

The island of Vis (Greek: Issa), located approximately in the center of the Adriatic Sea and immersed in its deep blue waters, has always been an indispensable point of Adriatic navigation. Throughout history, sailors sought to reach it during voyages in order to shelter from the capricious Adriatic conditions, as this open sea is known for its exceptionally strong and dangerous waters. Ancient mariners knew it well. They drew information about Vis from ancient pilot books dating back to the 4th century BC and adapted their Adriatic voyages according to the proximity of Vis and its safe harbors and bays. It was on such a Vis that, at the beginning of the 4th century BC, the oldest urban center in present-day Croatia was founded — Issa, today's Vis. The harbor of this ancient city was a place where classical seafarers sought safety, recovered from the hardships of the sea, repaired their ships, and replenished food and water supplies before continuing their journeys.

However, Vis is not known only for its safety on the Adriatic open sea; it is equally renowned for its viticulture. Vis has been synonymous with winemaking in the fullest sense of the word since ancient times. The first known record of Vis viticulture and the quality of Vis wine comes from Agatharchides, a Greek teacher, geographer, and historian born in the 2nd century BC in the city of Knidos in Asia Minor. Agatharchides was an extraordinary figure of his time. He lived first in Knidos and later in Alexandria, where he directed the famous Alexandrian Library. This remarkable scholar, Agatharchides of Knidos, once stated — as we learn through the writings of Athenaeus of Naucratis in Egypt, in his work *Deipnosophistae* (The Banquet of the Learned) — that:

**“Agatharchides says that the wine from Issa, the island in the Adriatic Sea, is better than all others.”**

These words testify to several important facts. First, they remind us how significant Agatharchides was, occupying an exceptionally important position. Such a person was certainly familiar with various world delicacies and wines — the drink of the gods. When someone of his stature says that Issaeon (Vis) wine was the best, or among the best, in the world, such a judgment carries great weight. It is difficult to imagine a better authority for assessing the quality of wines of that period. The fact that Issaeon wine was considered the finest fills today's inhabitants of Vis with immense pride, especially since many islanders still remain faithful to the millennia-old tradition of viticulture. Vis remains an island that continues to produce some of Europe's — and therefore the world's — finest wines.

Secondly, Hellenistic Alexandria was a meeting place for scholars, merchants, and travelers from all over the known world. Among these visitors were undoubtedly Issaeon merchants who transported the fruits of Vis vineyards, transformed into divine wine, to that cosmopolitan city, where the quality of the wine reached the palates of the Alexandrian elite. Thanks to those ancient islanders of Vis, whose courageous voyages from Vis to distant Alexandria made such trade possible, the words of Agatharchides regarding the quality of Vis wine have been preserved to this day. His testimony stands as beautiful confirmation that the people of Vis were not only excellent viticulturists, but also outstanding winemakers possessing knowledge and skill difficult to achieve even in the modern world. The ancient inhabitants of Vis clearly understood this well.

The importance of viticulture and winemaking to the Issaeans as economic activities is further demonstrated by the fact that they minted images of grapes and wine vessels on their coins. This clearly indicates how essential viticulture was to their economy — certainly one of their most important economic branches.

Agatharchides was not the only voice carrying testimony from the ancient world. Another witness is an inscription found on a stone altar discovered in the area of Velo Zlopolje on Vis. In that fertile field, like many others on the island, an inscription was discovered stating:

Iovi optimo maximo sacrum. Caius Valius Festus conditor vineae huius loci qui nunc Valianus a Festo dicitur, aeternumque tenet per saecula nomen. Voto suscepto aram adamplavit et tauro immolando dedicavit.

(“Dedicated to Jupiter, the best and greatest. Gaius Valius Festus planted a vineyard in this place, which from now on and forever through the centuries shall be called Valian after Festus. Having fulfilled his vow, he erected an altar and dedicated it by sacrificing a bull.”)

This inscription is exceptionally important and provides a whole range of information. We know the name of the Roman landowner from the 1st century BC who, as a lover of viticulture, planted the first vineyard plantation on Vis — indeed the first in the Adriatic region — and deemed it worthy of permanent and ceremonial commemoration. Furthermore, this act of planting was solemnly concluded by sacrificing a bull at the altar to the god Jupiter. It should be emphasized that a bull was the greatest sacrifice a person could offer, in this case to the supreme Roman deity.

Thus, we see that Vis was already mentioned in the 2nd century BC as the island of the finest wine in the world, and also as the island where the first vineyard plantation in the Adriatic and beyond was established. Gaius Valius Festus, the Roman proprietor, even named the entire field after himself — Valij (Valian) — evidently extremely proud of his achievement. The Romans, being skilled merchants, would never have planted such vineyards had they not known that high-quality grape varieties from Vis would produce excellent wine and consequently generate substantial profit.

Nor does the story of the quality of Vis (Issaeon) wine end there. Another inscription mentions that the Italic family Pontius family settled on Vis, where Marcus and Lucius Pontius traded Vis wine during the 1st century BC. In gratitude for successful trade, these merchants erected a monument to Mercury, the god of commerce. The amphorae in which they transported wine were often marked with their own seals. One of their ships sank near the coast of Vis carrying a cargo of more than 600 wine-filled amphorae.

Archaeological research reveals an exceptionally large quantity of ceramic finds that once formed parts of amphorae and dolia used for storing and transporting wine. Such vessels date back to the 4th century BC.

One could continue speaking at length about the quality of Vis wine through numerous medieval documents practically up to the present day. A particular flourishing of Vis viticulture occurred in the second half of the 19th century, when Vis wine was served at many European royal courts.

It may therefore be concluded that if any Adriatic island can be considered a true synonym for viticulture and winemaking, it is undoubtedly Vis.

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