The origin and the old olives in Albania

The olive is the most important fruit bearing tree of the Mediterranean which has provided food and high quality oil to the ancient civilizations. The country of origin for the olive has been the topic of several debates, but the area between the coast of Syria and Israel up to the north and west of Iraq is likely to be the area of origin.

The origin of the olive has been lost in the mists of time; its history is associated with the culture of the people of the Mediterranean basin, which have stipulated its development ever since and have shaped the ancient Mediterranean civilization. According to one version, the olive is said to have originated from Palestine. From there it was transferred to the Mediterranean basin and later to Egypt. The oil of this tree began to be used for food and medication about 4000 years BC. The Phoenician merchants took the olive to Greece, Spain and Italy. These three countries took the cultivation of the olive all over the Mediterranean, being nowadays the most advanced countries in olive oil production. They even constitute 74% of the world production. Nowadays the olive is found all over the countries of the Mediterranean basin. Despite the fact that the markets are predominated by the Greek and Italian varieties, recent research have shown that the oils from Istria, Dalmatia and Albania are of special quality.

In Minor Asia, as the place of origin; there are far numerous olestaers in the wild and spontaneous in the form of forest shrubs. The expeditions of the research Institute on Olive Vlorë and the Centre of Genetic Resources, certify that there are identical trees in the peninsula of Karaburun, in Jonufer, Shashice, Palase, Dhermi, Ksamil etc. Descriptions of several authors state that the olive has been transferred from Minor Asia along with the displacement of the peoples to Greece and Epirus through Anatolia (De Candole, 1883). In this respect Caruso considers the history of this tree mixed homogenously among all the Mediterranean countries.

The olive is said to have spread at the beginning of the XVIIth century B.C. along the Ionian shores, where the culture of cultivation was formed and developed until it became of great importance in the IVth century B.C, when Solone formulated several decrees for the protection of the olive tree.

In the VIth century B.C, the olive became widespread all over the Mediterranean basin going as far as Tripoli, Tunisia, Sicily up to the central region of Italy. This tree was thought to be widely known in Italy and it was
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described three centuries before the decline of Troy, 1200 years B.C according to (Penestrella) who supported the hypothesis that the olive entered Italy during the kingdom of Lucio Tarquinio Prisco (from 616 to 578 B.C). It arrived from Tripoli or Tunisia. Later the cultivation was widespread from the South to the North, from Calabria to Liguria. When the Romans invaded North Africa they found out that the grafting of olive olivasters was widely known there. It was exactly the Romans who spread the olive all over the Mediterranean countries.

In Marseille the olive appeared 600 years B.C, simultaneously with Corsica and Sardinia. The olive was introduced in Spain during the predominance of the Phoenicians (1050 years B.C). Around 100 years B.C, after the third Roman war olive plantations occupied considerable surfaces of the Betica valley up to the centre and east of the Iberian peninsula. The Arabs introduced their varieties especially those of the olivasters in the South of Spain and spread the culture of cultivation. During the period of Apollonic civilisation, 150-300 years BC, trade was present in its harbour among the French merchants who regularly imported from Apollonia olive oil and wine. The French describe the olive oil and wine as really aromatic. Milld of the Roman model as well as containers have been found in some ancient discoveries in Apollonia, Bylis, Kanina, Himara etc, which give the impression of the existence of a highly developed culture about olive groves.

Photo 1. Centennial olive tree in the region of Tirana

The cultivation of the olive went beyond the Mediterranean basin after the discovery of America (1492). The first trees to be taken to America were sent from Seville. In 1560 the olive was found in Mexico and further in Peru, California, Chilli and Argentina, where the first olive tree introduced then, is still found nowadays- the old olive of Arauko. During modern times the olive has continued to increase in other countries of the Mediterranean. Today it has reached the South African countries, in Australia, in Japan as well as in China. The history of olive cultivation in China started in 1970, through a bilateral project between China and Albania. Based on this project 1500 seedlings of the Kaninjot cv. were sent to China from the city of Vlora in the South of Albania.
a city of great culture for the olive. The Albanian specialists PhD. Godo Vjero and PhD. Dhimiter Muco were the first specialists for the creation of culture and experience of the olive cultivation in China.

The olive is the oldest among all other cultivated trees in the Mediterranean basin. Extensive research on its origin result in its domestication 6000 years B.C. The olive in northern Africa is estimated to have existed about 13 thousand years B.C. A lot of archaeological research prove the antiquity of olive oil production in Crete. The Old Testament mentions the king’s “trokuj” for olive oil production in Israel, milld for olive oil production in great capacity have been discovered in the biblical city Ecronjane.

The culture of the olive was widely known in antiquity by the Illyrians. The olive crowns served as a symbol of valor in wars, of the victors who performed outstanding deeds for the country of Illyria. The olive is also of great importance among the popular art and culture.

Different traditions of the popular culture are related to this holy generous tree. The bride’s veil “duvak” has a crown of olive sprigs tied with “gjurmish”, as a symbol of blessing for the happiness and prosperity of the new family. Contemporary scholars such as; Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus, Virgil etc, wrote a lot about the first of all trees (olivio prima omnium arboreum ect).

Albania is a Mediterranean country claiming to be the country of origin for the olive. A lot of archaeological excavations have found fossils of the organs of the olive tree, containers and objects with leaves and fruit, olivasters and seeds carved in warriors’ shields, crocks and bas-reliefs in Amantia, Bylis, Apolonia, Orik, Aulona, Kanina, Ardenica, etc, which give evidence for the existence of this tree during the 5-6 thousand last years.

In Anno Domini there are three stages for the development of olive groves in Albania (i) the Venetian invasion (ii) Scanderbeg programme (iii) the development programme after the country’s independence.

Currently in Albania there are about 1.7 million olive trees among other trees, about 3000 years old. The olive in Albania is really old, as old as in other countries of the Mediterranean. This tree in the west coast of our country is the only evidence of culture and antiquity. Skymni (a Greek geographer) 3 centuries B.C describes Epirus (Illyria) as a warm and prosperous country full of olive groves and good vineyards.
Photo 2, the oldest olive trees in Albania (more than 3000 years old).

With the Roman invasion Julius Caesar described Aulona as a beautiful developed place with widespread olive groves and of great economic importance. The Illyrians were described as masters of cultivation for the olive, grape, oil and wine.

Photo 3, Mills oil of the III-V centuries B.C.

During Scanderbeg times (1450), 10 olive trees had to be planted for each marriage as a sign of blessing and baptism for the couple. Marin Barleti, an
Illyrian scholar of the XIV century, described the catastrophes of Hamza Kastrioti in the olive groves of Drisht as a sign of losing the war. The book of taxes (Skanderbeg’s archive) described the inventory of olives owned by citizens.

A lot of archaeological discoveries give evidence for the existence of trade between the Illyrians selling oil and buying weapons or other industrial articles. The Albanian climate favours plant cultivation and reproduction. According to Vavillov, the climate makes Albania part of the fifth foci of biodiversity in the globe. The existence of a lot of varieties and several tens of forms, among the diversity of varietal populations of the autochthonous olives, proves the ancient and specific culture of this country.

At the end of the chapter De Candole considered Syria and Iran homeland of the olive, whereas Morettini considered Palestine as the country of origin, from where it went through Crete and then to the Mediterranean. But Anagnostopullos considered Crete as the country of origin as well as the islands of the Greek archipelago.

The Albanian scholars (Prifti, Kafazi, Rrapaj, etc) find trace of the olive in Albania as old as other countries of origin for this tree. These descriptions are based on archaeological evidence which according to the scholars are equivalent to analogous Greek, Roman and Arab documents and descriptions.

The word “ulli” in Albanian, derives from the noun “ullastër” of the family oleace. The olive appears in two different forms: the wild olive: *Olea europaea oleaster-sylvestris* and the cultivated olive: *olea europaea sativa*; the latter is thought to have been domesticated around 5500 years B.C, yet this is not sure.

The wild olive called sylvestris and oleaster is present in different regions around the Mediterranean, (in east and West) naturally even in Albania, since the last ice age. Several French research have found evidence that the first trace of oleasters were defined and found 60,000 years ago throughout the Mediterranean perimeter. (according to PedagOLIVE Histoire de l’olivier Atelier, À la découverte de l’Antiquité, Page 3-8. N.13/3).

The cultivation began about 5500 years B.C in Palestine, but also in Greece, Epirus, Spain and Italy, etc. Oil production started in parallel 5500 years ago, pressing with a stone manually, then squeezing the pulp and the separation from vegetal water.

According to the Greeks, the oldest olive in the world is the olive of Vuva, in Crete. It is estimated to be approximately 3000 years old and the Greeks claim that Rome had not yet been founded in this period. This tree produces
systematically and it is resistant to diseases and fire. This criterion gives trees great longevity.

Analysis with a genetic marker have concluded on the autochthonous individuality and variability with varieties of neighbourhood countries. Belaj (*et al.* 2003, *euphytica*)

In Albania the presence of oleasters was identified around 12,000 years B.C. The cultivation of *olea europaea* L. *sativa* in our country was known about 5000 years ago in the Centre in the South of the country, and the most rapid development was from 500 years B.C.

Trace of oil mills were found 300-350 years B.C. (Amantie, Kanine, Cerje, Bylis). Today there are a lot of olive trees of more than 1000 years old. The oldest trees are Brret approximately more than 3000 years old, which seems to be older than the olive tree of Vuva in Crete, ZT Bregas 2500 years old, BTL 3000 years old, Perk 2000 years old etc. (*Archaeological Sources 2002, SH.M.Vlore*). The age of the trees has been estimated based on dendrological methods and their morphological character. (*Perimeter x coefficient of dynamic growth plus 500*)

The well known Italian historian, Enzo Gatti, with an obvious irony emphasised that: “Yes, the Greek and Roman civilisations are known to have created neither the cloth, nor brass, nor the wheel, pottery or the wind mills, neither corn, nor vines, the olives, writing”…… in another episode he quotes: “The olive and the vineyard as a symbol of safety, peace and happiness stand as the pride of the Mediterranean peoples: of the Albanian-Illyrians”!…(*Extracted from the book, “The Illyrians”, “Bargjini” edition, Tiranë. 2005.*)
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)
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“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)
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“Multipied” olive tree, about more than 3000 years old.

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