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Pemet Shekullore te Ullirit ... Dëshmi eskuzive
Te Kultures Shqiptare

Old olives of Albania
Short Illyrian-Epirus Olive History

The old olives of Albania

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In Epirus or Illyria the olive used to be and still is ... a natural foundation... of all times ... an element of landscape the best tree yieldinggood oil.... which bears and grows strong generous men.

Legends about Illyria and Epirus are strange. The Albanian history and historians have definitely shown signs of incompetence by not contributing and deepening their knowledge to the discovery of this antiquity. Referring to the epanoistic dictionary of Epirus, the history of these two names according to the writer (*Fatos Mero Rrapaj, 2007*) derives from two terms: Tosks and Geghs. The Tosks derive from the Moloses (Epirus) and the Geghs from the Dardan etc. However both of them are Illyrians and derive from the Pelasgians.

According to Herodotus's description, the Moloses lived in good economic conditions, owned vineyards and well developed olives. These people cultivated the olive as the first tree which provided coating, another part was engaged in fishing, whereas the others dealt with farming. Herodotus the most plausible Greek historian said: ***"Epirus is inhabited by non- Greek peoples who speak a barbarian language"***. He also added that these people were called Pelasgians at an ancient time. These Pelasgians according to Herodotus as well as Thucydides, are the ones who invented the Pantheon of Gods, which was Pelasgian, but later on it was adapted by the Greeks.

It was the Moloses who spread the culture of the olive as far as Shkodra, because they dealt with mutual trade agreements with all the Illyrian countries, through the harbours of Apollonia, Vlora and Durrës. At ancient times the Pelasgians lived in Athens as well as all over the Greek territory, except for the islands. They planted olives and Cypresus around each castle, for the sake of the trees. The Pelasgians were a group of Illyrian tribes, which were mentioned by Homer with other Illyrian tribes, such as the Dardans, Taulants, Enkelejds etc, who fought against the Achaeans in the war of Troy as allies of the king Priam and Hector in defence of Troy.

Further on with the weakening of Epirus the Greeks created a colony in the territories of the Illyrian and Epirus kingdoms, especially in the island of Kerkyra, in Apollonia and Dyrrachium (Durrës). Agriculture was well developed at these times, above all the olive groves and vineyards, oil and wine were the main products of these people.

The trade relationships with the French were described during the period of Apollonic civilization, 150-300 years BC, whose harbour describes the trade relationship with the French at the time. They traded regularly with Illyria taking from them olive oil and wine. The Informatorio Agrario describes that Kaberne Sauvignon cv. originates from Apollonia.

The olive was a generous tree used to feed the Illyrian people. It had emancipated them, saved them from the barbarism and increased culture and civilisation. The Epirus people had the ritual of the olive wreath with twigs and leaves from the blessed tree, a symbol of joys and victories during war. The wreath was a symbol for those who performed remarkable works for the homeland. Three centuries BC Scymnus (a Greek geographer) describes Epirus and Illyria as a warm, prosperous country, full of olive trees and vineyards.

When king Pirro was married to Brikena, the daughter of the powerful Dardanian king Bardhyl, an olive wreath of thin twigs stood on her bride's veil, leaves and olive fruits woven with "*gjurmish*" by the olives of Epirus. This ritual has been inherited generation after generation, at the right place and of great importance in the culture and popular art. This tradition derived from antiquity still goes on nowadays where in the bride's veil, a wreath of woven olive stands as a symbol of blessing, happiness and prosperity of the new family. When king Pirro crossed the sea and fought severe battles with the Romans which he won, although suffering a lot of losses, the main food of the soldiers was olive oil and wheat bread. This juice according to them gave them strength in war ... enlightened the darkness ... healed wounds, etc.

After Pirro's death, a new force appeared in the north of Epirus. This time it was the king Agron who raised the flag over the capital of Shkodra's kingdom. He annexed the Moloses territories who asked for help against the Greek alliances which in turn tried to benefit from Pirro's death to conquer the territories of Epirus. The successive victories of the Illyrian armies later on continued under the queen Teuta the so-called "Queen of the seas".

When the Romans entered Illyria, they took control of the harbours of Durrës and Apollonia. Their resistance continued up to the IXth century A.D. Whereas Julius Cesar, describes Aulona as a place with widespread

olives and of great economic importance for this country, while the Illyrians as masters in the cultivation of olives and grapes, oil and wine.

The characteristics of the old olives.

There are a lot of olive trees more than 2000 years old in Albania. The most important territories are: the areas around Tirana and Vlora. Among the varieties there are morphological characteristics that distinguish them from each other, especially the form of the crown, branching, the form of the leaves, the form and size of the fruit, the date of their ripeness, oil content and quality etc.

The olive is considered to be naturally undergoing the period of non-productive installation from 1-7 years old. This period might be doubled in case of drought. The tree is developed up to 100 years and it recognizes a progressive increase of production. The olive reaches its maximal productive capacity between 100-150 years. Whereas later it grows in thickness, ages and is renewed systematically, but it never dies.

There have been a lot of attempts to identify the age of the olive, but it is yet impossible to identify the age of the olive for sure. Even through dendrochronology is extremely difficult to be realized, as the olive contains strong, pressed wood, has irregular growth and being a permanent evergreen tree does not have distinctive growth rings. Age cannot be defined clearly other than based on biometric indirect indices, such as: circumference at the base of the trunk, coefficient of dynamic annual growth, which denote approximately real age.

In a natural state when the olive grows old it differentiates several seedlings at the circumference area of the trunk base, thus it is renewed repeatedly but it never dies from growing old. The new substitute plant is not a new plant but another new one, a new expression of the same genotype. The olive might die only under the effect of frost, soil humidity, wars, urbanizations and fire.

The Albanian olives archaeology

The Albanian archaeology has identified that the oleasters came into being 12.000 years BC. The cultivation of the olive *Olea Europaea L. Sativa* in our country is recognized since 5000 years in the central and southern part of the country and the most impetuous development was from 500

years BC. Trace of oil mills found 300-350 years BC. (Amantie, Kanine, Cerje, Bylis). Olive in Albanian derives from the noun “ullastër” and is represented in two different forms: the wild olive and the cultivated olive. The latter is thought to have been domesticated 5500 years BC (however it is not for sure). Several French research have proved that the first trace of the oleasters were defined and found to have existed 60.000 years ago all around the Mediterranean, (in east and west) *naturally even in Albania*, since the last glaciers. (*According to PedagOLIVE Histoire de l'olivier Atelier, À la découverte de l'Antiquité, Page 3-8. N.13/3*).

A brief history on the antiquity of the olive in Albania

The olive in Albania is really old, as old as in the other Mediterranean countries. This tree in the western coast of our country is a main testimony of the culture, generosity and antiquity. That's why Scymnus three centuries B.C (a Greek geographer) describes Epirus and Illyria as a warm prosperous country, filled with good olive orchards and vineyards.

With the Roman invasion Julius Cesar describes Aulona as a country with widespread olives of great importance. The Illyrians are described as masters in the cultivation of the olive and grapes, oil and wine.

During the period of Apollonic civilization the relationship among French merchants is described in its port, who imported regularly olive oil and wine from Apollonia. The French describe the Illyrian-Epirotic wine and olive oil as really delicious and aromatic. Different kinds of containers have been discovered in Bylis, Kanina, Himara, Oriko, Cerje etc, which give the impression of the existence of well developed olive-groves.

The noun olive derives from the noun “ullastër”, the family of oleace. The olive appears in two different forms: the wild olive and the cultivated olive. It is not exactly known when the latter was domesticated in our country, however its domestication is thought to have started 5500 years B.C.

Whereas the wild olive known as Oleastër and Sylvestris is present in different regions all around the Mediterranean, (*naturally even in Albania*), since the last glaciers. French research have testified that the first traces of oleastres have been defined and found since 60.000 years ago, which means that the origin of the olive must come from this country. (*According to PedagOLIVE Histoire de l'olivier Atelier, À la découverte de l'Antiquité, Page 3-8. N.13/3*).

Some characteristics of the age of genotypes.

The antiquity of this tree in Albania is plausible because there are currently a lot of centennial individuals. For example in Petrela one olive is estimated about 3000 years old, in Lanabregas, Tufine, Preze and Tujan of Tirana there are several olive trees of e perimeter up to 30 meters and up to 3000 years old. In ancient centres such as the ancient Antipatra, which is estimated to be over 2500 years, Elbasani, Vlora, Bylisi etc there are old olive-groves whose age corresponds to the age of their creation. But the oldest trees of the olive in Albania are: the couple of Brret olives approximately 3000 years, which look as old as or even older than the olive of Vuva in Crete, which has been estimated by the Greeks as approximately 3 thousand years old.

Despite a lot of attempts that have already been made, it is not possible to identify the age of the olive for sure. Even by referring to dendrochronology it is extremely difficult to be performed as the olive has hard, pressed wood, of irregular growth and because of being evergreen does not have distinct growth rings. Age cannot be defined other than based on biometric indirect indices, such as: the perimeter on the base of the trunk and coefficient of dynamic growth which coincide approximately much more with the actual age, with a level of wrongness (± 200 years). In natural state, when the olive grows old it differentiates some saplings at the neck of the trunk. In this way it is often renewed and never dies because of growing old. The new substitute plant is not merely a new plant, but e new self, a new expression of the same genotype. The olive might die only under the effect of frost, soil humidity, wars, urbanizations and fires.

The Albanian olive resources.

There are currently two big populations of the olive in Albania (*Olea europaea* subsp. *europaea*): the wild populations, which possess a great genetic diversity and populations which constitute the cultivated varieties whose polymorphism is really weaker, despite the great number of varieties being in use. The confirmed term for the cultivated trees is called cultivar, but the most acceptable term for all of them is 'variety'. A lot of varieties present great variability which corresponds to the real botanic judgement of the word variety. There are currently more than 2 thousand recognized varieties and each country privileges its varieties. The olive varieties appeared with domestication when humanity asked for the selection and propagation of trees which have offered them pleasure. The new varieties are formed through different reproductions. A tree deriving from the germination of a seed will have identical and original

characteristics if it derives from auto-fertilization. An olive seed deriving from a cultivated variety is difficult to produce an interesting change and cannot enter the list of varieties. A lot of olives are found in the old populations which do not belong to a cited variety. Access to the varieties of one genotype is completed only via vegetative way to give a name and is accompanied by a homogenous population, be that small or large. The creation of new varieties might be fulfilled by choosing the parents through control of fertilization, afterwards by executing the qualitative and quantitative performance on a great number of individuals they have derived from.

The world of the current varieties derives from the sexual reproductive activity of the olive in domestic conditions under the pressure of choice for human use. Thus the varieties of most interest for olive production and oil have been propagated and multiplied, whereas the varieties considered to be of not - good characteristics have been abandoned or forgotten. Thus following this logics it might be said that the olive is being improved, as a lot of varieties which are currently cultivated have originated directly from the wild varieties, such as Pulazeqin, i Holli Himares etc. In the south of the country there are the cultivars of H.Himares, and Frantoio e Lecino. Most of the varieties are almost auto-sterile and must be planted when accompanied by another variety to improve fruiting.

The crown of old trees: they have a lot of branches upon one trunk, of strong dense wood, with grey dark cortex, coarse and split, even decayed, which might occupy 15-20 meters high and live for a long time. Under the influence of different factors and in areas of wind or not well exposed it preserves a shrub form for protection, like a compact cup and impermeable giving the image of a forest shrub.

The leaves: the leaves are in opposite position, double, elongated oval, in tight position with the twig and with a short petiole. Their colour is dark green on the upper part and pale silver green with oblong nerve separating the lower part in two. The leaves do not fall they are evergreen, but this does not mean that they are immortal. They live on average 3 years, then they turn into yellow and fall, mainly in summer.

The flowers: are white with a cup, two stamens, a corolla with four oval petals, and a round ovary holding a wide style finishing at a stigma. The ovary contains two ovules. The flowers are grouped in crowns from 10 to 20, which are installed under the armpit of the leaves at the beginning of spring, above the twigs more than two years old.

The fruit: the olive fruit is a small drupe, thinner- flesh (epicarp), a mixture of a substance containing a smooth substance impermeable by water (pruina), with a fleshy pulp (mesocarp) rich in fatty acids stocked during lipogenesis from the end of August up to dappling. Green at the beginning it becomes black at full ripeness. The endocarp is osseous, formed by a coating (endocarp) which is lignified in summer, at the end of July containing an internal socket with both ovaries, one of which is generally sterile and non-functional. This seed (rarely two), produces an embryo which will produce a new olive tree if the conditions are favourable.

The root: at germination period the new seedling produces pivotal roots. Later on while growing it develops a tuft of roots, deep up to 60 – 100 cm with lateral growing, the main roots go up to the extremes of the crown, whereas the secondary roots and the other ones might explore a considerable amount of soil surface. The tuft of roots is generally limited within the first meter of the soil.

The Albanian archaeologists have discovered organs of the olive tree, containers and olivaster seeds sculpted in warriors' shields, bas-reliefs etc, in Amantia, Bylis, Apolonia, Ardenica, Cerje etc, which prove the existence of this tree for 5-6 thousand last years.

The olive in Albania is really old, as old as in the other Mediterranean countries. The olive has its own place and importance in the popular art and culture. A lot of traditions are related to this saint and generous tree in the culture of the people. The bride's veil carries a wreath of olive sprigs tied with a "*gjurmish*" a symbol of blessing, happiness and prosperity of the new family.

Diversity of genetic material.

The cultivated varieties of the olive are part of the subspecies *Olea europea* L. Subsp. *sativa*. The classification and recognition of the varieties is difficult for the following reasons: Firstly, there is a diversity of the genetic material, and secondly, there is confusion of the existing designations and variations. The ancient cultivation of the olive and the methods of agamic breeding, have allowed for the breeding of interesting clones of more precedence than the previous ones. Cellular mutations in the course of centuries which have also been preserved by humans for their qualities have simultaneously had an origin of a single individual, thus in this way forming a "clone". Due to vegetative breeding, their breeding was enabled through preserving the genotypic characteristics. These genotype changes include later on fluctuations which are the result of the environmental conditions and have deeply influenced the phenotype of the individual.

Description according to Baseflor id: 5987. pr : 46 Code CATMINAT- 15/1. Idiotaxon: *Olea europaea* L. subsp. *europaea* var. *sativa*, *oleaster*, *sylvestris* (Mill.) Lehr

Family: Oléaceae. Origin: Mediterranean or Syria or Asia Minor. Period of inflorescence: Spring (May). Exposure: requires for solarised soils. Soil type: Tolerates poor, pebbly grounds---soils. Soil acidity: Neutral acidity. Soil humidity: it does not tolerate inundated soils. Height: up to 20 meters. Morphological type: tree. Foliar type: Permanent. Lifespan per leaf 3-4 years. Resistance: Resistant to drought, average resistance to cold.

Mediterranean chronology. Inflorescence: Floor inflorescence; Sexuality: hermaphrodite. Entomogamous pollination. Fruit: drupe. Flower dominating colour: white. Blossom 5-6. Biological type B-cad. Herbal formation: Parvophanérophytaie. Ecological characteristics: Mediterranean coast. Light valence: 8. Temperature valence: 8. Continental valence: 3. Air humidity valence: 4. Edaphic humidity valence: 4. Height valence: 6. Technological valence: 8. Soil reaction valence:(pH) 6. Soil richness valence: 5. Soil texture valence: 3.

Old Olives of Albania (PHOTO)

“Tufina” olive, about 2000-2500 old years.
(N 41° 22'04.07”, E19°52'31.01”, H:255m)



“Tujan” olive, about 2800-3000 years old.
(N 41° 22'43.42”, E19°53'05.94”, H:485m)



“Zhenem” olive, about 2500 years old.
(N 41° 22'42.01”, E19°53'01.01”, H:455m)



“Dajti olive, about 3000 years old.
(N 41° 23'03.68”, E19°52'59.86”, H:408m)



“Multiped” olive tree, about more than 3000 years old.



“Brret” olive tree, more than 3000 years old.



Centennial olive tree in the region of Tirana



The oldest olive trees in Albania (more than 3000 years old).



Mills oil of the III-V centuries B.C.

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