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## **THE HONEY BEE, HER LIQUID GOLD, AND HER SIGNIFICANCE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN**

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Honey, as the primary sweetening agent of the ancient Mediterranean world before the introduction of cane sugar, was recognized as a vital commodity among the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans alike. Some scholars even claim that honey was as important and prevalent in trade as wheat, oil, and wine. The ancient sources, especially the Roman authors Virgil, Pliny the Elder, Columella, and Cato expend many pages to record the characteristics of bees, the craft of beekeeping, and the myriad of uses for honey and beeswax. Beekeeping was enough of a common practice to afford this attention and yet there is little current scholarship regarding the actual trade and distribution of bee products between regions and kingdoms in a cross-Mediterranean exchange. Both the literary and archaeological evidence help to map a vast network of honey and wax exchange, including the insatiable demands of Middle Kingdom Egypt, Bronze Age Israel, classical Greece, and the Roman Empire's. Evidenced by honey's status as a medicinal remedy, votive offering with divine connections, and a display of wealth, it is readily apparent why this liquid gold and beeswax were in such high demand throughout the Mediterranean.

This research combines several lines of evidence: literary sources, archaeological sites, reverse engineering techniques, biological characteristics of honey bees, in addition to ceramic and lipid analyses to determine how lucrative the ancient honey and beeswax industry could be. In considering sites that preserved beehives in a fire, it is possible to determine a hive's productivity and total yields of beeswax and honey for trade.

This project considers questions regarding the uses of honey bee products, their social and economic significance, potential shipping containers, how much wax is needed for lost-wax casting of certain bronze objects, and product trade estimates across the Mediterranean.

### **Keywords**

honey bees, honey, beeswax, lost-wax casting, cross-Mediterranean trade

### **Note/comment**