THE Fig

June is the month of figs. **RICHARD ZAHRA** tells their story. →

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→ The fig-tree goes more or less wild and untended in the rural areas of Malta, ignored until the summer comes along and it begins to produce its delicious and costly fruit. It is indigenous to the rough, coarse areas of the Mediterranean, and thrives in sparse ground on almost no water. It is not uncommon to see a fig sprouting tenuously from a crack in the masonry of bastion walls.

In its natural state, the fig depends for cross-pollination on a minute wasp no larger than a couple of millimetres. Without this cross-pollination, the tree remains barren of fruit. The 'male' fig-tree produces pollen but cannot bear fruit. Its pollen is carried to the 'female' tree which, when pollinated, produces seeds that become fruit. The female fig-wasp enters the syconium, which contains many tiny clustered flowers, through a tiny opening at the base. It lays its eggs in the hermaphrodite fig flowers, which are shorter than the female flowers. The juvenile wasps feed and grow within their fruity shelter, and mate when they are mature. On their way out of the syconium, their bodies become covered with pollen. If female wasps enter a female fig, they will fail to produce a new generation of wasps as the flowers are too long for them to lay their eggs. However, they will pollinate the flowers so the tree will produce unconsumed fruit and seeds for a new generation of trees. If female wasps enter a hermaphrodite fig, they will lay eggs and produce a new generation of wasps – but no new generation of fig trees. It's either one or the other – a mutual and necessary sacrifice.

At some point, a mutation occurred, which gave rise to a fig-tree that requires no wasp pollination to bear fruit. This kind of tree, called parthenocarpic, cannot produce viable seeds. This means that it has to be propagated through the rooting of branches, which means that the trees are actually clones of one another. A research team co-ordinated by Ofer Bar-Yosef of Harvard University in the United States, and Mordechai Kislev and Anat Hartmann of Bar-Ilan University in Israel, a few years ago unearthed the remains of parthenocarpic figs in two archaeological sites close to Gilgal, a village in the Jordan Valley, not far from the ancient city of Jericho. The sites are dated to around 11,000 years ago. The significance of this discovery is astounding – fig-tree cultivation was practised 5,000 years earlier than previously thought, pre-dating the cultivation of wheat, barley and legumes. This means that the fig was one of the earliest plants to be domesticated.

The fig has long been associated with religious symbolism in different cultures. It was while sitting under a fig-tree that Siddhartha Gautama is said to have had the revelation that led him to start the Buddhist religion. The myth of Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of Rome, has them suckled by a she-wolf under a fig tree, which came to be revered as a sacred tree. In Judaism, the fig symbolises true spiritual understanding, and in Christianity, it stands for the promise of renewal. 'Behold the fig tree... when his branch is yet tender and putteth forth leaves, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand' (Luke 21:29, 30).

The fig-tree's tolerance for a varied range of landscapes and climates has facilitated its widespread cultivation. It thrives in hot dry summers and cool winters, making the Mediterranean countries perfect habitats. The ancient Greeks considered the Persians, who lacked knowledge of figs, as barbaric. A military advisor to King Kroisos advised him not to wage war with '...barbarians who know neither wine nor figs.' The Arabs esteemed figs over all other fruit. An eminent interpreter of the Koran, Zamakkhschari, quoted Mohammed as saying: 'If I could wish a fruit brought to paradise it would certainly be the fig.'

The ancient Greek city-states of Attica and Sikyon (named after *syke* – the Greek for fig) were famed for the quality of their figs. The Romans expended considerable effort on developing new cultivars of figs to improve their quality. The Syrian figs were in particularly high demand throughout the Roman empire. The Arabs raised fig culture to new heights of excellence, and the figs of the Iberian peninsula re remain among the best today. The Spanish and Portuguese took figs across the Atlantic in the 16th century, and today California, which has a 'Mediterranean type' climate, ranks third in world fig production, trailing just after Turkey and of course, Greece.

Since ancient times, figs have been attributed with medicinal and nutritional properties. The Roman naturalist Pliny, wrote in the first century: 'Figs are restorative; the best food that can be eaten by those who are brought low by long sickness and are on their way to recovery. They increase the strength of young people, preserve the elderly in better health and make them look younger with fewer wrinkles.' Figs also have mild laxative properties which help to detoxify the body from waste.

Plato wrote that Greek athletes at Olympia were fed figs to improve their stamina. The sugar in figs acted as an instant energy boost. The Greeks also considered it a great honour to bestow fig foliage and fruit upon someone. Figs have the highest mineral content of all common Mediterranean fruits, being rich in calcium, iron, phosphorus and potassium, and they contain small amounts of vitamins C and B. They are also high in fibre and sodium.

In ancient Greece, the fig was linked with the libidinous god of wine and festivity, Dionysius. The myth has it that Dionysius placed a phallus carved out of fig wood on the grave of Polyhymnos, a youth with who he was in love, but who never reciprocated. In Dionysian festivals, fig-wood phalluses were carried in procession.

Christians completely capsized the sexually charged Dionysian associations of the fig-tree. The modesty of naked statues was concealed by the now proverbial fig leaf, in imitation of Adam and Eve, who were supposed to have used fig leaves to cover their private parts when they were expelled from the Garden of Eden after eating the forbidden fruit: 'And they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.' (Genesis 3: 7).

The fig-tree's ability to thrive without care made it the perfect source of fruit in a region short of water and fertile terrain. Figs were an important source of sustenance for the impoverished peasants of the Mediterranean countries. Harvests may have failed, but figs were always plentiful – an important back-up of food. The fig season is short, and figs rapidly become fly-blown on the tree, but methods were developed of drying them for the winter months. They were a precious source of sweetness in a diet without sugar or honey.

'If I could wish a fruit brought to paradise it would certainly be the fig' - Mohammed