

## HOW TO KNOW GOOD OLIVE OIL: OLIVE, OLIVE OIL AND MUSEUM IN SPARTA

Silviu ANGHEL

Olives and olive oil have been considered, for twenty five centuries, fundamental staples of Mediterranean diets. For most people connected with Greek classical civilization, they are by no means limited to it. Though it may not have been so central in the diet of other people in the Mediterranean, it nevertheless retained an important role. Throughout classical antiquity, olive oil was considered good oil, oil of superior quality, or just oil. By opposition, sesame, chestnut or castor oil were considered bad or low quality oil. These were used either as a cheap substitute of olive oil or in areas where olive oil was not produced.

It is to the Classical Greek civilization that we owe most of the spread and introduction of olive oil. This is proved by olive oil amphoras which were found in excavations from Spain to Afghanistan, and from the Black Sea to Nubia. For Greeks olive oil was not only part of their diet, but widely used for lightning (in lamps) or in *gymnasia*, for daily physical exercises.

The *Museum of the Olive and Greek Olive Oil* is, to my knowledge, the only one in Greece specifically and exclusively dedicated to the subject, and the only museum on this topic emphasizing on olive oil cultural impact and its technical culture. The museum is a private enterprise, financed with funds from the Piraeus Bank Group Cultural Foundation, and we can only hope that this practice will be more and more emulated in Greece or Romania or other countries. Private funding has had interesting consequences in the case of the Olive and Greek Olive Oil Museum.

The latter have most to do with the availability of documentary materials, as most excavated archaeological remains of olives cultivation and olive oil production would be given to public museums. This turned out to be a blessing for the museum. Face with this difficulty in obtaining material, the organizers chose to focus on the organization of space and on the maximum exploitation of the material they do have. Unlike public museums, where objects are clustered together with little explanation, the Olive and Greek Olive Oil Museum is creatively divided; and space is ingeniously organized.

The Museum is planned on two levels. On the upper level panels present thematically the role of olive oil in society. On the lower level, the bulk of the space is dedicated to the technological process of producing olive oil. A description of the panels can be found on the official website of the museum- [www.piop.gr](http://www.piop.gr)

We will focus, in this article, on a chronologic discussion. In fact, the museum does treat olives and olive oil chronologically, but within each thematic unit. For antiquity, separate panels discuss the contribution of olive oil in different contexts: diet, physical exercises, or other domestic uses. Each panel has archaeological objects, illustrations from ancient sources and explanatory texts.

For the Byzantine period, the organizers chose to illustrate the place of olive oil in lamps used during orthodox liturgy. This association is a bit forced, and perhaps to the detriment of other sources. In the Byzantine

period olive oil continued to be a fundamental staple of diet, though not in the same way as in ancient diets. Christianity's emphasis on fasting and ascetic diets had a fundamental impact, and this could be exploited more fully in the museum.

For the early modern period, the museum displays a good broad of oil presses from the Peloponnesus, together with explanations on their usage. The last section of the museum is dedicated to the modern era. A number of models of consecutively larger and more mechanized complexes of olive oil production from Greece, from the 19th and early 20th centuries, are displayed. Some of these models have small engines and can be turned on by visitors. Besides its obvious attractive properties, the section shows the transition in olive oil production from animal power to water power and finally to electric power.

The attractiveness and educational role of the museum are going to be increased by the arrangement of the museum's garden as part of the visitation tour. The outdoor exhibition will include a section on harvesting olives and two functioning olive mill replicas from Prehistoric and Hellenistic times, plus an actual Early Christian period mill.

If the upper level of the museum, with the ancient and medieval sections, was divided by fixed panel, the lower one employs the usage of hanging posters, which can be easily moved when the display is modified. The posters contain pictures and information. One of them, for example,

contains pictures and descriptions of types of olives found in Greece. Unfortunately, unlike the other labels in the museum, it is only in Greek. Finally the museum contains a small gift shop and café area.

Overall, the museum has a unique offer among similar institutions in Greece or elsewhere, and attracts a large number of visitors. The alternative way of presentation is a much needed break for most visitors, accustomed with overcrowded and under-explained exhibits.

A fundamental question is which is the intended visitor-target of the museum? The museum is designated as '*The museum of olives and Greek olive oil*'. Almost all labels are in both Greek and English. However, the choice of comments and areas of focus seem to tell a different story. The organizers have designed the museum as a complex picture of olive oil in Greek history. They aimed to treat thematically the importance of olive oil in society, its technological development, all within a chronological framework. However, there seem to be large gaps in their coverage. What they mean by Greek history is the history of the territory of modern Greece, with perhaps a few additions. Next to the entrance, a large 3D map shows the area of cultivation of the olive tree, but this theme is not picked up again in the museum.

In view of the importance of olive oil in the entire Mediterranean or beyond, and especially considering the importance of olive oil in Ancient Greek or Byzantine cultures, wherever these would be found, it is perhaps unfortunate that the organizers chose

not to develop the theme. The museum would be an appropriate place to show how olive oil transformed the diets of many regions and people, and how it continues to do so, often through a Greek catalyst. This would directly appeal both to a Greek and foreign audience, indeed to most people who consume olive oil.

Another important aspect of olive cultures is the types of olive trees and olives in existence. As I mentioned before, a panel does present several types of olives found in Greece. This amount of information is woefully incomplete. Not only are there more types of olives, but there are also important climatic and geographic differences throughout the Mediterranean. In places such as Turkey or Greece, the microclimate of very small valleys has important effect in the type of olive oil produced. In places such as Italy or Northern Africa, olive oil is produced very differently, often on large plantations. In Antiquity, a typical olive tree in Tripolitania produced a much bigger yield of olive oil than one in Greece. Last but not least, the Greek and Roman classical civilizations imported olive trees in parts where it had never been cultivated before. Egypt under the Ptolemies or during the Roman Empire produced important quantities of olive oil, for domestic use, in spite of the climate unfavorable to this plant.

One last important aspect is the economic importance of olive oil. That this aspect is almost neglected in the museum is even more surprising than previous aspects. The museum puts a lot of accent on the technological evolution

of olive oil production. The visitor is left to wonder why, and in what circumstances, for example, did farmers in the Peloponnese change from human or animal power to water power, in particular since the technology for both had coexisted for quite a while? This change implies bigger investment in the initial construction, but it also implies a much larger amount of olives processed, and therefore a denser production rate. No doubt the change is connected with a change in the market demand for olive oil, and the desire of local producers to sell on rapidly expanding urban markets in the 19th or early 20th century. In fact in many cases this change is connected with the development of Greece after it won its independence in 1821.

Even much earlier, in the Roman Empire, olive oil had an important part in the economy. Large cities demanded huge quantities of olive oil, and as the demand increased beyond the possibility of the adjacent countryside, these had to be imported from long distances, mostly overseas. Emperors provided free olive oil for Rome and Constantinople, together with wheat and wine. For Rome this mainly came from North Africa. Studies in the Tripolitania have uncovered extensive cultivation of olive oil in that region. The density of olive trees decreases continuously as we move inland. They testify to a systematic and market orientated exploitation of the land, as far as the level of rainfall would allow. They push inward for up to 100 km from the coast, to the limit of the desert, far beyond what land transportation costs would seem to justify.

A second example is the northern part of the Large Oasis in Egypt (today the Dakhla Oasis). This area of the Western Desert was briefly colonized by colonists from the Nile valley in Pharaonic times, for reasons which escape us, but then abandoned, perhaps when water became too expensive. The Oasis is dependent on deposits of water under the Sahara. The deposits are made of fossil water, and are non regenerative. While ancient wells could find water at depths of around 100 meters, today one can rarely find it at depths of less than 500 meters. In the Persian, Greek and Roman periods the area is reoccupied, in spite of the ever growing price of water. The reason seems to be exactly olive oil, which was exported to the valley. The oasis is propitious to the cultivation of olive trees. Evidence is not only mentions of olive oil from the oasis in papyri from the period, but also many crushed pit tans, residual objects from the production of olive oil, which were pressed and used as fire combustible. Overall, in the Roman Empire, olive oil was an important part of the economic circuit of the Mediterranean.

Though not as dramatic, the museum can find similar cases closer to Sparta. At the other end of the Greek presence, in the Black Sea, Greek colonists imported and used extensively olive oil. The colony of Histria, faced with an impossibility to produce olive oil locally, chose to sell other products, such as wheat or fish from the Danube Delta, and in return, receive particular Greek staples, such as olive oil. The economic value of olive oil has tremendous appeal to a large audience. A Romanian visiting Sparta, searching

for local bottles of olive oil would be very interested in putting local production in context.

Overall the *Museum of the Olive and Greek Olive Oil* is a unique combination of successful private integration into Museum endowments and museum organization. The museum does not, however, fully exploit the historical importance of the olive oil, and additions could be made in the illustrative materials which accompany the objects presented in the exhibit, or through various public programs addressing a wide audience.

On the scientific side, the Museum is an excellent platform for conferences and congresses of direct interest to the history of olive oil. Several have been organized, and their conclusions have been published. The museum management is extremely interested in such events, large facilitating investments being planned. As far as we know, a conference center with multi-purpose halls (also for temporary exhibitions and various events) will be built with a roof terrace for visitors. The exhibition itself will also be enriched with touch screens, CD-Rom. Video, the Museum's guide and monographs on relevant topics that could not be presented in detail in the exhibition units.

The educational function of the museum is thus emphasized by the way the public exhibition is organized and the exhibits presented. Interactive teaching methods, such as texts and drawings or working models, are used to enable visitors to guide themselves. Different educational programs are also

developed, mainly aiming to teach children about old technologies, their importance to the society, about technical culture.

Teachers are encouraged to come to the museum. They are offered free information packs to guide them during the school group's visits, suggest activities for pupils before, during and after the museum visit. Oil-making demonstrations are also planned.

The museum could be an example to other museums also taking into account its architectural environment integration and the coherence of its design with its topic. The museum reuses the stone façade of the former municipal electric company. The building was designed taking into account both the build and natural environment, as well as the purpose and topic of the museum. Natural light and

huge windows mark the small museum. The interior design harmoniously blends wood, brick and iron. The architectural project won the first prize in the "Architectural Awards 2004" at the category "Works of the wider public sector", organized by the Hellenic Institute of Architecture.

The Museum of the Olive and Greek Olive Oil has overall proved a very successful project. Above all, it has confirmed what museum studies and marketing can do to present material on a given theme. Proofs of its success are the great number of visitors and the prizes won over the years. Had this professional approach in museum display and image been coupled with the efforts of professional historians and archaeologists, it would have had an even greater appeal to the public.