes unique to the region and contributes to the development of agriculture. The increase in the territories used for viticulture and the economic role of viticulture ended up with some improvements related to viticulture.

During the reign of the Urartians, viticulture had its golden age and became an indispensable part of the socio-economic life in the region. Even laws were enacted in order to protect the viticulture during its golden age. In an inscription found in Karağaç site of the Ereğ province, King Menua cursed those damaging the vineyard. The inscription reads as: Menua set this vineyard in the name of God Khalidi. If anyone damages these grapes, then may God Khalidi, God Teisheba, God Teisheba and all Gods remove him before the sun.
Despite the passing of thousands of years, Urartu civilization heavily influenced the Van Lake region and the imprints of this influence still exist. The influences are visible in the fields of architecture, gastronomy, and, to some extent, clothing.

This study found that the vintage festivals, which were colorful and spectacular in the past, are still alive, even though the recent festivals are smaller. The festival takes place in September and October. Face-to-face interviews with the local people have been conducted within the scope of this study. The interviewees stated that some grape varieties cultivated in the region were moved abroad, especially to France, by the Armenians. As stated before, the Armenians, which lived in the region after the Urartians and left numerous works of art, engaged in viticulture activities. After they were forced to leave the country in 1915, the Armenians took away grape varieties to their new countries, especially to France.

In the past, viticulture was so widespread and had important impacts over social life in the Van region that the region still holds the imprints of the culture. For example, the names of cities and villages, such as the Beyzülmüş neighborhood, the Çelibabag district and the Şah Bağ village, derived their names from grape. Our interviews with the archeologists and the local farmers and our observations in the field show that the region has an important potential for viticulture and that the viticulture can be revitalized.

The most spectacular constructions of the Urartu civilization are found within the borders of the Van province. Especially the fortress settlements are well-known. Though most of these constructions have been ruined, some of them, including the Van (Tuspa) Ayana, Çavuştepe, Toprakkale, Aşağı-Yukarı Anzafl and Amik Fortresses are still alive thanks to the restoration. Archeological excavations reveal wine storages and cellars in those fortresses.

Çelibabag Tumulus, which is located in Erciş district dates back to 3000 BC. During the excavations, various wine storages were found in the tumulus. In addition to wine, remaining of other drink varieties have been found as well. For example, equipment used in beer-making and remaining of beer in bowls were found at the excavations in Ayana. Since having a vineyard was an indicator of status during the ancient times, it might be inferred that more wine storages will be revealed by further excavations.

It can be stated that the vineyards were comprised of thousands of hectares during the Urartian period. The analysis of the vineyards reveals that vineyards are mostly located in the southern, northern, and eastern shores of Van Lake. The analysis of the region’s climate indicates that the geographic concentration of vineyard is not parallel with the height of the region. However, the existence of Van Lake and the surrounding high mountains provided a fertile ground for viticulture.

As the ancient writers stated, the Van region is suitable for viticulture. For example, Columella stated that “the most well-informed farmers know three types of soil: plains, hillsides and hills. The most fertile soil in plains was the one with a slight slope rather than the flat ones. The fertile ground has a smooth slope for the hillside and is neither very high nor steep that is covered with grass for the hills” (Doğan, 2004).

The explanation of Columella regarding the fertile ground, in fact, defines the ancient areas covered with vineyards in the Van region. Especially, the area of 500 hectares located in Edremit province and watered by the Shamlam channel has smooth slopes. These hillsides receive good amount of sunlight with good wind circulation, yet with no reservation of rain water. Various studies on viticulture note that similar physical conditions have to exist for viticulture and high-quality wine.

Sunlight angles of the vineyards in the Van region differ to some extent. To illustrate, the vineyards in the Erciş region receive more sunlight since they are located at the southern slopes whereas those in Edremit receive less as they are located at the northern slopes. There is a parallel correlation between grape varieties and characteristics of climate, that is, grape varieties react to sunlight, wind, and temperature changes and this reaction ends up with wine of different quality.
Conclusion

The Van Lake region, the home of the Urartu civilization, has a unique geography compared to its surroundings and the region is highly suitable for settlement and agricultural activities. The characteristic of the region resulted in higher population density and the emergence of a civilization in comparison to the surrounding regions. However, it is the Urartians whom definitely had an impact over the social, economic and cultural life in the region. Known as the water civilization, the Urartians engaged in agricultural activities by using modern techniques of the time, particularly the watering systems. Viticulture and wine-making were the dominant agricultural activities during the period of the Urartians. Based on our interviews with the archeologists working in the region, we might argue that the watering systems were constructed to vitalize the vineyards.

Viticulture and wine making, which were symbols of status and prestige in the past, are currently under the danger of extinction in the Van region. Damages given to vineyards during the war; the usage of agricultural grounds for settlements; diminishing of viticulture, lack of information about viticulture techniques, insufficiency to determine proper grapes and production targets, and the low income and product obtained from viticulture could be counted among the reasons of the decay of viticulture in the region. Currently, the most important indicator of the vanishing of viticulture is the disappearance of the vineyards. In fact, the families opt for planting grapes in front of their houses for shade. However, this is in contrast to the magnificence of viticulture in the past. Presently, viticulture is conducted over a total area of 235 hectares and 620 tons of grapes are produced annually. Viticulture is mostly conducted in the province of Erzincan in Van. The grapes, known as the Erzincan grapes are the only grape varieties which have been cultivated since the ancient times. Based on the morphological characteristics of its bunches and fruits, the black-colored Erzincan grape is most suitable for wine and grape juice making but the local inhabitants consumes those grapes for their tables (Keskin, 2010).

References