

The Competitive Spirit in Flora

"The crown, symbolic of the sacred Games was oleaster for the Olympics, laurel for the Pythian, fresh celery for the Nemean, dried celery for the Isthmian Games..."¹

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ABSTRACT

The ancient Greek athletic spirit was achieving apotheosis at the time of the victor's reward. The athletes achieved immortality throughout the centuries at the very specific time of their crowning and their prize came from the flora. This is why ancient Greeks' Games including leaves and wreaths were known as "phyllophoroi", "stephanophoroi" or "phyllites" Games and contained virtues and ideals. During the Cosmogony, on the third day of Creation, God said, "Let the earth bring forth grass (flora) and so sprouts the olive tree", its presence expressing hope, peace and tranquility in the Bible. The olive tree will play a vital role both in human life and its manifestations as well as in art, religion and in the athletic field. It will also represent a special emblem for regions, games, semigods and Gods. In particular, it is found at the Phaestos Disc (Minoan era), as a holy tree at ancient Olympia (Holy Altis), as a prize at Panathenea and the Olympic Games and furthermore as a symbol of peace in the hands of the embattled goddess Athena. At the same time, it is awarded in athletic and cultural competitions. It also has an equivalent sense in Christianity, starting with Noah's flood, certifying its "adoption" from religion. We will find proportional meaning at the apples, awarded before the "kotinos", the oak tree, the laurel, the pine tree, the celery, the myrtle, the aspen wreath and the barley, considered to be God's symbols. These are symbols that survived throughout the centuries and even nowadays they have a global meaning due to their power and importance. They represent values and ideals of great significance, expressing the holiness of human acts via the yearly renaissance of nature.

Key words: Athlete, Games, Prize, Flora, Olive Tree, Religion, Ideals.

El espíritu competitivo en Flora:

"la corona, símbolo de los juegos sagrados era el olivo para las olimpiadas, laurel para los juegos píticos, apio fresco para los juegos nemeos, apio seco para los juegos ístmicos..."

RESUMEN

En la Grecia antigua, el espíritu atlético alcanzaba su punto culminante en el momento en el que el vencedor recibía la recompensa por su triunfo. Precisamente en el momento en que recibían la corona que simbolizaba su victoria, los atletas conseguían la inmortalidad, y esa recompensa venía de la flora. Los juegos antiguos en los que los vencedores recibían hojas y coronas eran llamados "phyllophoroi", "stephanophoroi" o "phyllites", y esas hojas y coronas representaban virtudes e ideales. En el día tercero de la Creación del mundo, Dios dice: "Que la tierra haga nacer la hierba (flora), y así brota el olivo"; su presencia expresa esperanza, paz y calma en la Biblia. El olivo desempeñará un papel fundamental en la vida humana y sus manifestaciones, en

¹ Pindarus' Commentator O.3.27, see *Grigorios Paliouritis* (1815), *Elliniki Arhaiologia Vol. B* (Greek Archaeology Vol. B), publ. Venetia, 1815, p. 161.

el arte, la religión y también en el terreno deportivo. Será también el emblema de ciudades, juegos, semidioses y dioses. En concreto, se encuentra en el disco de Festo (época minoica), en la antigua Olimpia como árbol sagrado, en las Panateneas y en los Juegos Olímpicos como premio, y además es símbolo de paz en las manos de Atenea, la diosa armada. Se entrega como premio en competiciones deportivas y culturales. En la tradición judeo-cristiana tiene un simbolismo semejante, empezando por el diluvio de Noé, donde se certifica su uso "religioso". Un sentido similar puede tener la manzana que se entregaba como premio antes de la rama de olivo ("kotinos"), las coronas de roble, laurel, pino, apio, mirto y álamo, y la cebada, considerada símbolo de los dioses. Hay símbolos que sobrevivieron en el curso de los siglos, e incluso en nuestros días tienen un significado global debido a su poder e importancia, y representan valores e ideales fundamentales, expresando la sacralidad de los actos humanos a través del renacimiento anual de la naturaleza.

Palabras clave: Atleta, Juegos, Premios, Flora, Olivo, Religión, Ideales.

According to Greek mythology, which constitutes the historical core of the primordial events of the past, the first deities in the Universe had been Uranus and his wife Gaia (Mother Earth), ancestors of both the flora and fauna worlds². The first Goddess, Mother Earth, had been mother to both Gods and humans³.

Relative to Cosmogony are the beliefs of the eastern peoples. According to the Bible, God, the Word, "first created the heaven and the earth"⁴. On the third day of creation, God said, "Let the earth bring forth grass (flora)⁵ and so sprouts the olive tree", its presence expressing hope, piece and tranquility⁶ in the Bible.

The first official references to plants derive from the Orphic Hymns, in which Goddess Demeter (Demeter = Earth + Mother in Greek), a worshipful continuation of Mother Earth, is being worshipped as the preserver of nature, flora and seeds⁷. She also bears the honorary epithet "Goddess Chloe"⁸ (the Green Shoot) or even "Chloris" as Amphionas⁹ daughter.

In mythology there are a lot of references to the symbolism of the flora's sacredness. Through the myth, the olive tree symbolises Goddess Athena and Zeus, the oak tree, Zeus, the rose, Aphrodite, the pomegranate, symbol of fertility, Persephone and Hera, the poppy, Demeter and Persephone¹⁰. Furthermore, plants and trees have

² Orphic Hymn 4, 1-10 63,16, D.P. Papaditsa-E. Ladia (1984), *Orphic Hymns*, text, translation, comments, publ. Imago, Athens, p. 8; as for the Hymns' originality, Hesiod, *Theogony* 45-50, see Apollodorus, book Two, par. 4.

³ Orphic Hymn 63, 16 26,1, see Homeric Hymn 14,1, Pindarus O. 7. 70.

⁴ Genesis 1 par. 1.

⁵ Genesis 1,11

⁶ Genesis z. 1-6, chapter 7, verses 10-11.

⁷ Orphic Hymn 40,5 38,13, compare Hesiod, *Theogony* 284-285.

⁸ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 835, Herodotus 4,34.

⁹ Apollodorus 1.93, 3.46.

¹⁰ Nikos Psilakis, *Elaias Stefanos* (Olive Crown), publ. Geniki Grammateia Olympiakon Agonon (2002), Athens, pp. 22-23.

been granted the ability to speak in human voices¹¹. In general, ancient Greek painting and sculpture have developed - for art imitates “nature”¹².

First, forest flora was sacred¹³ for it was a place of spirits¹⁴, a belief that also exists in the Minoan era. The Minoan civilisation is the one that has provided us with the most complete and outstanding depictions of olive branches¹⁵. In particular, the Phaistos Disc (1600 BC) which was recovered by Luigi Pernier in Phaistos, contains Linear B script ideograms. It is suggested that it describes a ritual religious hymn. The disc’s 25th ideogram strongly brings to mind the shape of an olive tree leaf¹⁶. Also, one of the first depictions of olive tree crowns is located on the upper storey of a 15th century BC Knossos dwelling, in murals embellishing a frieze¹⁷.

A mural dating back to 1650 BC which was uncovered in Minoan Thera depicts a young girl, wounded, worshipper in the sanctuary of Xesti, a multi-level building. The young woman bears a branch of olive in her head, which apart from a religious quality also has a magical one¹⁸.

The book *Trauma*¹⁹ provides us with information about trauma infliction and care in Ancient Greece, describing why “by mistakes we learn”²⁰, a proverb from the Antiquity that still is in use today.

In one of the two golden cups uncovered in 1888 from a non desecrated tomb dating back to 1600 BC in the region of Vapheio in Laconia, we have a depiction of bull hunting in a rural area where the olive is clearly visible. In Minoan religion both the Bull and the Olive were considered sacred and were among the favourite subjects of the Minoan Art²¹.

The sacredness of the olive tree is connected to the worship of trees (dentrolatreia) of the Minoan religion and is very nicely engraved on golden rings from the Minoan and Mycenaean eras, the deity²² depicted under the tree. The sacredness of

¹¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, chapter ξ=14=XIV. 328, see ι=9=IX.,186. Also, Rizou A. – Rizopoulou S., *Symbolika Phyta ton Olympiakon Agonon* (Symbolic plants in the Olympic Games), publ. ESTIA, 2004, Athens, p. 10.

¹² Theophrastos, *Peri Phytou Aitai*, (Explanation of Plants), B.18,2.

¹³ Orphic Hymn, 36,10, see Apollodorus, Book 1.83, par. 110.

¹⁴ J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, translated in Greek by A. Tsakalis, publ. Pyninos Kosmos, 1992, Athens, p. 124.

¹⁵ N. Psilakis, *ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁶ See L. Goraro, *The Phaistos Disc, The Enigma of an Aegean Script*, 1995, and N. Psilakis, *ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁷ P. Warren, *The Fresco of the Garland From Knossos*, B.C.H., Supplement, 1985, pp. 187-208, see N. Psilakis, *ibid.*, pp. 11, 21-22.

¹⁸ N. Psilakis, *ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁹ Stephanos Geroulanos - Rene Bridler, *Trauma*, 1998, translated, publ. Educational Institution of the National Bank of Greece, Athens, pp. 29-89, pictures no 2-23.

²⁰ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 177.

²¹ A. Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*, Vol. III, 1930 London, p. 182, see E. Davis, *The Vapheio Cups, One Minoan and One Mycenaean?*, Art Bulletin (1974, 472-487), A. Xenaki-Sakellariou, Archaeologiki Ephimeris Tomos 30 (Archaeological Chronicles Vol. 30), Athens, pp. 45-64.

²² See N. Marinato, *The Tree the Stone and Pithos: Glimpses Into a Minoan Ritual, Aegaeun*, Annales d’Archeologie Egeenne de Universite de Liege 6, 1990, pp. 79-92.

forests and of the oak tree in particular, is found in the Mycenaean era as well (Minoan influence²³). The oracle of Dodona in Epirus was located within an oak forest where arch-diviner God Zeus via his symbol, the sacred oak, revealed his intentions²⁴.

According to Apollodorus' recounts of the Argonauts, Phrixus comes to Colchis and after many adventures he wins and sacrifices the Golden Fleece to God Zeus, pinning it to an oak tree inside God Ares'²⁵ sacred grove.

Sacred forests "each and every overgrown area was assigned to the Gods..."²⁶ were the surrounding grounds of Ancient Greeks' sanctuaries, which also neighbored on wrestling schools (palaestra in Greek), gymnasiums and stadiums²⁷. The ancient Altis²⁸ -according to Aeolans- instead of Alsos, forest in Olympia contained all sanctuaries as well as the numerous statues of the Pantheon. In particular, the athletic institutions, the palaestra, the Gymnasium and the stadium²⁹.

The olive tree. We have references about the competition between Athena and Poseidon to be the patron deity of Athena-Attica at the Acropolis³⁰ or Colonus³¹. The rest of the Gods judged the competition. The God that would give the most valuable gift to mankind would be the patron of Attica. Poseidon struck the ancient rock of Acropolis with his trident and sea water sprung up immediately. Then, Goddess Athena struck her spear on the rock and so, sprouted the olive tree³².

Fair divine judgment awarded Attica to Athena - for her gift offered food and light to mankind and was more valuable than sea water. It is also said that at the time Goddess Athena had planted the olive tree in Creta³³.

The olive's religious status is also evident from the fact that one of Poseidon's sons, Alirrothios, proceeded with an unholy act, one that annoyed the Goddess. Angry as he was for Attica had not been awarded to his father, he took an axe and ascended to the Acropolis. There, he attempted to cut down the sacred and unique olive tree that Athena had planted herself, but he did not manage to. As he was trying, the axe bounced from within his hands and instead of hitting the sacred tree, turned against him and in a wondrous way cut his head or his leg off and he died. This apologue does not only express the tradition for the olive's divine status, but also reflects the legal and customary prohibitions that protected olive trees and olive

²³ Homer, *Odyssey*, κ=10=X. 197, see Apollodorus, Book Two par. 6; sacred forests.

²⁴ Homer, *Odyssey*, ξ=14=XIV. 328, ι=9=IX. 186, *Iliad*, M=12=XII. 132.

²⁵ Apollodorus, Book One, 83 and par. 110.

²⁶ Pindarus' commentator, O.3.26 and par. 31 and I.1., pp. 76-81.

²⁷ Pausanias, 9.39,9 5. 10,1.

²⁸ Pindarus' commentator O.IA (I) 51.

²⁹ Pindarus, O.10.55, see Pausanias 5.10,1.

³⁰ Apollodorus, 3.177-179.

³¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 701, compare Herodotus 5.82.

³² Pausanias, I.26 5-6, see Homer, *Iliad*, P=17=XVII. 53, *Odyssey*, ν=13=XIII. 104, 372; sacred olive tree.

³³ Aggel. Chaniotis, *Klasiki kai Elliniki Kriti* (Classical and Hellenic Creta), in K.I.P., Vol. A, 1987, Creta, p. 315.

groves. It was forbidden to ever cut or uproot an olive tree³⁴. This was a very strong belief in Attica until the 1950's; it was forbidden to cut an olive tree without a permit from the Forest Service.

According to Dion Chrysostomos the first one to be crowned with an oleaster wreath, a "kotinos", was Goddess Athena³⁵ in remembrance of her victory. During the regular Panathenaea Games held every year and the Great Panathenaea held every four years in Athena's honour, the olive and oil are distinctive features. The "thallophoroi" in Panathenaea, a group of men chosen for their fairness, held olive branches³⁶.

The suppliants were approaching sanctuaries holding olive branches³⁷. Kreon, King of Thebes, decreed that all dead Argeioi in the clash between his sons Eteocles and Polynices were not to be buried. Then, General Andrastros of Thebes comes to Athens as a suppliant, resorts to the "mercy" altar holding an olive branch and asks of the Athenians to convince Kreon as for the dead to be buried³⁸.

Upon winning the Panathenaea Games, the athlete was awarded the Panathenean Amphora, a type of ceramic vase with two handles, which was filled with olive oil and an oleaster wreath³⁹. Both the leaf and the olive oil had been taken from the Goddess's sacred olive grove in Akademia⁴⁰. Morios Zeus⁴¹ was the patron deity of the sacred olive trees, a feature that enhances the sacredness of the olive tree. "Morios" olive trees grew inside the temples⁴² niches or parvises. Whoever was caught removing olive branches from the Goddess's sacred forest was sentenced by the chief court of Areios Pagos with the death penalty for his unholy act⁴³.

The oil inunction of wrestling athletes apart from the practical and practice role it played, also contains a metaphysical philosophy, similar to that of the chrism in the christening; the person that is being covered in oil also acquires sacredness⁴⁴.

³⁴ Apollodorus, 3.14, see Commentator Aristophanes, *Nepheles* (The Clouds), 1006.

³⁵ D. Chrysostomos, *Tehni Peri Panigirikon*, 6.9.

³⁶ Aristophanes, *Sfikes* (The Wasps), 544. Isihios, entry "thallophoroi".

³⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 902.

³⁸ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 3, Apollodorus, III 78-79.

³⁹ Soudas, entry "Panatheneia", see "There are numerous specific studies on panathenean amphorae, the most recent one being (M. Bentz, *Panathenaische Preisamphoren. Eine Athenische Vasengattung und Ihre Funktion*, vol. 6. 4. Jahrhundert v.Chr., 18. AntK. Basel (1998). P. Valavanis, *Recherches sur le Amphores Grecques*, B.C.H. Suppl. 13 (1986); 453 M. Tiberius (1974). "Panatheneaka" in AD 29, vol. A, Meletai (Studies), pp. 142-153.

⁴⁰ Aristophanes, *Nepheles* (The Clouds), 1005.

⁴¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 705.

⁴² Lysias, 109.11 and 108.26.

⁴³ Gustav Gilbert, *Egheiridion Arhaiologias tou Dimosiou Viou ton Ellinon* (Archaeologic Manual on Greek Public Life), 1897, transl. N.G. Politou, Vol. I, (1897), Athens, p. 352.

⁴⁴ Dictionary H.G. Liddell-Rob. Scott, entry "aleiptis", see Gianakis Thomas, *Archaeognosia – Philosophia Agonistikis* (Knowledge of the Ancient Era – Philosophy of Competition), 1979, publ. Panepistimio, Athens, pp. 20-23.

The olive tree, as Athena's distinctive mark, a Goddess with an apparent martial status, never acquired a status as a symbol of warfare. Peace herself, daughter of Zeus and Thetis, the Goddess of Justice, was depicted with olive branches⁴⁵ by the Greek intelligentsia.

Ancient beliefs about the olive tree are both projected and adopted by Christianity, where the God-man appears to be praying in the mountain of olive trees⁴⁶. The olive branch symbolises God's peace and love or as Ioannis Chrysostom comments, "the olive branch is God's charity"⁴⁷. The special part the olive tree has played as a symbol of peace to Christian art and worship is strengthened from the Biblical version of the flood; "the sole survivors of the flood were Noah along with his wife... with the dove bringing him optimism and hope with an olive branch"⁴⁸.

Ecclesiastical writer Methodius in 3rd century BC states that the olive tree signifies God's mercy⁴⁹ or the olive leaf signifies God's charity⁵⁰. Epiphanius considers the believer to be "a fruited olive tree in God's House"⁵¹. There are numerous examples in tomb engravings from the early Christian era which symbolise the Christian doctrine and the hope for eternal peace⁵². Furthermore, in depictions of the Annunciation of Mary⁵³ (Theotokos in Greek) Archangel Gabriel sometimes carries an olive branch.

The olive tree in the Olympic process. According to Polydefkis, the oleaster on the Acropolis is called "moria" (morio = piece, part) or "kotinos", and "kallistephanos"⁵⁴ in Olympia. The crowns for the Panathenea Games were made of leaves from the first one and the crowns of Olympic champions⁵⁵, of the later one. It is said that the "kotinos" had been brought and planted in the Pantheon by Heracles from the land of the Hyperborea⁵⁶ (beyond the "Boreas" - north wind). It is also mentioned that the semi-god Heracles, a personification of the Greek type, relieved Prometheus, the reformer of all mankind, of his punishment and honoured him with a kotinos wreath⁵⁷. According to traveler Pausanias, the five brothers "Daktyloi Idaioi" (Idaeon fingers) the tribe of Curetes, come to Olympia from Creta, a cultu-

⁴⁵ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 902.

⁴⁶ New Testament, Matthew, 21,1 24,3 Marcus 13,3 14,26 11,1.

⁴⁷ P.G. 48, 1037.

⁴⁸ Old Testament, Genesis, chapter 8 par. 11.

⁴⁹ P.G. 18,196.

⁵⁰ Ioannis Chrysostomos, P.G. 48, 1037.

⁵¹ P.G. 43, 429.

⁵² Charalambidis K., *Symbolikes Parastaseis tis Eirinis kai tis Elpidas stin Palaiochristianiki Tehni tis Dysis* (Symbolisms of Peace and Hope in Old-Christian Western Art), Athens, 2002, pp. 46-47.

⁵³ J.C. Cooper, *ibid.*, p. 165.

⁵⁴ Pausanias, V 15,3.

⁵⁵ Onomastikos, 1.24, see Pindarus, O.3.23, O.4.19, I.2.34, also, Isihios, entry "Kotinos", and Pausanias VIII 2,2.

⁵⁶ Pindarus, O.3.29, see Pausanias V 7,7.

⁵⁷ Apollodorus II. 119.

ral influence, and for the sake of enjoyment they hold the Olympic Games. In particular, they hold a stadium length sprint and Heracles Idaios, the older of the brothers, becomes an Olympic champion and is crowned with a kotinos⁵⁸ for the first time.

Zeus' ivory statue in Olympia, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, carved by the famed Greek sculptor Phidias, bore a silver kotinos, as an Olympic champion due to the clash of the Gods with his father Cronus for the rule of Olympia⁵⁹. Furthermore, King Iphitus is being crowned with a kotinos within the temple's niche by Ekecheiria⁶⁰ (Truce).

It is said that the use of the kotinos⁶¹ is established as an award to Olympic champions either in 884 BC or 828 BC, on the 6th Olympiad and King Iphitus' reign, while until then they were awarded the "mileios karpos" (sheep or fruit). Therefore, the first crowned Olympic champion still remains unknown.

The Spondophori heralds were proclaiming the Olympic Truce. They were crowned with kotinos wreaths and set out from the sacred region of Elis for all directions of the land before the Olympic Games started. Any interference with those sacred heralds of Zeus⁶² was considered to be an unholy act.

According to beliefs, tradition and medicine, the olive tree and olive oil contain immense therapeutic properties and therefore, the Athenians considered the olive tree a national symbol and were trying to establish it as a unique feature. In particular, they believed that "moria", branches from Athena's tree at the Acropolis were replanted, resulting in the introduction of the olive tree around the world⁶³.

Apples or "mileios karpos" (apple fruit). The sheep or a quadruped⁶⁴, the ovine⁶⁵ and "milatis o poimin"⁶⁶, but also the fruit apple. The nymphs, inferior divinities of the forests, which were called Meliades or Maelies, protected flocks and fruit trees⁶⁷. Also, melites is the wine that is produced after distilling apples⁶⁸.

Apples hold a prominent place in Greek mythology. The eleventh labour of Heracles, the Greek role model, which expresses the competitive spirit in the Western world, refers to the stealing of the Hesperides' apple⁶⁹. Goddess Aphrodite gives her love-struck son three golden apples in order for him to deceive the so far

⁵⁸ Pausanias, V 7, 6-7.

⁵⁹ Pausanias, V 11,1.

⁶⁰ Pausanias, V 11,1.

⁶¹ Patrologiae Curpus Completus Accurante J.N. Minge, tomus XIX, Eusebius Pamphili Caesariensis Episcopus, Chronicorum Lib. 1. 1857, pp. 221-224, see Pindarus, O.12.12-13 and O.3.23.

⁶² Pindarus, I.2.35, Thucydides, 5.49, Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 4.7, 2 Pausanias 5.20 or (28) 1, Polidefkis 4.94.

⁶³ N. Psiliakis, *ibid.*, pp. 410-411.

⁶⁴ Pindarus' commentator, O.6.167.

⁶⁵ Herodotus, 1.119.

⁶⁶ Isihios, entry "melotae".

⁶⁷ Polidefkis, *Onomastikos*, ?.122, 127.

⁶⁸ Plutarch, 2.648 E, see Polidefkis, 6.47.

⁶⁹ Apollodoros, II 113 and 120, see Theophrastos, *Peri Phytou Aitias*, Book Three, chapter 10 par. 7.

unscathed heroin⁷⁰ Atalantis in their racing competition. We also have references to apples during the Mycenaean era when Homer calls them “aglaokarpous”⁷¹.

Apples are an established reward until the 6th Olympiad⁷². The apple fruit symbolises immortality; it is the seed of renaissance and rejuvenation⁷³. According to Pausanias, Heracles, the alleged founder of the Olympic Games, awarded Olympic champions with wreaths of palm trees⁷⁴.

Oak tree (Drys, Fygos, Valanidia). The Ancient Greeks believed that the oldest fruitful tree, beneficial for people was the oak tree and in fact, was Zeus’ sacred tree, his symbol in the oracle of Dodona. They believed that through the rustle of the oak’s leaves, the God himself spoke, offering his prophecies to earthborn beings⁷⁵.

According to Parker, during the Panathenea Games, the Athenians were holding olive branches because they considered themselves a civilized people, whereas slaves and barbarians were only holding oak branches⁷⁶. The acorn signals the primitive civilisation, roughness and ferociousness. The Athenians used to call the Arcadian people “Valanophagous” (acorn eaters) due to their roughness. They believed that they were the first to eat acorns before they knew how to cultivate the land⁷⁷.

The Attic orator Demosthenes also agrees that the only indigenous peoples were the Arcadians and the Athenians⁷⁸; hence apparently the cultivation of the olive tree⁷⁹ followed the oak’s presence and usefulness. According to commentator Efstathios, the exclusion of acorns from man’s diet signaled the cultural transition from primitive to peaceful existence, to civilisation⁸⁰.

The figurativeness of plants is pervasive in Ancient Athena’s celebrations. During the Athenian celebration of Pyanepsia⁸¹, honouring Apollo and that of Thargilia⁸², honouring Artemis and Apollo, children would bring the “eiresionis”, an olive or a laurel branch woven with wool and various seeds, while singing the “eire-

⁷⁰ Apollodorus, III 106-108.

⁷¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, η=7=VII. 115, ω=24=XXIV. 340.

⁷² P. Phlegon v. Tralles F. (Olympiads) p. 1162, see Pausanias, V,15,3-4, K. Kitriniari, *Gymnastikos Philost.*, 1961, trans. Shol. Athens, p. 137; reference to the prophecy of Delphoi.

⁷³ J.C. Cooper, *ibid.*, p. 221.

⁷⁴ Pausanias, VIII 48,1.

⁷⁵ Homer, *Odyssey*, ξ=14=XIV. 328, Sophocles, *The Trachiniae*, 1168.

⁷⁶ H.W. Parker, *Oi Eortes stin Arhaia Athena* (Celebrations in Ancient Athena), 2002, transl. Har. Orfanos, Athens, p. 58, see Herodotus 1.66, Plutarch Koriolanos 3.

⁷⁷ Philon, *Peri Athlon kai Epitimion kai Aron*, 8.3.

⁷⁸ Peri Parapresveias, par. 261.

⁷⁹ Marcellus Fragm. 125.

⁸⁰ Efstathios, *Parekvolai eis tin Omirou Iliada*, A. 449 M. 361.

⁸¹ It is said that it was held in the month of Pyanepsionas, corresponding to October. It is called so because they cooked a variety of pulses (pyana=broad beans); Plutarch Theseas 22, Athenaeos 408 A., see in lexicographers entry “Arpokration”, Soudas Isihios (for calendar see W. Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, 1890, transl. Athens).

⁸² Held in the month of Thargilion (May); Archilochos 102, Antiphon 116,17, Aristoteles, *Athenaion Politeia* 6. 81. 11,8 (publ. Blass), see Isihios.

sionis” song. At the same time, sacrifices were made to God Sun and the Hours. Then, they hung the branch outside the dwelling; the custom is still preserved on May Day with a wreath of flowers. The branch was left there for the entire year until it was replaced with the new “eiresionis”⁸³. The “eiresionis” also embellished tombs to honour the dead⁸⁴, a custom which is still preserved, when laying laurels on the tombs of the dead.

During the Argonautic expedition, Goddess Athena makes her presence apparent by placing an oak branch from the sacred forest of the oracle of Dodona⁸⁵ in the bow of the Argo ship. In the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, there are references to the tall oak trees, in whose forests dwell the nymphs, the fairies⁸⁶, as it still believed today. The oak tree was the personification of the Dryads or Hamadryads, whereas “drymoi” or “drymones” were forests dedicated to Zeus.

From the Royal Burial Chambers in Vergina (350-325 BC) what was brought to light was a golden oak wreath, which stated the apotheosis in the after-life. With sacred branches from Zeus’s oak tree they used to weave wreaths for the victors of the Naa Games in Dodona⁸⁷. Furthermore, the victors of Arcadia’s Lycaea Games in Zeus’s honour were also crowned with oak branches; the victors (“Lycaeanikes”) were called “Dryostephanoi”⁸⁸ (those crowned with oak wreaths). Also, officers were crowned with oak wreaths⁸⁹.

Maybe the fact that the oak wood does not rot when timbered on a proper season, symbolises the endurance of the victors’ glory through the centuries. It also contains therapeutic and hygienic properties as summed up in Valaneia, where the main ingredient of the bath was acorn extract, and also, the term “Valaneia” of this institution⁹⁰.

Laurel. After Apollo was born in Delos, he comes to the oracle of Delphi, Gaia’s oracle and claims the land’s religious reign. He kills the serpent Python, guard to the oracle and Gaias’ child. For this unholy act, he exiles himself to Tempi for nine years. After the nine-year ordeal, the Minoan priest Karmanoras⁹¹ cleansed him with laurel branches; therefore, he is called “daphnitis” or “daphnopolis” and “daphniphoros”⁹².

⁸³ The song was called “eiresionis” and later, ended up to be a song sang by beggars; Aristophanes, *The Knights*, 729, *The Wasps*, 399, *Plutus*, 1054 (Homeric Hymn 15, 1-9; of beggars Plutarch *Theseas* 21).

⁸⁴ Collection of Inscriptions 956, *Alkiphron* 3.37. For these two celebrations see H.W. Parke, *Eortes stin Arhaia Athena*, transl. publ. I. Zaharopoulos, Athens; (Thargelia) pp. 249-250, 252-254, 301, 315 and *Pyanepsia* pp. 101, 104-107.

⁸⁵ Apollodorus, 1 par. 110.

⁸⁶ Homeric Hymn 5.264, see lexicographer Soudas entry “phigos”.

⁸⁷ See C.I. Gr. 290 9: “victor in the Naa Games in Dodona”. N. Psilakis, *idem.*, p. 12.

⁸⁸ Plutarch *Koriolanos* 3.

⁸⁹ Pierre Charneux, *Inscriptions d’Argos*, B.C.H. 190 (Bulletin Correspondance Hellenique), 1985, Paris, pp. 357-370, see Herodotus 1.66, Plutarch *Koriolanos* 3.

⁹⁰ Plutarch 2. 42B, see Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, 837, 1054.

⁹¹ Pausanias X 7,2.

⁹² Isihios, entry “dafnitis”, see Euripides, *Ion* 422, Aeschylus, *Hiketides* 706.

The Thebes' region was the first to worship Apollo and had established the "Daphnophoria" celebration. Pilgrims would adorn a long olive branch with laurel leaves. Leading the procession would be a young boy, "pais amphithalis", a child whose both parents were alive. In front of the boy was the "daphnophoros" priest of Isminios Apollo bearing the decorated branch, known as "kopo" (stick)⁹³.

It is said that Hesiod (Boeotian, 8th century BC), when singing, he was crowned with a laurel wreath and held a laurel⁹⁴ stick. The oldest Apollo temple in Delphi was a hut made of laurel branches from Tempⁱ⁹⁵. In 582 BC, laurel is officially established as a reward in the Pythian Games⁹⁶. Pausanias argues that Laurel, personified by the daughter of Ladonas, was a friend of Phoebus, and that explains why the victors of the Pythian Games⁹⁷ are awarded laurels. The evergreen laurel wreath symbolises immortality and in Christianity, the agony for the Holy Passion, the pain, the labour, the struggle⁹⁸.

Nowadays the laurel is being used in pharmaceuticals, cooking, distillery and as a digestive, diuretic, stimulant, emmenagogue, sudorific, invigorating and antiseptic substance.

Pine tree. A conifer, for which we have references since the Mycenaean era⁹⁹.

Poseidon's sacred forest was located in the region of Isthmos and it was the place from which branches were taken to create the wreaths for the victors of the Isthmian Games ("Isthmionikes"¹⁰⁰). According to Pausanias, in particular, the sacred pine was near Melikertis's altar and wreaths for the "Isthmionikes"¹⁰¹ were made from that. Pindarus' commentator also agrees with the pine reward, but stresses that "the wreath was made of celery all along"¹⁰² and also, "...wreath of dried celery for the Isthmian Games' competitors, and fresh celery for the Nemean Games"¹⁰³.

Celery. Celery is mentioned in the Homeric poems as horses'¹⁰⁴ food. Lexicographer Soudas (Soudas) mentions its funereal expression; the dead were laid upon celery layers, then, buried¹⁰⁵. Also, there was a custom of placing celery

⁹³ Pausanias IX. 10,4. See Pausanias, *Periigiseis*, Boeotian-Phokika, transl. comments N. Papahatzis (1992), Academy of Athens Award 1982, Ekdotiki Athinon A.E., Athens, p. 84, footnote 2.

⁹⁴ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 30, see Pausanias IX 30,3.

⁹⁵ P.G. 115, 1185-1211 and P.G. 96, 1281, see Pausanias X 5,9.

⁹⁶ Pindarus Π. 10. 61, see Pausanias X 7,8 7,5.

⁹⁷ Pausanias X 7,8.

⁹⁸ J.C. Cooper, *ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

⁹⁹ *Iliad*, N=13=XIII. 390, Π=16=XVI. 483, see Soudas entry "pitys".

¹⁰⁰ Plutarch 2. 674 F., see *Anthologia Palatini* 6.253; crowned with pitys.

¹⁰¹ Pausanias II 1,3.

¹⁰² Pindarus' commentator I. "Isthmian case", for celery or pine branch rewards see Broneer Oscar, *The Isthmian Games Lectures*, article in International Olympic Academy, Third Session, July 1963, Olympia-Greece, pp. 189-190, *idem*. Olympic Academy Report (1970), French version, pp. 94-99.

¹⁰³ Pindarus' commentator I. 2.19.

¹⁰⁴ Homer, *Iliad*, B. 776, *Odyssey*, ε. 72, *Iliad* Λ=11=XI. 562, E=5=V. 202, Λ=11=XI. 562.

¹⁰⁵ Soudas entry "selinou stephanos penthimos".

wreaths¹⁰⁶ in the tombs. In the Panhellenic Games, of sepulchral origin, victors are crowned with celery wreaths, symbolising the funeral. Therefore, in the Nemean Games, of sepulchral nature, “in early times were crowned with olive... later, with celery”¹⁰⁷. According to Pindarus, olive branches, for the victors’ wreaths, were taken from the sacred forest of Nemaïos Zeus¹⁰⁸. What was later established is “a fresh branch for the Nemean Games, whereas in the Isthmian Games, the dried celery wreath”¹⁰⁹.

Celery’s sepulchral origin still is believed today; In Greek villages, when they offer the “koliva” (mixture of boiled wheat kernels, sesame seeds, almonds, cinnamon, sugar, pomegranate seeds, raisins and parsley) after the memorial liturgy, they use finely chopped celery, as it is believed that it is the dead’s favourite plant. Celery is used in cooking, as well as a pharmaceutical, febrifuge, emmenagogue, diuretic substance and also, for stomach aches. It can cause uterus contractions and animals to abort¹¹⁰.

Palm tree, “Date palm”¹¹¹. In Mythology, when Leto was about to give birth to Apollo and Artemis in sacred Delos, she approached a tree, the evergreen palm tree and during labour¹¹² she hugged the trunk in order to reduce birth pangs.

Paeonius’ statue of Nike in Olympia (420 BC), dedicated by the people of Messenia and Naupactus, is said that as she descended from Uranus, she held a palm tree branch in her right hand, expressing the general concept of victory¹¹³. In Ancient Greece, the palm tree wreath or branch were primarily rewards in the sacred Panhellenic Games¹¹⁴. It is dated back in the Minoan era, when Theseus returning to Creta along with the “human tax”, “approached Delos and in Apollo’s hometown he held Games and awarded the victors palm tree branches”¹¹⁵. According to Pausanias, in most Games victors were awarded palm tree branches, even in the Olympic Games¹¹⁶ themselves. A mosaic which was uncovered in Larisa’s Kalo Nero region, displayed today in the Larisa Museum, depicts Goddess Nike carrying a palm tree branch, crowning a winged Eros or Agonas, who also carried a palm tree branch¹¹⁷.

¹⁰⁶ Plutarch 2. 676d.

¹⁰⁷ Pindarus’ commentator, N. 6. 71, Nemean Case, see Isihios entry “selinou stephanos”.

¹⁰⁸ Pindarus N. 2. 6-7, N. 1. 26.

¹⁰⁹ Pindarus N. 4. 181-182, I. 2. 23, see Pindarus’ commentator I. 2. 19, Celery wreaths are established in Nemea commemorating the death of Opheltis; Pindarus’ commentator N. 6.71.

¹¹⁰ *Phytologiko Lexiko Kata Theophrastos* (Plants Dictionary according to Theophrastos) (1998), No 11, publ. Kaktos, Athens, p. 260.

¹¹¹ *Odyssey*, ζ=6=VI. 163, Homeric Hymn 3,117; Hymn to Apollo.

¹¹² Homeric Hymn 3,15-18 115-118.

¹¹³ See N. Papahatzis (1979), Pausanias Periigiseis, Messenean-Hellian, transl. comments, Athens, p. 321, photo 316.

¹¹⁴ Plutarch, Symposium, Problem 7.2.4.A and 8.4.2.

¹¹⁵ Plutarch Thiseas 21,3, see Polidefkis, Onomastikos, P=III. 152.

¹¹⁶ Pausanias, VIII 48, 1-3.

¹¹⁷ Spathari Elsa, *To Olympiako Pneuma* (The Olympic Spirit), Athens, 1989, p. 220.

In the Vatican, a marble statue of a female dating back in 460 BC is displayed, accompanied with the comment that she is the victor of the female competition in the Heraia Games in Olympia. The conclusion is drawn from her athletic outfit while next to her there is a palm tree branch, signifying the award¹¹⁸.

Palm tree branches or “vaia” also signified victory and apotheosis in the beliefs of eastern peoples. The Sunday before Easter day, Christianity celebrates “Sunday of the Vaia”, in remembrance of the God-man’s triumphal arrival to Jerusalem, where vaia leaves¹¹⁹ were laid along the path leading to the city. Even nowadays when celebrating historical or religious events, we decorate sanctuaries or monuments with palm tree branches.

In Thebes’ funeral Ioleaia or Heraclea Games, victors were awarded a wreath from the evergreen bush myrsina – myrtle¹²⁰. Victors of the Heraea Games in Argos, in Hera’s honour¹²¹ received the same award.

In Athena’s ancient market there were stores called “myrrinae”, selling exclusively those wreaths. The myrtle was called “sacred bush” for when Aphrodite of Cyprus, the Goddess of beauty, broke to the surface of the sea, hid her nudity behind a myrtle bush¹²².

Myrtle wood stands out for its durability, does not rot and is used in fine carpentry. Its leaves have therapeutic effects on gingivitis, skin diseases and vaginal inflammation. Apart for its use in Games, it is also used for the creation of wreaths in symposiums, in sacrifices and funerals. It symbolises joy, peace, tranquility, happiness and victory¹²³.

In the Tlepolemeia Games in Rhodes, in honour of the hero Tlepolemus, the award was an aspen wreath¹²⁴. The aspen signifies the Elysian Fields, the islands of the deceased¹²⁵.

In the Eleusinian or Demetrian Games, in honour of Goddess Demetra, the victor was awarded a wreath of barley¹²⁶, which was reaped from the Goddess’s sacred field, in the Thriasian plain. Every cereal variation, including barley, symbolises renewal, life, resurrection, fertility¹²⁷.

¹¹⁸ E. Norman Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World*, Oxford, 1930, photo 13, p. 40 and photo 42, p. 79; *Stili tou Gymnasiarhou tis Prousas*, see Pausanias V 16,1; as for the athletic outfit.

¹¹⁹ New Testament, Evangelist Ioannis, chapt. 12 par. 12-13.

¹²⁰ Pindarus I. 8(7)147, Euripides, *Alkistes* 172, see Pindarus’ commentator I.2.114-117.

¹²¹ Pindarus’ commentator O. 7.141,147.

¹²² Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazousae*, 448, see *Plants Dictionary According to Theophrastos*, 1992, *ibid.*, p. 211.

¹²³ J.C. Cooper, *ibid.*, p. 339.

¹²⁴ Pindarus’ commentator O.7.171-147.

¹²⁵ J.C. Cooper, *ibid.*, p. 287.

¹²⁶ Pindarus I.1.81, see Pindarus’ commentator O.9.143.150, ?1.81.

¹²⁷ J.C. Cooper, *ibid.*, p. 259.

Lucian's works¹²⁸ are very revealing as far as the connection between the Olympic process and flora variations is concerned. The book of Euridiki Kefalidou is equally interesting for the use of plants and trees as crowns for victors¹²⁹.

CONCLUSIONS

Ancient Greeks' Games included leaves and wreaths (phillophoroi or stephaniphoroi or phyllites¹³⁰) and contained virtues and ideals. These symbols survived the test of time and via their enduring value and significance, still are global symbols nowadays. Today, we lay laurel branches or wreaths in honour of historic figures or saints of Orthodoxy, in national or religious celebrations. It is noteworthy that victors' wreaths come from forests, the evergreen flora, with few exceptions. Forests were home to spirits. The evergreen tree symbolises eternal life, the immortal spirit, immortality¹³¹.

The laurel symbolises God Apollo, a multi-faceted personality; an Olympic champion, symbolising wisdom and spirit. Phoebus; a symbol of success, achievement, value, noble origin. Moreover, the plant's scientific name is *Laurus nobilis* LINN., the meaning of the Latin word *nobilis* being "noble", giving evidence of the plant's link to honorary titles. The French word "*baccalaureat*" is a combination of Latin words "bacca" and "Laurea" ("leaves" and "laurel") and refers to an Academic distinction.

The olive tree symbolises reconciliation, charity, the Holy Spirit; it represents the life cycle and therefore, it is used as a funeral object, as an expression of human hope for afterlife. The olive tree is the sole tree that never dies because it keeps regenerating. Apart from being a resource of life, wealth and health, it is also a cultural element, an element of a civilisation that was formed around a common sea, in the Mediterranean, amongst peoples sharing common anxieties and hopes.

The Kotinos (oleaster) symbolises glory, victory, ethos, honour and triumph; it is linked with impartiality, justice, virtue and bravery. It expresses human sacredness and the annual rejuvenation of nature.

When crowned with a kotinos, the olive's power is "transfused" to the most sacred part of the human body, the head. It transfers to the victor, the crowned, the life-giving properties it contains and above all, the light that enlightens us.

¹²⁸ Lucian, *Anaharsis or Peri Gymnasion*, 9-14, see Palatini Anthologia 9.357, P. Valavani, *ibid.*, p. 22.

¹²⁹ Kefalidou Euridiki, *Nikitis, Eikonographimeni Meleti tou Arhaiou Ellinikou Athlismou* (Victor; An Illustrated Study on Ancient Greek Athletics), 1996, publ. University of Thessaloniki, pp. 60, 72-73, *idem.*, see article on magazine "NIKEPHOROS", 1999, No 12 Jahragang, Weidmann, ee. 95-119, see Valavani P., 1996, *Athla, Athlites kai Epathla*,

¹³⁰ Pindarus' commentator O.8.97-101.

¹³¹ J.C. Cooper, *ibid.*, pp. 124-127.

¹³² J.C. Cooper, *ibid.*, p. 479.

The kotinos, the humble oleaster leaves, contains every aspect of the philosophy of the ancient Olympic Spirit. When crowned, each Olympic champion becomes immortal. Zeus, the God of Gods and humans, is crowned in Olympia with a silver kotinos. The crown symbolises the cycle of time, represents the energy and the strength, both contained in the head, as it is the base of the integral soul¹³².

The olive is a global symbol of peace and nowadays it is praised around the world during the most esteemed cultural event of all, the Olympic Games, constituting the official emblem of the 2004 Olympic Games.