

THE OLIVE TREE AND OLIVE OIL IN THE TRADITIONAL LIFE OF CYPRUS

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The olive tree has co-existed with the inhabitants of Cyprus from the Neolithic period (6th millennium B.C.) to the present day, not only in the countryside but also in the towns. One can see in the gardens of houses, side by side the beloved traditional trees of Cyprus: the lemon tree and the olive tree.

The cultivation of the olive tree began during the 2nd millennium B.C. but the earliest evidence of production of olive oil on the island goes back to the end of the 13th century B.C., the period to which the oldest olive presses that have been discovered in settlements and temples date back (Hadjisavvas 1992 and Hadjisavvas 1996, 59-63),

In antiquity Cyprus was well-known as a place rich in olive trees and olive oil, *evelaios* according to Strabo, and Cypriot olive oil was much sought after as being light and easily digestible (Strabo 14. 6 .5).

The olive tree is hardy and long-lived (Fig. 1). There are some very old olive trees in Cyprus, their trunks full of roomy hollows. The so called *frankoelies* (Frankish olives) are thought to go back to the period of Frankish rule (1191-1489), while another variety of olive tree is called *apostolitzi* (apostolic) because according to tradition these trees sprang from the olive stones

thrown on the ground by the Apostles Paul and Barnabas during their stay on Cyprus (Aristidou 1986, 53).



Figure 1. Old Cypriot olive tree. Photo by author.

During the period of Venetian rule (1489-1571) olive trees were abundant and were distributed all over the island. Most of them, however, were wild, *arkoelies* (oleasters). This problem existed in recent times as well, since in 1937 Cyprus had 2.25 million olive trees of which one million were wild. With grafting and systematic cultivation from 1946-1958, olive trees increased in number by 40% (Christodoulou 1959, 171).

The Turkish invasion in 1974 inflicted a serious blow on production because almost half of the island's olive trees are grown in the occupied northern part of Cyprus.

The olive tree suits all types of cultivation (Fig. 2). According to consular reports of the 19th

century, olive trees were constantly found with the carob trees at the foot of the mountains and skirting the plains, forming a line of demarcation between the uncultivated mountain sides, and the tilled land below (report by the Vice Consul White in Papadopoulos 1980, 83. See also Savile 1878, 93). At the same time there were olive groves, *liofovia*, which came right up to the walls of Nicosia. An area of the capital is still called “Elaion” today and, despite the fact that large modern villas are built on it, a number of olive trees still grow there.



Figure 2. Olive grove in the village of Ayios Ioannis Maloundas, Nicosia district. Photo by author.

Olive trees were included in records of property and the number of olive roots is recorded in inventories of property and marriage contracts (e.g. in the 18th unpublished inventory of the property of the Dragoman Hadjigeorgakis Kornessios).

In an economy that was primarily agricultural, like that of Cyprus, olive oil was only second to wheat as a food staple. Therefore, interregional exchanges were essential and itinerant merchants and even producers would exchange olive oil with grain.

The production of olive oil fluctuated considerably. It did not always meet local needs and only in good years was there the possibility of exporting. This phenomenon seems to have been perpetual. At the end of the 18th century Archimandrite Kyprianos gives the following picture: “The olive groves produce a good quantity of oil so that when they do well the country is provided for up to three years and

sometimes it is even sent out of the country” (Kyprianos (1788) 1974, 544), while in 1868, in the report of the Vice Consul Sandwith on the merchants of Cyprus, it is mentioned that Cyprus is the only island in the East which does not produce sufficient oil for its needs (Papadopoulos 1980, 116).

In the traditional society of Cyprus, especially in rural areas, production remained at the pre-industrial level at least until the mid 20th century. Therefore, the year’s provision in olives and olive oil, was a real struggle, involving the cultivation of the trees, the collection of the fruit and the extraction of olive oil in the pre-industrial olive mills and presses. “When we were going to plant olive trees, we had to dig pits up to four feet deep. We put the olive tree in the pit, pressed the earth down well and then watered the plants. If they were grafted they produced olives in three years,” says an eighty-year old man from Dhikomo (Mavrokordatos 1987, 47).

For better fruiting the olive tree needed looking after, ploughing and hoeing, essential tasks which were described in popular proverbs : “If you plough the olive tree seven times between October and March/April, you’ll go crazy from the oil you’ll produce” and “Give me at the root and I’ll give you on the branch.”

Equally good was a thorough watering: “The olive tree heard the plough and thought it was the irrigation ditch.” The reason why the olive oil of Kythrea was famous, is because in Kythrea there was a perennial spring, the largest spring on the island, which watered many olive trees and turned 32 watermills (Xioutas, A, 1984, 114, no. 346, 297, no. 1055, 32, no. 84, and Xioutas, B, 1985, 155, no. 253).

The tree also needed skilful pruning, which was most important for a good yield: “The olive tree needs a crazy pruner and a sensible picker,” that is to say merciless pruning and prudent harvesting, with the hands (Xioutas, B, 1985, 20 no. 1955). In proverbial speech, the olive tree

voices all its needs: “The olive tree tells its owner: Dig round me? You remember me. Manure me? You feed me. Water me? I am refreshed. Prune me? You make me pregnant.” (Xioutas,C, 1985, 266, no. 4947).

Crucial for production is the flowering season in the spring, when the fruit is small and tender. Being unable to control the weather conditions, people resorted to religion and superstition. They believed that “When you say “Christ is risen” to the olive trees on Easter morning, they keep their fruit” (Xioutas, A, 1984, 77, no. 221). For the olive tree to develop it needs air and light, not buildings all around it: “The olive tree heard the builder’s trowel and burst into tears” (Xioutas, A, 1984, 32-33, no. 85).

The periodical production of the olive tree also passed into proverbs. The tree was considered an independent lady who produced fruit when she wanted to: “They invited the olive tree to the wedding and it told them a lady doesn’t go” (Xioutas, A, 1984, 351-352, no. 1283).

The harvesting of the fruit began in August with the picking of the green olives which would become *tsakkistes* (crushed). They left the other olives to turn black and these they picked in October and even November. The men climbed up the trees and shook the branches so that the fruit would fall and be picked up by the other members of the family or female labourers, but the final harvesting at the beginning of the winter was done by striking the tree with *vakles* (long sticks) or long canes. This very ancient method was effective but harmful to the tree and was strongly criticised by the British (see the relevant comment in the consular report of 1844 in Papadopoulos 1980, 20).

A certain amount of the olives was salted to keep for food for the whole year, while the main crop from the *ladoelies* (“oil olives”) was to be turned into oil. From 3-5 okes of olives they

produced an oke of oil. They put the olives into big baskets of 40 okes. Before they took them to the mill, they spread them out in their yards or on the flat roof tops for about 10 days because they considered that the fruit produced better oil if they left it to shrivel.

The process of extracting the oil was laborious and was done in two stages at special installations which in some areas were open air but in others housed in buildings. The first stage was the crushing of the fruit with a cylindrical millstone which turned in an upright position in a circular stone basin, the *skoutellin tou milou*. The millstone was turned by pushing the pole, i.e. the beam which formed the horizontal axis of the millstone. This was done by men or animals (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Crushing olives in a traditional olive mill, in the 1950s. Photo by F.M. Yiaxis.

The washed olives were turned into pulp, the *zimari*. They left this first pulp, with a hollow in the centre, for many hours in a container and the first oil came out by itself. This was the cleanest/purest oil and they called it *adolon* (pure). The second stage was to squeeze the pulp in a press with a screw, initially of wood and later of iron. They put the pulp into round woven baskets with a hole in the middle, the *zembilia*, and placed 5-7 of them, one on top of the other, in the base of the press. Here they squeezed the filled *zembilia* three times, again with muscle power, turning the screw with the help of a wooden beam. After the first pressing, *adolon* or virgin oil came out, at the second pressing, however, and the third, they threw hot

water onto the *zembilia* which contained the pulp, for the rest of the oil to come out. This they collected in a container. The oil floated and they scooped it up with their cupped hands or even with their palms. They left it for about 20 days for the sediment to settle before they began to use it. The oil was kept in small earthenware jars, *ladokoumnes*, stopped or sealed with beeswax, or in glass demi-johns (*lamintzanes*). Another type of vase used for olive oil was *ladokouzin*, a jug provided with a spout opposite the vertical handle (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. *Ladokouzin*, glazed jug with a spout for serving olive oil. Kilani village, Limassol district. Photo by author.

The unit of measurement of the oil was the litre, which was equivalent to 2½ okes or 10 ounces. For each litre of olive oil they had to give one ounce (a quarter of an oke) to the owner of the mill (Rizopoulou-Egoumenidou 1996, 324-339, Fiouri, under publication, Rizopoulou-Egoumenidou, under publication).

Despite the efforts of the Greek agronomist Panayiotis Gennadios, Director of the newly established Department of Agriculture (1896-1904) to improve the equipment and containers used in the production of olive oil, the substitution of the wooden press, from which the oil acquired an unpleasant, rancid taste, by an iron press, was very slow, since even in 1946 more than half the presses in olive mills were still wooden (the conservatism of the Cypriots over adopting modern methods of production were also noted at the end of the 19th century by

the researcher Magda Ohnefalsch - Richter ((1913) 1994, 104).

The olive and oil were integral elements of the traditional life and the staple ingredients of daily food.

Throughout ages of deprivation, serfdom and exploitation, the olive earned recognition as a valuable and favourite form of food. Because of poverty, the daily diet of the rural population was so frugal, even in the last days of British rule – a lump of bread, a few olives, an onion or, on better days, a piece of lard or *halloumi* cheese – they cherished the olive as their eyes or their sweetheart. All this is summed up in the Cypriot proverb “He looks after her like the olive on his plate” (Xioutas, A, 1984, 231 no. 771). The olives, which were always counted, together with bread, constituted the everyday meal of the farmers, the workers, the craftsmen.

In traditional households olives were prepared and preserved for domestic consumption in a variety of ways. Some of them are similar to those of antiquity. Black salted olives were preserved in *koumnes* (earthenware containers). A particular type of olive is preserved in brine and vinegar and is called *kolymbati* (swimming olive), a word deriving from the ancient name *kolymvas elaiia*. According to the 5th-century lexicographer Hesychios, this kind of preserved olive was called by the Cypriots *vomvoia* (see reference in Michaelides 1998, 32). More common in Cyprus is the green *tsakkisti* (crushed) olive, the *thlasti* of the ancients. Cypriots also keep in vinegar and oil the *adrouppa*, a fleshy olive from which they do not get oil (Xioutas, A, 1984, 74).

The most characteristic Cypriot olive is the *tsakkisti* (Fig. 5), which is prepared as follows: they crush lightly the green olives with a stone and cover them with water which is changed twice a day, until the bitterness has gone. Then they put the olives in bottles with brine and lemon juice. Before serving, they are prepared

with finely chopped garlic, crushed coriander seeds, olive oil, thin slices of lemon and lemon juice (Evangelatou, 35-36).



Figure 5. Green olives *tsakkistes*. Photo by author.

A very common Cypriot food with olives is the *elioti* or olive bread (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. *Elioti*, olive bread. Photo by author.

It is prepared with dough (made of flour and water) in which black olives, dried mint, coarsely chopped fresh coriander leaves and onions are added. They knead all the ingredients together, shape the dough into small round loaves and bake them in the oven (Farmakides 1983, 302).

The role of the olive was, and continues to be, especially important during fasting periods, which covered more than half the days of the year. It is considered, indeed, that the small quantity of oil which the very few olives in the daily diet contain does not break the fast and for this reason the consumption of olives is permitted on fasting days when olive oil is prohibited (for the fasting periods and the related foods see Egoumenidou and Michaelides 2002, 55-64).

In traditional households special provision had to be made for having olive oil in the house during the pre-Christmas fast because the year's provision was running out and the new olive oil was not yet ready. In contrast, for the major Lenten fast before Easter, it was necessary to have wheat for bread: "The forty days olive oil and the fifty days bread" (Xioutas, C, 1985, 173 no. 4613).

For financial reasons and because of the abundance of natural produce on the island, the traditional Cypriot diet was based mainly on the consumption of green vegetables, legumes and pasta, always with bread, while meat from the home-fed animals and chickens, rarely reached the table except at weddings, on major feast days and when a visitor came or someone in the house was ill. In the rural areas of Cyprus, all the year round, every wild or cultivated plant was made use of and in every possible combination. Typical of the Cypriot cuisine are dishes which combine boiled legumes with vegetables, eaten with raw olive oil and lemon, as are salads. Such combinations are black-eyed beans with kale or red pumpkin, fresh black-eyed beans with marrow, beans with celery and carrot etc. In the past, sesame oil was used as a substitute for olive oil during Lent, while for frying they usually used pork fat.

One of the most common dishes was, and still is, brown or yellow lentils.

Brown lentils are often cooked with rice or *trin* (home-made pastry cut in short lengths) and are flavoured with onion fried in olive oil. This dish is called *mougendra*. *Mougendra* absorbs a lot of oil, but the quantity does not show. The following proverb, inspired by the dish, is used in a metaphysical sense: "The lentil turned round and ate the olive oil" (Xioutas, A, 1984, 328 no. 1187).

Stews with olive oil were common, as were also greens fried with eggs in olive oil.

Mavrolado, black oil, had a stronger taste and smell, and was also heavier than the normal olive oil. To produce *mavrolado* they picked the olives while they were still green, cleaned them and scalded them for a short time in water in a copper cauldron until they were soft but not soggy. Then they strained them and spread them out to dry but not to shrivel. They crushed them in the press without water and the oil which came out was left to settle in a tank for 40 days (Fiouri, under publication). The black oil, produced mainly in Paphos and the Karpasia, is produced in only small quantities today, despite the appreciation felt for it by gourmands.

The use of plenty of oil was a sign of prosperity and generosity. They called a stingy person “*alathkiasto*” – a person who grudged putting oil on his food.

Olive oil was also used medicinally in the traditional society. They put drops of it in the ear to cure earache and rubbed the belly with oil to ease pain. They anointed wounds with oil, even those made by the saddle on the backs of animals. They also rubbed figs with oil to make them ripen quickly and early.

Olive oil continues to have an important place in today’s diet, enhanced constantly by a steady flow of information about its beneficial qualities, which do not hold for *mavrolado*. Despite the fact that in recent decades various vegetable oils have been in widespread use, olive oil remains in the minds of Cypriots as the “good oil”. As well as Cypriot oil, which is exported abroad, imported oil, mainly from Greece, is also consumed. According to data from the Statistics Service of the Ministry of Finance, 12,219 kilos were imported into Cyprus in 2002 and 25,976 kilos in 2003. In the same years the export of Cypriot olive oil reached 766,791 and 1,572,975 kilos respectively.

In 2003-04 local production of olive oil was 4,500 tons (1000 kilos per ton) and in 2004-05, 6,000 tons.

It is worthy of mention that, despite the abundance of oil on the market, the Cypriot still aspires today to cultivate his small inherited olive grove or even the few olive trees in his garden or yard. If one calculates the cost of labour for harvesting and the fees at the olive mill, this enterprise is economically unprofitable. Thus, usually the family and friends are mobilised for the harvesting and they themselves take the fruit to the mills, which are now modern and automatic. There they wait for the oil to come out, enjoying, as they did at the old manual mills, *kapires* (toasted bread) dipped in the fresh olive oil, with salt and lemon, together with *tsakkistes* olives and *zivanja* (Cypriot eau-de-vie) or wine offered by the owner of the mill.

The significance of the olive oil in human life, especially in the traditional communities, preserved through time the belief that the olive is a blessed tree and the olive oil is holy.

In Cyprus, as in the whole Christian world, olive oil is used in the sacraments of the Church, such as Baptism and Euchelaion (Anointing), and olive oil burns in lamps in churches, by the family iconostasis and on graves. Of the many customs linked with olive trees and oil, we mention only the use of oil during burial, when the priest pours oil, forming the shape of the cross, over the dead from a plate which he then breaks in the grave (Papacharalambous 1965, 152-153). After the burial, bread with black olives and wine are offered as a consolation (*pariorka*).

In Cyprus wedding wreaths in the past were made of plaited olive leaves. Palm Sunday is called Olive Sunday. The fumes of olive leaves that have been previously blessed in the church, are used to ward off the evil eye. This custom was and still is essential at weddings and on

feast days. The words of a traditional wedding song are characteristic: “Call her mother to come and burn olive leaves for her and with incense burner and olive leaves bid her (Translated from the Greek by Christine Georghiades).

farewell.” (For the use of the olive in customs and in folk worship, see Rousounides 1988, 23-71).

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