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Olive in Culture

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Abstract: This study focuses specifically on olive that is the symbol of Mediterranean, Anatolian and Balkan cultures and a historical symbol of peace and a symbol of hope in the worst times. There are findings that show olive and olive products were commonly used in pre-historic times. Current researches proved the improving effect of olive and olive oil on human health. Low rates of coronary heart diseases in Mediterranean countries are also related with use of olive and olive oil. Consumption of olive and its products will mean healthy and long life. Olive has an important part in Mediterranean cuisine. Simultaneously it has been an important part of Mediterranean culture and has taken place in songs, poems and alike.

Key words: Olive, culture, peace, Anatolian, Balkan

INTRODUCTION

Today, when talking about folklore, people tend to think about folk songs, history, dances and celebrations, although eating habits also builds up an important part of folklore. This study focuses specifically on olive that is the folkloric symbol of Mediterranean, Anatolian and Balkan cultures and that is a historical symbol of peace. Olive trees have been seeing as symbol of peace because in the past, people realized olive trees' interesting beings. After a fire of rain, even though no creatures were left alive after fire, the olive trees recovered quickly. So, the olive trees were used for a symbol of hope in the worst times. Moreover, there are findings that show olive and olive products were commonly used in pre-historic times as being symbol. In Roman times, athletes who have been ranked high in Olympics were given olive branches. Usage of olive as a symbol such as in countries' flags and symbols of international organizations such as UN (United Nations) is evidence that it is still being considered as an important object.

The locations where the earliest cultivation and use of olive took place were the countries along the Mediterranean coastline. Being a product, olive tree is peculiar to Mediterranean countries, olive dates back 8.000 B.C. (Sezer and Kirmanli, 1999). Archeological findings reveal that olive is of sacred crucial importance for human being (Arslan, 1999). Ancient western Anatolian civilizations called olive as "liquid gold" and that winning a race has been awarded with a branch of olive as the olive tree symbolizes resurrection and immortality and the branch of olive took place in various legends (Unsal, 2007). Olive has been the symbol of peace and hope in different cultures and the tree and fruit of olive have been regarded as a holy one (Tezcan, 2000). As one of the earliest agricultural product, olive (*Olea europaea*) is rich in oil (Arslan, 1999). Olive oil is the oil made of the fruits of olive tree. Olive oil is the only

oil produced through pressing olive and consumed directly without any chemical process. Olive oil resembles fruit juice in this form. The fact that it is the only oil of the vegetative oils is a faculty of it (Tunaliloglu and Karahocagil, 2004).

History of olive: Olive and olive oil, the first vegetative oil of the world, are regarded sacred and took its place in holy books. It is told in one of the legends taking place at Old Testament for olive; a pigeon coming back to the Noah's Ark with a piece of branch of oil in its mouth announced that the flood ended and the branch of oil has been regarded as the symbol of peace from then on (Atilla, 2003). Olive took place not only at holy books but also at administration, daily life and sportive activities in a society. Egyptian paid so much attention to olive. It is known to us through wall paintings that Pharaoh Tutankhamun (1354-1346 B.C.), dying at an early age of 19, was wearing a crown of justice woven with olive branches and that pharaoh mummies had necklaces around their necks woven with olive branches. The first king of Israelis, Saul was sanctified by olive oil rubbed on his forehead when he came to throne in 1035 B.C. (Atilla, 2003).

In Ancient Greek civilization having various legends concerning olive, collecting olive was not allowed to anybody except virgin girls and boys who swore an oath not to touch opposite sex, as olive tree was regarded sacred. The Greek believing that the children of the gods were born under an olive tree made their sculptures not only out of marble but also of olive trees (Unsal, 2007). It is known to us that olive in ancient time was given as a crown to the sportsmen winning races in the Olympic Games and as a present in the form of olive oil.

In Romans, Ramos and Romulus were believed to have been given a birth under an olive tree and the branch of olive was used that diplomats visiting a country came to that country with an idea of peace (Atilla, 2003). Olive

oil, in Romans, was used at the ceremonies of funerals and wedding and the dead one was blessed by sprinkling olive on the face and it was believed in this way that he would be purified of his sins (Murgoci, 1919). Planting olive trees, which are considered to be a holy one in many areas of life, was encouraged by Romans (Arslan, 1999).

In the eve of Christmas in Cyprus, children were taken to churches early in the morning and churches were decorated with branches and leaves of olive tree. Olive oil was sensed till dawn and people returning their homes would take some of these branches to their homes. They believed that these branches would protect them against evil eye and bless them (Haji-Costa, 1944).

Olive oil was a commodity used at religious ceremonies at Slavs. It was owned at every house and was used as a symbol of happiness and health at the ceremonies at churches, in the New Year and its celebrations (Maxwell, 1891).

In Macedonia, just married people and their house were blessed with olive oil so that they would be protected against evil eye and would bring happiness to them. A kind of bread made of the mixture of dried fish, onion, rice and olive oil was prepared to offer the bride when she came home in the evening so that she was believed to be blessed (Lodge, 1935).

Other areas olive and olive oil are used: Besides being used as a food, olive oil has been used in the production of soap enlightening, cosmetics, medicine and jewelry throughout the history. Current researches proved the improving effect of olive and olive oil on human health. Low rates of coronary heart diseases in Mediterranean countries are also related with use of olive and olive oil. It has an important part in Mediterranean cuisine. Consumption of olive and its products will mean healthy and long life (Assmann *et al.*, 1997; Visoli and Galli, 2009; Owen *et al.*, 2009).

Censing of olive oil and inhaling it was used a cure for headaches, bad cough, some dermatological diseases and against getting poisoned during the World War I in Spain. It was also used in the treatment of some gastrological diseases and some bags of olive would be hung at home in order to prevent snakes from entering the house (Fogg, 1941).

Olive oil is a widely used raw material of soap in the current time. In Ancient Greece, some beauty ailments were produced by putting some nicely-smelling spices into olive oil, those traveling long distances would rub it under their heals in order to prevent them from wounding and wrestles and athletes would rub their muscles with olive oil in order to soften them (Unsal 2007). Pure olive oil was used for the enlightening in prehistoric period as it has a long period of burning (O'Dea, 1951).

Olive and olive oil at verbal culture: As well taking part in the nutrition of human being, olive and olive oil was regarded as sacred, used for the treatment of some diseases and took its place at such periods of wedding, death, birth and birthday anniversaries. All these participation were expressed at songs, proverbs, puzzles, expressions and poems.

At expressions (Unsal, 2007):

- He went upward just like olive oil in water (Istanbul)
- He did his best and went upward just like olive oil in ater (Gaziantep)
- The months when black water flows (Ayvalik)
- Give someone a branch of olive
- Giving an olive into his mouth and open a cloth under him

At proverbs (Unsal, 2007):

- Plant poplar tree, your children will see it, plant olive tree, your grandchildren will see it (Adana/Kozan)
- Don't open a cloth under him before you make him swallow olive

Conclusion: Olive has been a significant cultural plant for Mediterranean and Balkan civilizations from prehistoric period onwards, it has been produced out of its fruit and the oil has been used in many fields. Olive with a wide range of usage has been used widely in verbal culture as well. Simultaneously is has been an important part of Mediterranean, Anatolian and Balkan culture and has taken place in songs, poems and alike.

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