

## A Secret God Domesticated...

Having in mind to tell along several parts about everything we know about bees and beekeeping in general, a vast scientific territory that still holds secrets to unveil, I've resorted to several sources, the idea being to extract the most significant fragments. And here is what I have found. On the oldest existing documents, the Mesopotamian clay plates dating 2700 BC, there are lines quoting honey as a medicine. Approximately 1000 years later, in Egypt, Ebers' papyrus circulated, one of the most important sources to learn some of the secrets of Egyptian medicine that also quotes honey and bee wax as medicine. In the Hindu civilization, honey and bee wax appear as medicine used to cure the sick, the discovery of honey being attributed to the Azwins, Sun gods. Most interestingly, the texts call Krishna and Vishnu often Madhumaskha, a derivative of the term *bee* – maybe in reference to the hard work and order that characterize these two gods. We go to Greek mythology, which admits that Jupiter was fed by the bees of Mount Ida that had produced the honey for this purpose. Northern mythology links honey to the god Odin. Out of it a drink is made that has the power to turn any mortal into a poet – maybe a representation of poems' sweetness. Another source says that we still do not possess with certainty data about bees and their origin. A Greek legend attributed beekeeping to Aristeus, king of Arcadia, who taught his subjects how to keep the swarms. Aristeus, shepherd and beekeeper, would be in mythology the son of Apollo and Cyrene.

Virgil in one of his *Georgias* mentions that the best method to obtain a swarm was by sacrificing a young bull, closing it in a hut and leaving it to decay. "*In the following spring, he says, worms will grow that not before long, will turn into bees.*" This "belief" is reminded also by a relief on the tomb of Caelderic, king of the Franks in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, where three hundred bees are sculpted surrounding the head of a bull. One notices thus a common tradition of several people. Without being able to specify when exactly this tradition started, some people in the East and Middle East would install hives on the tombs of those characters that had distinguished themselves in life through their courage. Some historians of the past century stated that only on the tombs of certain heroes would bees nest. If they had had something to do with medicine, then the honey of these tombs had exceptional curing effects. Bees' placement on tombs was to guard the tomb against enemies or thieves in the same zeal as in their guarding the hive and the queen, the whole swarm would attack anyone who dared get near. Others believe that thus the food of the one who had left for the world of the righteous was secured. More often, bees are attributed the symbol of immortality, they were considered spirits, or winds, that change their place, but never die; and the teachings from the life of those dead and buried world perpetuate in the memory of the heirs.

The oldest scientific data about bees and their products is provided by the father of zoology, Aristotle, in the *History of Animals*. In the six books of his work, he describes the life of various species of bees and their reproduction.

Bees collected and deposited honey long before man's appearance on earth – according to another source. The first historical traces of man's collecting honey date since the Neolithic or since the end of the Paleolithic, namely for 12000 years, and are proved by a cave painting discovered in 1921 in the Spider's cave, near Valencia, in Spain. This describes a primitive practice of collecting honey by means of a stick and dropping it into a recipient. This practice is still used today but in a more evolved manner, in Botswana and in Nepal.

In ancient Greece and Rome, however, beekeeping is very well known, another source says. The slave having this task was called “apiarus” among Romans and “mellitus” among the Greeks. Then hives would be harvested by smoking, the honeycombs would be cut but not completely taken away. Bees were thus left food. To cut and scrape the wax, the beekeeper of those times would use special knives of forged iron, practically identical to the instruments used today. Honey was then filtered and left to rest for a few days to allow impurities to come to the surface, after which it was stored in amphora.

Subsequent centuries did not engage a major revolution in the beekeeping techniques: methods were even more rudimentary and cruel since at this time complete honey collection was practiced and the destruction of the colony by sinking or suffocation.

Among those “in the first line of discoveries and concerns” about beekeeping, since the very ancient times, are the Getic populations. In his work *Anabasis*, Xenophon (430-355 BC) writes: “The food of the Getae consisted mainly in honey, vegetables, milk, simple or prepared, and very little meat, as their faith in Zamolxes stopped them”. Later, in confirmation of Xenophon’s words, Dimitrie Cantemir adds to this description in his own work “Describing Moldavia” of 1714. Elected member of the Academy in Berlin, he is tasked with writing a book about his country that he writes in Latin. Translated afterwards into German and Russian, this book becomes a source of information for all Europe. “To what he did not write, or would not write”, is its our duty to add “about what we ought to do in the present circumstances”, the same historian says. Here is a fragment of Chapter VII – *About wild and domesticated animals* in the above mentioned book: “I shall say a few things about bees, as I have noticed that beekeeping is not an unpleasant work and maybe not everybody knows this. The people of the country profit a lot from it: all fields are full of the nicest and most pleasant flowers, and forests incessantly provide enough food to the bees to produce honey and wax. People would profit even more from bees were they allowed to keep all the swarms every year. But the law of the land stops one from having more hives than the neighbor so that one’s increased number of bees should not bring damages to the neighbor. Besides common beehives and wax, Moldavian bees produce a certain wax of strong fragrance and very dark in color not to keep honey inside but against sunlight. Which is why, when beekeepers catch a new swarm with its queen, before bringing it into the hive, they cut holes and small openings into it. Before starting anything else, bees fill in the holes and cuts with the black wax I have mentioned because they can only work in the dark, and only afterwards they start working. Beekeepers take this wax together with the honey in due time: because it smells like amber and holds sunlight, they sell it at a dear price. It has been noticed that bee swarms that are too close from one another, when they meet during their flights a terrible fight starts that does not end until one group flees or gives up beaten. The winning side stops collecting honey from flowers but goes to the losers’ hive and takes their collected honey that the latter cannot defend. When beekeepers notice that their bees do not work well, they spring them with lime slacked in water. The next day, they go to their neighbor, showing him the spots on account that his bees are at fault and demand compensation”.

But, as Miron Costin says, things told quickly happen ...slowly. So we’ll continue next week.

MARTA GIOGIA