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 istmicos..."

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 Atena, la diosa armada. Se entrega como premio en competiciones deportivas y culturales. En la tradición judío-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 worlds. The first Goddess, Mother Earth, had been mother to both Gods and humans.

Relative to Cosmogony are the beliefs of the eastern peoples. According to the Bible, God, the Word, “first created the heaven and the earth”. 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, piece and tranquility 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 seeds. She also bears the honorary epithet “Goddess Chlorë” (the Green Shoot) or even “Chloris” as Amphionas’ 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 Persephone. Furthermore, plants and trees have

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

First, forest flora was sacred for it was a place of spirits, 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 branches. In particular, the Phaestos Disc (1600 BC) which was recovered by Luigi Pernier in Phaestos, 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 leaf. 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 frieze.

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 one.

The book *Trauma* provides us with information about trauma infliction and care in Ancient Greece, describing why “by mistakes we learn”, 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 Art.

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

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13 Orphic Hymn, 36,10, see Apollodorus, Book 1.83, par. 110.
15 N. Psilakis, ibid., p. 22.
18 N. Psilakis, ibid., p. 29.
20 Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 177.
forests and of the oak tree in particular, is found in the Mycenean 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 neighboured on wrestling schools (palaestra in Greek), gymnasia and stadia27. 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

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23 Homer, *Odyssey*, κ=10=X. 197, see Apollodorus, Book Two par. 6; sacred forests.
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, Μ=177-179.
31 Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 701, compare Herodotus 5.82.
groves. It was forbidden to ever cut or uproot an olive tree. 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 Athena 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 branches.

The suppliants were approaching sanctuaries holding olive branches. 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 Andrastos 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 buried.

Upon winning the Panathenaic 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 wreath. Both the leafs and the olive oil had been taken from the Goddess’s sacred olive grove in Akademia. Morios Zeus was the patron deity of the sacred olive trees, a feature that enhances the sacredness of the olive tree. “Mories” olive trees grew inside the temples 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 act.

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 sacredness.
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 branches\textsuperscript{45} 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 trees\textsuperscript{46}. The olive branch symbolises God’s peace and love or as Ioannis Chrysostom comments, “the olive branch is God’s charity”\textsuperscript{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”\textsuperscript{48}.

Ecclesiastical writer Methodius in 3\textsuperscript{rd} century BC states that the olive tree signifies God’s mercy\textsuperscript{49} or the olive leaf signifies God’s charity\textsuperscript{50}. Epiphanius considers the believer to be “a fruited olive tree in God’s House”\textsuperscript{51}. There are numerous examples in tomb engravings from the early Christian era which symbolise the Christian doctrine and the hope for eternal peace\textsuperscript{52}. Furthermore, in depictions of the Annunciation of Mary\textsuperscript{53} (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”\textsuperscript{54} in Olympia. The crowns for the Panathena Games were made of leaves from the first one and the crowns of Olympic champions\textsuperscript{55}, 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 Hyperborea\textsuperscript{56} (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 wreath\textsuperscript{57}. According to traveler Pausanias, the five brothers “Daktyloi Idaioi” (Idaean fingers) the tribe of Curetes, come to Olympia from Creta, a cultu-

\textsuperscript{45} Hesiod, \textit{Theogony}, 902.
\textsuperscript{46} New Testament, Matthew, 21,1 24,3 Marcus 13,3 14,26 11,1.
\textsuperscript{47} P.G. 48, 1037.
\textsuperscript{48} Old Testament, Genesis, chapter 8 par. 11.
\textsuperscript{49} P.G. 18,196.
\textsuperscript{50} Ioannis Chrysostomos, P.G. 48, 1037.
\textsuperscript{51} P.G. 43, 429.
\textsuperscript{52} Charalambidis K., \textit{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.
\textsuperscript{53} J.C. Cooper, ibid., p. 165.
\textsuperscript{54} Pausanias, V 15,3.
\textsuperscript{55} Onomastikos, 1.24, see Pindarus, O.3.23, O.4.19, I.2.34, also, Isihios, entry “Kotinos”, and Pausanias VIII 2.2.
\textsuperscript{56} Pindarus, O.3.29, see Pausanias V 7,7.
\textsuperscript{57} Apollodorus II. 119.
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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 Olympia. Furthermore, King Iphitus is being crowned with a kotinos within the temple’s niche by Ekecheiria (Truce).

It is said that the use of the kotinos 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 Zeus 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 world.

Apples or “mileios karpos” (apple fruit). The sheep or a quadruped, the ovine, and “milatis o poimin”, but also the fruit apple. The nymphs, inferior divinities of the forests, which were called Meliades or Maelies, protected flocks and fruit trees. Also, melites is the wine that is produced after distilling apples.

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’ apple. Goddess Aphrodite gives her love-struck son three golden apples in order for him to deceive the so far

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58 Pausanias, V 7, 6-7.
59 Pausanias, V 11,1.
60 Pausanias, V 11,1.
62 Pindarus, I.2.35, Thucyrides, 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 Apollodorus, II 113 and 120, see Theophrastos, Peri Phyton Aitias, Book Three, chapter 10 par. 7.
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unscathed heroin70. Atalantis in their racing competition. We also have references to apples during the Mycenean 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 Panathena 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 Efstatios, 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-
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 (“Lyceanikes”) 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 Gaia’s 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, Platus, 1054 (Homeric Hymn 15, 1-9; of beggars Plutarch Thiseas 21).
84 Collection of Inscriptions 956, Alkiphron 3.37. For these two celebrations see H.W. Parke, Εορτες στην Αρχαία Αθήνα, 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”.
88 Plutarch Koriolanos 3.
90 Plutarch 2. 42B, see Aristophanes, The Clouds, 837, 1054.
91 Pausanias X 7.2.
92 Isitios, entry “dafnitis”, see Euripides, Ion 422, Aeschylus, Hikutides 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 Tempi.95 In 582 BC, laurel is officially established as a reward in the Pythian Games.96 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 struggle.98

Nowadays the laurel is being used in pharmaceutics, 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 Mycenean era.99 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” were made from that. Pindarus’ commentator also agrees with the pine reward, but stresses that “the wreath was made of celery all along” and also, “…wreath of dried celery for the Isthmian Games’ competitors, and fresh celery for the Nemean Games”.

**Celery.** Celery is mentioned in the Homeric poems as horses’ food. Lexicographer Souidas (Soudas) mentions its funereal expression; the dead were laid upon celery layers, then, buried.105 Also, there was a custom of placing celery
wreaths\textsuperscript{106} 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”\textsuperscript{107}. According to Pindarus, olive branches, for the victors’ wreaths, were taken from the sacred forest of Nemaios Zeus\textsuperscript{108}. What was later established is “a fresh branch for the Nemean Games, whereas in the Isthmian Games, the dried celery wreath”\textsuperscript{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 abort\textsuperscript{110}.  

**Palm tree, “Date palm”\textsuperscript{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 labour\textsuperscript{112} 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 victory\textsuperscript{113}. In Ancient Greece, the palm tree wreath or branch were primarily rewards in the sacred Panhellenic Games\textsuperscript{114}. 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”\textsuperscript{115}. According to Pausanias, in most Games victors were awarded palm tree branches, even in the Olympic Games\textsuperscript{116} 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 branch\textsuperscript{117}.

\textsuperscript{106} Plutarch 2. 676d.  
\textsuperscript{107} Pindarus’ commentator, N. 6. 71, Nemean Case, see Isihios entry “selinou stephanos”.
\textsuperscript{108} Pindarus N. 2. 6-7, N. 1. 26.
\textsuperscript{109} Pindarus N. 4. 181-182, L. 2. 23, see Pindarus’ commentator I. 2. 19, Celery wreaths are established in Nemea commemorating the death of Opheltis; Pindarus’ commentator N. 6.71.
\textsuperscript{111} Odyssey, \textsuperscript{6} VI. 163, Homeric Hymn 3,117; Hymn to Apollo.
\textsuperscript{112} Homeric Hymn 3.15-18 115-118.
\textsuperscript{113} See N. Papahatzis (1979), Pausanias Periigiseis, Messenean-Hellian, transl. comments, Athens, p. 321, photo 316.
\textsuperscript{114} Plutarch, Symposium, Problem 7.2.4.A and 8.4.2.
\textsuperscript{115} Plutarch Thiseas 21,3, see Polidefkis, Onomastikos, P=III. 152.
\textsuperscript{116} Pausanias, VIII 48, 1-3.
\textsuperscript{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 award\textsuperscript{118}.

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 leaves\textsuperscript{119} 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 Ioleaeia or Heraclea Games, victors were awarded a wreath from the evergreen bush myrsina – myrtle\textsuperscript{120}. Victors of the Heraea Games in Argos, in Hera’s honour\textsuperscript{121} 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 bush\textsuperscript{122}.

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 victory\textsuperscript{123}.

In the Tlepolemeia Games in Rhodes, in honour of the hero Tlepolemus, the award was an aspen wreath\textsuperscript{124}. The aspen signifies the Elysian Fields, the islands of the deceased\textsuperscript{125}.

In the Eleusinian or Demetrian Games, in honour of Goddess Demetra, the victor was awarded a wreath of barley\textsuperscript{126}, which was reaped from the Goddess’s sacred field, in the Thriasian plain. Every cereal variation, including barley, symbolises renewal, life, resurrection, fertility\textsuperscript{127}.

\textsuperscript{118} E. Norman Gardiner, \textit{Athletics of the Ancient World}, Oxford, 1930, photo 13, p. 40 and photo 42, p. 79; Stili tou Gymnasiarchou tis Prousas, see Pausanias V 16,1; as for the athletic outfit.
\textsuperscript{120} Pindarus I. 8(7)147, Euripides, \textit{Aliktes} 172, see Pindarus’ commentator I.2.114-117.
\textsuperscript{121} Pindarus’ commentator O. 7.141,147.
\textsuperscript{122} Aristophanes, \textit{Thesmophoriazousae}, 448, see Plants Dictionary According to Theophrastos, 1992, ibid., p. 211.
\textsuperscript{123} J.C. Cooper, ibid., p. 339.
\textsuperscript{124} Pindarus’ commentator O.7.171-147.
\textsuperscript{125} J.C. Cooper, ibid., p. 287.
\textsuperscript{126} Pindarus I.1.81, see Pindarus’ commentator O.9.143.150, ?1.81.
\textsuperscript{127} J.C. Cooper, ibid., p. 259.
Lucian’s works 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 victors.

CONCLUSIONS

Ancient Greeks’ Games included leaves and wreaths (phillophoroi or stephanophoroi or phyllites) 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, immortality.

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 “baccalureat” 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.
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 soul.

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.