Olive in the story, art and tourist value

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Abstract—Situation, distribution, germplasm, culture, myths and history of olive tree in Albania is analyzed, using olive database in genebank, and external data from historical and archaeological archival documents. Albania belongs to the favourable climatic zones of Olive trees distribution, and is very rich in biological and landscape olive tree diversity. Olive germplasm, in two principal counties (Vlora and Tirana) is presented by three basic olive populations: Kanjinjot, White of Tirana and wild population, with 28 (native) varieties. Albania have 1.7 million olive trees (500-3000 years old), and its 10% is evaluated to be near to 1000 – 3000 years old. The old centres of civilization were considered as the old areas of olive trees. There is a high relationship among Castles (Old Illyrian or pre-Illyrian Fortresses) and old olive trees distribution. It is very significant the fact the great number of Old olive trees is situated near or relatively near castles that were at the same time the centres of antique civilization. There were 53 villages, which possessed 136 thousand old olive trees, around 42 castles. For more than 3000 years olives and olive oil have been one of the most celebrated food products; they represent a traditionally valued source of healthy nourishment, and historically are considered to be sacred, a blessed tree, a symbol of joys and victories, rituals, popular culture and tradition.

Keywords- Olive tree, olive oil, olive landscape, castles.

I. INTRODUCTION

The olive tree may have originated in Syria, Asia Minor, Ethiopia, Egypt, or India. Being a familiar feature of the Mediterranean landscape, since ancient times, olive has contributed, in practical and symbolic terms, to the economy, health and cuisine of the inhabitants of the Mediterranean (14,15). Archaeological excavations have revealed the existence of olive leaf fossils dating back to the Palaeolithic and Neolithic era (37,000 BC) on Santorini Island, Greece. The most ancient oleaster traces in Greece are fossilized leaves found in the caldera on the island of Santorini dating back some 50,000 – 60,000 years (19).

The spread of the olive tree to western places (including Albania) is due to Phoenicians who traded with other maritime centres. The Greeks extended olive farming and spread it through their colonies and routes taken by their seamen. Later, the Romans expanded the tree throughout their huge empire. It is believed that the cultivation of olives started around the fourth millennium B.C. in the stretch area of land around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers runs west through Syria to Lebanonese and Palestine shores, and south toward the African desert, where the land is periodically irrigated by the flood waters of the Nile.

Olive trees are the oldest and one of the most important fruit trees (17). The botanical origin of the tree and the beginning of its cultivation has been a subject of dispute (1, 2, 13). Archaeologists tend to believe that the transformation to the cultivated tree should be placed in the early Bronze Age. According to Riley (20) the spread of olive oil has been documented in the Bronze Age by the features and artefacts (stones, pottery) and later by the containers (araballos and alabasters) of the perfume industry which used olive oil as a perfume base.

The first significant improvement of olive cultivation and a better organization occurred in the seventh century B.C. There are many Greek and Latin sources for historical times and particularly the Greco-Roman world. Columella, a Spanish born Roman writer on agriculture, (1st century A.D.), characteristically calls the olive “the queen of plants” (4). Based on estimates by the FAO (2010), Plant Production and Protection Division Olive Germplasm, the world’s olive germplasm contains more than 2,629 different varieties, with many local varieties and ecotypes contributing to this wealth.

Albania is a Mediterranean country where the olive tree is thought to have originated. For more than 3000 years olives and olive oil have been one of the most celebrated food products, they represent a traditionally valued source of healthy nourishment.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study for assessment of geographic distribution and genetic diversity (genotypes / varieties) of olive trees is realized using ex situ, in situ and geographical data of olive tree collection present in Albanian Gene Bank database. It was conducted in all natural growing areas of five districts areas of Tirana and Vlora in Albania.

External information and data related to status or situation of old olive trees, antique oil processing methods, presence (or rests) of olive oil mills and new olive oil factories, the Albanian olive archaeology, the olive tree in art, songs, history, proverbs and myths were gathered using archival documents, archaeological objects, statistical yearbooks, and historical and scientific published documents.

Questionnaires and surveying missions in Tirana, Kavaja, Vlora, Saranda and Delvina districts were organized to collect directly data from farmer families, from Albanian Gene Bank contact points, Agricultural Department, Local Government representatives, to identify the existence of old olive trees, to assess the age of olive trees, to verify the existence of Castles,
to take photos of olive trees, stone mills, and other objects related to olive archaeology, history, arts, sayings, myths, etc.

Olive germoplasm and olive varieties were evaluated to define the similarity and differences among olive populations and genotypes. The assessment of identity/differences between olive genotypes was based on morphological methodology, using scientific published data of olive genotypes. The age of olive trees was evaluated using the trunk biometrical data using the formula: \( M = \frac{P}{L} \), where \( M \) – age (years old), \( P \) – basal woody trunk perimeter, and \( L \) – annual dynamic growth coefficient. For some of olive genotypes molecular data (SSR, RAPD) were also used.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The history of olive trees in Albania resembles an evolution similar to all countries of the Mediterranean basin.

Based on government archival statistic data of 1912 (State archive,) in Albania there were 8.1 million olive trees, the number of trees decreased to 2.8 million by 1944 and again to 1.768 million by 1946.

A. Albanian Olive Germplasm and Varieties

Olive germoplasm is represented by the wild and domesticated forms, and it consists in 3 basic populations: Kaninjot, White of Tirana & Wild forms. In areas under Ionian Sea influence (Vlora) the olive genotypes originated from Kaninjot population. In the central part, under Adriatic Sea influence, (Tirana) the olive genotypes originated from White of Tirana population. The olive genotypes generated from wild populations (such as Pulazeqin, i Holli Himares etc.) can be found in both regions (Vlora and Tirana).

B. Status of Old Olive Trees in Albania

Multi century olive trees (thousands years old) consist of individuals or small groups of individuals (from 5 to 20 olive trees/ha). Olive trees planted during XIV–XX century period (evaluated 100-500 years of age) are situated in blocks with 80–100 plants/ha. During 1955 – 1990 period olive groves (30 -50 years old) consist of classical blocks with 120-150 olive plants /ha. Recently Albanian farmers are using modern high density planting systems (270-330 trees/ha) (as in EU, USA, etc).

Old Olive Trees: There are 1.7 million Old Olive Trees evaluated to be around 500-3000 years old, and near 1 million were identified in Vlora, Tirana, Kruja, Berat and Lezha.

C. The History, Culture, and Myths of the Olive Tree

The hypothesis that different species are native to different areas shows that the olive tree cultivation, in Albania

Source: INSTAT, 2013, Direction of Agriculture

Figure 1. Map Olive Grove in Albania (project)

Figure 2. Distribution of olive trees in Albania

Figure 3. (Graphic 2). Old olive trees evaluated between 1000 – 3000 years old.

More than 10% of Albanian olives are evaluated as very old (1000 – 3000 years old). Old olive trees cover around 28% of the total in Vlora County and more than 60% of total areas with olive trees in Tirana County (Graphic 2).

C. The History, Culture, and Myths of the Olive Tree

The hypothesis that different species are native to different areas shows that the olive tree cultivation, in Albania
(Mediterranean area) took place at the same time as in the other Mediterranean neighbouring countries such as Greece, Italy, etc. There is several evidence that proves the olive tree presence in different regions of western coastal part of Albania, specially taking into account the presence of numerous olive trees more than 1000 - 2000 years old. Scymnus (a Greek geographer) three centuries B.C. describes Epirus and Illyria as a warm prosperous country, filled with good olives, orchards, and vineyards. Strabon in his work “Geography” wrote “Warm and fruitful is this Place” (Illyria), as it is full of olives and vineyards except for few regions of harsh climate. During the Apollonic civilization the French merchants, describe the Illyrian-Eprioitic wine and olive oil, exported from Apollonia, as really delicious and aromatic.

Under the Roman invasion, Julius Cesar describes Aulona as a country with widespread olives groves of great importance. The Illyrians are described as masters of olives and grapes cultivation. Olive oil processing, referred by many Roman scholars as “Olea Liburnicum” was a mastery developed by the famous Illyrians. The Moloses (Illyrians situated in Southern part of Illyria) knew about the cultivation of olive trees 6000 years BC and spread the olives, through the harbours of Apollonia, Aulona, Epidamme and Scutari. In ancient civilization centres, (more than 2500 years old), such as Antipatrea, Scampi, Aulona, Byllis, Olympe, Amantia, Albanopolis, etc, there are old olive trees whose age corresponds to the age of those ancient centres.

With the fall of the Roman Empire and subsequent wars with continuous military campaigns, olive growing was abandoned due to the large-scale devastation of plantations, especially in the coastal areas and deep valleys (15th – 16th centuries).

The cultivation of the Olive trees is one of the oldest signs of civilization in the world, where the benefits of Olive Oil and the mythology were linked. The great significance that the olive tree has had for the ancient Mediterranean olive area is evident in the appearance of the olive tree in the myths of the people who lived there, including the Illyrian people.

The culture of the olive tree is manifested in many different ways (objects, arts, customs, religious, magic rituals, medicals, cosmetics, etc). Illyrians have considered the olive tree as sacred for thousands of years. The olive tree has served as a symbol of peace, life, and fertility. In battles the main food of Illyrian soldiers was olives and oil and bread. Scanderbeg faced thirst of soldiers using dried olive fruits during the battles. To counteract the large-scale devastation of plantations in the 15th and 16th centuries, young couples, to be blessed, were obliged by Scanderbeg rules to plant, before the weeding, at least 10 olive trees. Popular tradition assigns the olive tree a divine origin and the tree is associated with rituals on special occasions, such as weddings, etc.

The antiquity of olives tree in Albania is evident because there are currently a lot of secular exemplars (especially in Tirana and Vlora areas). In Tirana areas (Petrela, Lanabregas, Tufin, Preze, Brret and Tujan) old olive trees which have a perimeter up to 30 meters were evaluated up to 3000 years old. A couple of olives in forest of Brret village (near of Tirana) (Latitude 41°25’15’’N; Longitude 19°39’28’’E;: Elevation H: 157 m) are evaluated as around 3000 years old.

In 25 villages of Tirana County as Brar, Tujan, Linzë, Shishutfunë, Lanabregas, Surrel, Priskë e Madhe, Petrelë, Preze, Ndroq, Dorëz, etc exist old olive trees (of thousands years) that still produce fruits. In 28 villages of Vlora County as Cerkovinë, Nartër, Armen, Kaninë, Drashovicë, Lapardha, Gumenicë, Palasë, Himarë, Borsh, Sasaj, Shën-Vasil, Nivicë, Delvinë, Vagatal, Konispol, etc. very old olive trees can be found.

D. The Antique Olive Oil Processing

In the past, around 70% of olive fruits were processed using antique methods, especially using oil mills with stones. This oil-producing method is still being used in some areas where olive fruits are pressed with a stone mill, the paste is then placed in hessian bags, which in turns are placed one on top of the other under a wooden press. Two wooden screws are turned manually on that press to apply pressure on the olive paste bags, while boiling water is continuously poured on these bags so that a mixture of oil, water, and fine sediments flow into a wooden trough located underneath the press. The oil will rise to the top being lighter and is skimmed with a big wooden spoon, while the water and residues are dumped on the fields. The remaining part, around 30% of olives, is processed using traditional family methods (by feet and hands and warm water).

Oil Mills with round stones were the basic method used in the past. Olive mill stones have been found in several archaeological excavations. Proofs of olive processing mills date back to the 6th century BC. According to a 1940 inventory there were 546 oil mills in Albania and near 88% of those were in Vlora, Delvina, Kamenica, Mallakastra and Tirana areas. The study identified 283 oil mills in 84 villages of Vlora and Tirana Counties (Figure 4).

![Number of Olive Mills in Vlora and Tirana Counties](http://www.quaesti.com)

Figure 4. Number of Olive Mills in Vlora and Tirana

Source: Personal Contribution

E. The Albanian Archaeology on Olives

For more than 3000 years olives and olive oil have been one of the most celebrated food products; they represent a traditionally valued source of healthy nourishment. Wine and olive oil were important products for Illyrians. Several containers discovered in Amantia, Byllis, Kanina, Himara, Oriko, Cerje prove the existence of olives at that time. Various vessels, such as amphorae, barrels, pots, wooden bowls used by pre-Illyrians were discovered in Katundas, Cakran, Blaz, Kolsh (Neolithic, Bronze Age) (5,6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 4,16,12,9), and in
Amantia, Byllis, Kanina, Himara, Oriko, Cerje, and by Illyrians in Byllis, Kanina, Himara, Oriko, Cerje (11,18). Rest of Oil mills that dated back to the III Century B.C. were discovered in Amantia and in Byllis.

Figure 5. Rest of Oil mills of III Century B.C. in Amantia (left) and in Byllis (right)

F. Old Olive Trees and Castles

The Castles symbolized antique civilization centres. Great numbers of old olive trees were found near or relatively near the pre-Illyrian fortresses or castles. It is very significant the fact the great number of Old olive trees is situated near the castles, facts that assume the old centres of civilization were considered as the old areas of olive tree distribution.

There is a close relationship among Castles (pre-Illyrian/Illyrian Fortresses) and spreading of Old Olive Trees. The more old olive trees were found near the Zgendorhes, Herr, Tujuan, Brar, Lanabregas, Preza, Petrela, Persqop, Ndroq, Dorzi, Zigxhafaj, Ishem, Mlik and Clodiana Castles in Tirana County (Figure 7), and near the Triporti, Armeni, Aulona, Kanina, Drashovica, Orkos, Grammata, Oympe, Gumenica, Amantia, Cerja, Dermes, Kemara, Borshi, Qeparo, Phoehikre, Delvina, Vargalat, and Çuka e Ajojtë Castles in Vlora County.

G. Old Olive Trees – Castles – Tourism - Landscapes

The olive tree contributes in shaping landscapes and has deep importance in the agro-economy, including the industrial economies based upon its by-products. Around the antique Castles there are marvellous panoramas, landscapes, fresh shades and waters sources. The presence of olive trees around ancient cities (Berat, Elbasan, Tirana, Vlora, etc.) suggests that these can be used to promote agro-tourism. Such old olive trees, like permanent green knights, co-existing with the marvellous panoramas, landscapes, fresh shades and waters sources, with the clean clear sky, sun and moon, are testimonies to the glorious story of Albanians, producers of life-bearing oil, curative and healing, an elixir of rare magic, which in Albania is found in its full form and flavour, as laid out in the table of Illyrian Gods. On the ruins of the old castles, tourists can enjoy a meal in the local restaurants which are built in the style and with similar materials as the castle.

In Tirana, among 14 castles only 5 – 6 Castles (36% - 43%) are used as touristic attractions. In Vlora among 19 castles only 7 – 8 of them (37% - 42%) are used as touristic attractions. In Albania there are still under the ground a great number of castles (not yet studied by archaeology because lack of infrastructure, means, lack of money, etc). Therefore, these potential touristic attractions can be used in the future, especially those of the coastline areas known as the Albanian Riviera, where all new tourist resorts built should include plant olive trees in their courtyards.

In the last decade, olive trees have been increasingly used as ornamentals in tourist resorts, large trade centres, airports, parks, villas or even at traffic rings, to add a historic and pleasing touch. This has created both a legal and sometimes illegal market of old olive trees.

H. Olive tree in the art and folklore

The Illyrian people had the ritual of the olive wreath/olive branches taken from the queen of all trees as a symbol of blessing, happiness, and prosperity for new families (3). The wreath was a symbol of joy and victory for those who performed remarkable works for the homeland. The wreath with new branches of olives is used on special occasions, such as weddings. When King Pirro was married to Brikena, the daughter of the powerful Dardanian King Bardhyll, an olive wreath of thin olive twigs, with leaves and fruits woven by gold, stood on her bride’s veil. This ritual has been inherited generation after generation and is of great importance in the culture and popular art.

The olive’s ancient heritage in Albania has given birth to many songs, stories, proverbs, and sayings, honouring the venerable and economically important plant. There are lots of songs, dances, and folklore testimonials that prove the ancient relationships among Illyrians and Olive Trees. Common proverbs about the olive tree and its fruit exist in large numbers in the country with a long history of cultivation. Some of the most interesting are: “Who plants an olive makes a fortune”, “I’m suffering the black of the olives”, meaning to show the heavy burden of life, “I don’t have even a drop of oil to tint my eyes”, implying one’s poverty. In ancient times it was believed that burning the leafy twigs in the chimney near Christmas time inside a living room removes bad spirits from the house. The olive fruit itself is a symbol of beauty because in several folkloric songs, the eyes of a beautiful girl as defined as olive fruits. The shade of the olive tree has been a setting for celebrations, a place for the very popular dance of Southern Albania, inspiring the saying “Dance under olive shadows”.

Many ancient olive trees were given symbolic names, like in Pijeras where one can find “the olive of Scanderbeg” and “The olive of tears”. According to local inhabitants, their predecessors planted olives trees to commemorate the marriage of Scanderbeg, but only one of those is still surviving. “The olive of tears” was a ballad about wives watching their emigrant husbands travelling by boat to the first station of their trip, at those times, the Corfu Island. In the area of Tirana, olive twigs were placed in the veil of brides as a symbol of longevity, happiness, and harmony for the young family. On the other hand, olive is also considered as a symbol of luck. The first morning of January, wishing for a prosperous new year, the man of the house wakes up early to bring home the sheep that gave birth, along with an olive twig. Olive branches are also used in 6 January, the Day of the Blessed Water and as decorative parts in Summer Day Celebration.

REFERENCES


