Overview and Economics
The olive tree is a familiar feature of the Mediterranean landscape. It may have originated in Syria, Asia Minor, Ethiopia, Egypt, or India. Since ancient times, it has contributed, in practical and symbolic terms, to the economy, health and haute cuisine of the inhabitants of the Mediterranean. Crete, the Peloponnesian, the coastal regions of Greece, the islands of the Eastern Aegean, such as Lesbos, Samos and Thasos, and the Ionian islands all possess olive groves. Likewise the olive is found widely in Cyprus, the coasts of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the south of Spain, France, Italy, and the coast of North Africa. Spanish migrants spread the olive to Mexico, Argentina, and Uruguay in Latin America, and Italians took it to Australia. The significance of the olive tree rests upon the existence of these groves, or has done so over recent centuries. The culture of the olive tree has three aspects: the landscape itself, diet (consisting mainly of the use of oil), and the symbolic importance of the tree and its fruit. All these aspects have been the subject of intense discussion over recent decades. The culture of the olive tree is manifested in many different ways, in material objects, in the arts, and in various customs. It is also manifested in religious behavior, magical rituals, medical prescriptions, and cosmetics. Above all, the culture of the olive tree is manifested in a symbolism that transcends time and place.

Myths and the History of the Olive Tree

The great significance that the olive tree has had for the life and the economy of the ancient world in the eastern Mediterranean area is evident in the appearance of the olive tree in the myths of the people who lived there. In Hebrew mythology a dove brings an olive branch to Noah after the Great Flood, indicating that life has returned to earth. In the Old Testament, oil is often mentioned along with wheat and wine as one of the basic products in the land of Israel (Valavanis, 2004). Moses dreamt of the Promised Land as “the land of olives and olive oil” (2004). The dedication of the altar and various objects required for worship was performed with holy oil “and Moses took the anointing oil, and anointed the tabernacle and all that was therein, and sanctified
“them” (Leviticus, 8.10-12). According to Greek tradition, the bringing of the wreath to Olympia from the distant mythical Hyperborean countries was the initiative and deed of the demigod Heracles (Faklaris and Stamatopoulos, 2004). The ancient Egyptians crowned their dead with olive branches. The Phoenicians were possibly the first to produce olive oil.

The olive originated in the countries of south Asia and was carried by birds to the Mediterranean via the Middle East. 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 (Valavanis, 2004) (Fig. 1.1).

There is no evidence for the use of olive products by the inhabitants of the prehistoric Aegean. Nevertheless, it seems possible that at least since the Neolithic Age, namely since 8,000 B.C., the oleaster fruit would occasionally be collected, along with other wild edible fruit, to supplement the daily diet. Palynology, the relatively new science of the study of pollen, has revealed the presence of oleaster pollen towards the end of the Neolithic Age, about 3,200–3,100 B.C. in Kopais, Thessaly, and Crete.

The principles of cultivation of the olive were apparently discovered and formulated some time later, at some point in the third millennium B.C., at the beginning
The Culture of the Olive Tree

The Cretans were in contact with the civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, where the olive had already been domesticated. This contact resulted in the spread of the knowledge of olive cultivation therefore in Crete.

Greek myth would seem to locate the origin of olive cultivation in North Africa. Aristaeus, a rural deity and the son of Apollo and the nymph Cyrene, was raised on the North African coast and subsequently spread the knowledge of olive cultivation. He, in his turn, had been taught by nymphs techniques of grafting to produce better fruit, and of pressing and extraction of oil. Aristaeus travelled to Greece and Sicily, spreading his knowledge of olive cultivation and being deified by the Greek inhabitants as the patron deity of cultivators of the olive (Valavanis, 2004) (Fig. 1.2.).

In another well-known myth, it is Athena who spreads knowledge of the cultivation of the olive. The myth is very probably the creation of the Athenian democracy, which very clearly discerned the importance of the olive for the economy of the Athenian state and olive oil which, after it had been produced in Athens, it was exported by Athenian ships.

Thanks again to palynology, olive pollen has been found spread throughout Greece from about the middle of the second millennium B.C. This suggests that the systematic spread of the cultivation of the olive and the exploitation of its products...
begins with the construction of the palaces of the New Palace Period in Crete and of the palaces of Mycenaean civilization on the mainland of Greece. Linear B tablets from Messenia, deciphered in 1952, containing references to e-ra-wa (‘olive tree’) and e-ra-wo (‘olive oil’) give further proof of the existence of the olive tree in this period. A group of 51 tablets, from four different areas in the Mycenaean palace at Pylos, give an insight into various aspects of the use of the olive at the time. The oil, plain or scented, mentioned in these tablets was intended for purposes of worship. The tablets also mention the names of the gods who received this offering, for example, Poseidon (‘Po-se-da-o-ne’, which is the name of the god in the dative case) or Potnia (‘po-ti-ni-ja’, ‘lady’). The presence of the names of these deities in the tablets also coincidently indicates that many deities of the Greek pantheon are of Creto-Mycenaean origin. The tablets also make mention of various time parameters, including a month or reference to various festivals, which shows that some sort of sacred calendar was in operation at the time, to be used henceforward.

Perhaps the clearest proof of the strength and ubiquity of the Mycenaean olive trade is seen in the enormous numbers of stirrup-jars, used exclusively to transport scented oil throughout the Mediterranean, which bear witness to the importance of the production and trade of scented oil for the royal economy (Fig. 1.3.).

Fig. 1.3. Scent bottles (lekythoi) 6th century B.C. From the book “Ode to the olive tree,” Hellenic Folklore Research Center of the Academy of Athens, General Secretariat for Olympic Games, Athens 2004.
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” (Hadjisavvas, 2003).

Recent research in Cyprus has shown that all important late Bronze Age sites had olive presses and storage areas (Hadjisavvas, 2003). Various objects, such as the fragmentary relief depicting a bull before an olive tree, from the so-called “Treasury of Atreus,” ivory objects carved with representations of olive trees, a piece of a lady’s dressing table from Matmar in Egypt, of 13th c B.C., depicting a bull in front of an olive tree, a similar representation on a comb made from ivory from Megiddo in Palestine, of 13th c B.C., the naturalistic wall paintings from Crete, the landscapes depicted on the well-known cups from Vapheio, of 15th c B.C., show the prevalence of the olive in Mediterranean countries (Hadjisavvas, 2003).

The dominant spiritual and symbolic role of oil is closely connected with the geographical and cultural environment in which Christianity was born and prospered. The inhabitants of the Mediterranean adapted their needs to the productive capacities of their natural habitat, so making the olive and its oil a basic element of their daily nutrition. In addition, oil was valuable as the main source of light and as a healing medium, because of its calming qualities.

In the Byzantine Empire the areas with climatic conditions favorable to the growth of the olive tree were mainly Syria, Palestine and Cyprus in the East, Italy and Sicily in the West, and North Africa in the South (mostly the area of Carthage). Along the coastline of Greece and the Aegean, including the coastline of Asia Minor and the coastline of Pontus, olive cultivation was developed, albeit to a lesser extent. Production in Greece aimed mainly to cover local or family needs and less to export oil (Tsougarakis, 2004).

One of our most important sources relating to olive tree cultivation consists of the records of the monasteries. These give some idea of the presence of the olive tree in the country in certain areas. Although Corfu and Crete have been notable during recent centuries for intensive olive cultivation, they do not seem to have been such intensive producers in Byzantine times. In Crete especially there are reports in the writings of Al-Zuhri of shortages of olives in the 9th century and from the 12th century until the beginning of the 15th century in the writings of Buondelmonti. This necessitated importing of olive oil and olives from other areas (Tsougarakis, 2004).

As for the various aspects and uses of olive oil, such as its nutritional importance, its use in cooking, as a source of light, as a substitute for soap (which developed later) in cleansing the human body, there are numerous passages from Classical writers and numerous examples of ancient iconography that offer considerable information.

**Nutrition**

The nutritional habits of a society are an expression of its cultural level and their
study contributes to our understanding of that society. The changes in the nutritional code of a traditional agricultural society occur very slowly. In Greece, for example, all nutritional habits remained for the most part intact and the changes in the nutrition were very few. New nutritional habits and traditional foods from the Greeks of the East appeared when the refugees came from Asia Minor in 1922. In general, until the first half of the 20th century, food was plain, simple, and depended mainly on local production, the climate, occupations, and the professions, financial, and social status of the consumers and the degree of communication with other areas containing such things as commercial centers, weekly street markets and fairs. The nutritional attitude of the Greeks changed after World War II. Mass consumption of industrial and commercial goods increases day by day and foreign nutritional habits have invaded the country (Polymerou-Kamilakis, 2004).

Olive oil, a basic element in Greek nutrition, holds a predominant position in the nutritional code of the areas that produce it, even if it is not an area’s main product. In addition, olives are nutritious, tasty, cheap, and they can be easily preserved. Thus they are widely used in modern Greek cuisine, even in areas that do not produce them. Over recent decades, there has been extensive research on the olive’s beneficial qualities for consumers’ health. This research has led to a more systematic recording of the traditional ways and methods of exploitation in order to incorporate the olives in today’s nutritional code. People in Greece say: “We can just have bread and olives…”

Olives are considered suitable food for funeral feasts and are consumed during the Lenten fast, memorial services and funeral suppers. In Cyprus, slices of bread and black olives are offered, either at the cemetery or at home, to comfort the relatives of the deceased. In Thrace, a tablecloth is laid on the ground and Lenten food, such as beans, rice, olives and fresh hot bread, known as makaria, consumed. The deceased is believed to be present and participate in the funeral supper. In general, olives have always been the food of the poor because they are consumed with bread.

Oil is antiseptic and a disinfectant and it also has calming properties. It is, however, sensitive and difficult to preserve. Throughout the year, it should be decanted two or three times in order to separate out the dregs. This procedure takes place in factories. The oil containers are cleaned very carefully and care is taken to maintain a steady temperature in the storage room. At the beginning of this century, probably under the influence of agriculturists, olive oil producers poured pure sugar in the containers to avoid oil rancid. The oil storage vessels were often kept in dark storage rooms or buried in the soil to avoid changes caused by air and light.

Olive oil was used in almost every type of food conservation, but the fact that it was so rare made its frequent use as a preservative with antiseptic properties impossible. The loss of olive oil during decanting, transport or for any other reason was a bad omen for the owner, such a belief naturally expressing the importance of the oil.

Whenever sufficient quantities were produced, oil was used to preserve meat,
spiced cheese, vegetables, grapes, and olives, thus improving the taste of the product. Besides these basic uses in the area of food conservation, olive oil was, and still is, used for non-culinary purposes, such as coating wine vessel rims to avoid evaporation which spoils the wine. When the vessel is opened, the oil is poured out. It is said that even eggs remain fresh longer if they are coated with oil.

**Heating and Lighting**

Alongside light produced by fireplaces, torches, and spermaceti (cloth dipped in animal fat and wrapped around a stick), oil lamps for centuries provided the light necessary for those working at night, the oil lamp having one or more wicks.

Oil is still used to light the cresset in front of the icons in Orthodox Christianity. The same light was used in the past to illuminate rooms. The cresset oil is considered sacred and it should be pure. A family always deemed it necessary to use some of its oil to light the cressets.

Everything involved in the olive production process was of use in a traditional society. The by-product of oil production, the olive seed, was used in the past as food for domestic animals, as fertilizer, and as fuel. Since 1950, the seed has been almost exclusively exploited in olive seed factories for the production of seed-oil and seed-wood. Along with the products of the olive seed, an important soap industry developed making use of oil and oil dregs.

**Treatment — Medicine**

"Is any one of you sick? He should call for the leaders of the church people. They should talk to God about him and put oil on him in the name of the Lord…” (James 5:14-15).

Oil symbolism rests upon observation and the complex of beliefs concerning its therapeutic properties. In countries where Christianity spread beneficial effects of olive oil on the human body were known and as a result oil was used for worship and healing. It was also widely used in folk medicine and treatment, either as a treatment in itself, or as base for other preparations for internal or external use.

In particular, the *agourólado* (green olive oil produced by crushing the olives without the use of hot water) was, and still is, one of the most important natural medicines for various illnesses. Traditionally, oil was used as an antiseptic for curing small wounds and for dealing with skin irritations. It was also used as a pain killer for rheumatism, abdominal pains, and for earache. It was used as an embrocation, poison antidote and all-purpose antiseptic. It was also used in magic to remove the evil eye. The *Geoponíca*, of AD 10, notes that to avoid infection by scabies, sheep should be anointed around the tail with sulphur and oil after shearing (*Geoponíca* 18, 17, 5). Red oil in Crete, olive oil with poppy petals and sometimes spearmint balm was used as throat emollient and calmative for the joints. Threshed olive leaves and fruit were also used to soothe swollen glands.
Cosmetics

Dioskorides describes oil as *wetting and thermal at the same time*. In the past people would use oil to preserve skin moisture, to protect their body from the cold in winter and as sun protection during the summer.

Scented oils, for which olive oil was the basic ingredient, were mainly used by women. The most well-known ones were the *irinion* (with iris root extracts), the *storax balm* (aromatic tree) with vanilla flavor, the *melinion* with quince oil and the *rodion* with rose extracts, not to mention the extremely expensive and exotic scents from Egypt, Lydia, and Libya.

Writer Antiphanes informs us that the most elegant Greeks exaggerated so much that they used different scents for different parts of the body. The vessels used for the scented oils were small and delicate, made of clay, alabaster or glass, round or long with a special neck that allowed the oil to be poured in very small amounts. Of course, a vessel with scented oil was one of the most favorite love gifts.

Since ancient times, olive oil has been a basic ingredient for beauty treatment and body care, both for women and men, either on its own, or as base for the manufacture of cosmetics. It was used for hair care in everyday life and on special occasions, such as weddings. Hair is an important element of female beauty, and to cut it was considered shameful and disgraceful. So, after washing their hair, women would anoint it with oil to nourish it and make it shine. All of Greece abounds in beauty tips on how to produce lustrous black hair. In Archanes, in Crete, for example, a walnut tree root is placed inside a bottle with olive oil and buried in the soil for forty days. The oil is used to anoint the hair to make it full and wavy. In Lesbos, laurel seeds are crushed and browned in a pan with some olive oil and used for anointing hair. In Chios, crushed laurel seeds are placed in a bottle with olive oil. The bottle is kept in the sun for a few days to produce laurel oil and then used for washing to produce luxuriant hair.

Olive oil is used, along with other natural ingredients like vinegar, walnut tree, eucalyptus, and laurel leaves, to make hair stronger, shinier, and easy to comb.

Special care was taken with the dyeing and combing of a bride’s hair, in a specific ritual procedure. One of the bride’s brothers dropped some oil on her hair, while women sang:

*Mother, bring the olive oil, the oleaster olive oil to anoint my hair, so that no one can cut it and cast spells on me…*

In Thrace and Lesbos among the gifts that the groom sent to his bride before the wedding there were cosmetics for her bath. These contained olive oil and red dye for her hair. Olive oil is the basic ingredient for the preparation of dye for white hair.

They would use seven ingredients: candle from the church, mastic, olive oil, unsalted
fresh butter, lemon, mercury, resin and white lead (= white stone that was powdered). They mixed all the ingredients and applied them on the face during the night. To prevent the mixture from spoiling the woman who prepared it should tell lies.

You used make-up and lipstick  
And you made me crazy about you

Religion and Worship

Olive oil was used to worship the Gods and to care for and honor the dead (Kambanis, 2004). Besides these vital spiritual functions, it also enjoyed prolific use in ancient medicine. But it also played an important role in ancient athletics (Stambolidis, 2004). The awareness that the olive tree and its oil are beneficial to the body contributed to the sanctity in which Mediterranean populations held the tree and its products. Its origin was connected with gods and the use of its products was under the jurisdiction of the clergy. In Christian religious rituals, olive oil holds an important position, from baptism to funeral. Moreover, the length of life is symbolized by the length of time the oil in the sanctuary lamp burns.

The Christian Church, although emancipating itself in a short period of time from the confines of the Jewish context, absorbed all of the latter’s elements which served the Church’s special identity and mission. Among these elements was the symbolic and ritual use of oil, which was, however, enriched with an intent, Christ-oriented, messianic and ecumenical character. In the New Testament oil continues to be evaluated as a precious source of lighting and as a healing medium. Christ combined this healing attribute of oil with the spiritual and liberating force of truth. For that reason He sent off His disciples to exorcise the evil spirits and to heal sick people by using holy oil. It was especially common for young men to anoint the body by using pure olive oil during exercise, training and racing. These activities were performed on a daily basis by large groups of citizens in ancient cities. Here we can see a scene at the ring, where a young man pours oil from an arívalos (earthenware vessel, wide at the bottom and narrow on top, used by athletes for anointing) to anoint his body, while the young slave on the left takes care of his master’s foot. It is worth mentioning a special profession, the oil anointers, who used the oil to massage parts of the athletes’ bodies that were sensitive from injuries.

Popular tradition assigns the olive tree a divine origin and the tree is associated with rituals and important religious locales. In modern worship, which retains elements from the ancient worship, elements from the Old Testament and Christianity are also incorporated. Olive oil holds a significant position in the official religious ceremonies. It is also important in secondary, quasi-magical ceremonies. So, when a new church is founded a lighted cresset full of olive oil is placed at the site of the altar and buried with rocks and soil “for the cresset to burn until the church is built.” Near the cresset are written the names of the faithful, who will thereby obtain eternal
forgiveness.

Oil is used in other major ceremonies of the Church, such as baptism, confirmation and Holy Unction. Its initiatory, communicatory, and apotropaic significance is clear, in that it wards off evil from the Christian initiate and heals the wounds of the sinner. The baptized thus becomes an “athlete” of the Church and his body is to be anointed, so that he may fight the good fight (Karapidakis and Yfantis, 2004).

Apart from its ceremonial use, oil is used for lighting in every day routine in Christian churches, a habit inherited from ancient Greek, Jewish, and Christian religions. This role of oil as a means of illumination can be seen in many manifestations of popular religion, such as the eternally burning lamp in front of the altar, the other lamps in church, in cemeteries, or wayside shrines and the lamp that burns before the icon at home. From Messene, during the German occupation of 1941-44, a typical example that illustrates the role of oil as a metaphor for spiritual illumination in popular piety. While not using a single drop for cooking, a woman ensured that the lamp in front of the icon was always lit, offering up a prayer every day before departing for the fields. The symbolic importance of light, and the woman’s consciousness of it, is illustrated by her words, “How could I say this prayer if I left my icons in the dark?”

The habit of making an offering of olive oil, bread, and wine has existed since antiquity, as has the use of oil and olives in burial customs. The need of the deceased not to “end” with death explains the presence of a lamp on the grave. In a funeral song from Peloponnese, the dead brother and his living sister are compared to olive trees:

*The vineyard fence burnt, the garden burnt*
*The two olive trees burnt*
*Oh! My dear brother!*
*One of them burnt and fell and has no more worries*
*The other burnt and still stands and how will it survive?*
*My brother!*

A very characteristic phrase from a funeral song refers to the bad luck of the person who died away from his country and was thus not buried according to his country’s customs:

*He was buried without olive oil on his eyes in a wild land.*

**Methods of Olive Oil Measurement**

Galen, the medical writer (30-200 AD) gives some general information on methods of measuring liquids in the Greco-Roman World.
“Weights are evaluated based on their weight. Measures are evaluated based on the vessel’s capacity. The vessel measures either liquid or solid amounts. There are three different methods of measuring an amount; one by weights, one by solid substances like soil and one by liquid substances. There are various weights and measures depending on the country and the habits of the people that use them. We only mention the most common ones.”

Wine and olive oil are important products, especially in the Mediterranean, and methods of measuring quantity were naturally a matter of concern to Mediterranean communities that traded in these products. Various vessels, such as amphorae, skins, gallons, barrels, jars, wooden bowls, and other vessels, were used to define weight and volume of both wine and oil.

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