OLIVE HERITAGE AND TOURISM IN MESSENIA: A PATH TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract
Olive tourism (OT) is an emerging special tourism type, as testified by increasing scientific research and relevant OT services. The latter are offered both by traditional and non-traditional olive producers, addressing domestic and outbound tourist segments. Despite the olive's diachronic existence in Greece and its vital economic, environmental and sociocultural contribution, scientific literature concerning OT in Greece is almost non-existent. Furthermore, the olive's significance as a timeless, intangible cultural heritage of Greece's local communities, defining their way of life, identities and cultures, is largely undervalued.

This paper examines the potential for developing OT in Messenia, at the Peloponnese (Greece), where the olive culture dates back to the Mycenaean era and still constitutes the lifeblood and intangible cultural heritage of local communities. An informed situational analysis is composed, based on primary and secondary data collected during the "Olive4All – Olive Heritage for Sustainable Development" European project (funded by JPI Cultural Heritage). The main results support that the development of OT products in Messenia could create win-win situations for both visitors and local stakeholders, supporting the area's sustainable development in its financial, social, cultural and environmental dimensions. Nonetheless, there are a number of factors gravely threatening the olive's landscapes, intangible culture and production, the impact of which could spill over the financial and sociocultural sectors with damaging results. This paper complements recent publications on this topic, contributing to the establishment of a scientific literature corpus for OT in Greece. Finally, its results can support stakeholders in efforts to develop strategically OT in Messenia.

Keywords: *Olive heritage, Olive tourism, Sustainable development, Messenia, Peloponnese, Situational analysis, Olive4All project*

Introduction

Olive tourism (OT) is a budding special interest tourism type that falls within the model of alternative tourism. Systematic scientific research on OT has been developing for a little longer than a decade mainly by Spanish and Australian universities, revealing valuable information on the demand and supply sides of OT, while assessing its economic and social potential (Hernández-Mogollón et al., 2019). Despite the scarce body of specialised scientific literature (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2020) and highlighted links among OT, agrotourism and gastronomy tourism (Campón-Cerro et al., 2014), OT is nowadays developing as a distinctive tourism type on its own. This calls for further extensive investigation, in order to broaden understanding of this tourism form, allow the generalisation of research findings (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2020), and support the design and realisation of relevant developmental strategies.

Within this scope, the project "OLIVE4ALL - Olive Heritage for Sustainable Development" (2021-2024) funded by JPI-Cultural Heritage and carried out by a Franco-Portuguese-Greek partnership, aimed to underline the potential of the olive heritage in supporting sustainable development (Olive4All, n.d.). Despite being a diachronic and representative heritage of the Mediterranean and, in many instances, the lifeblood and part of the cultural identity of local communities, the olive remains insufficiently comprehended and undervalued. Even principal stakeholders are largely unaware of the olive's diverse meanings, connotations and potential, which spill over the olive's more apparent economic and nutritional contribution to support all four pillars of sustainable local and regional development (Hawkes, 2001). Indeed, the ancient, intangible olive heritage renders the olive tree not just an economic feature, but the focal point of an extensive nexus of social, cultural and environmental practices, which are inextricably linked to local identities, as well as to a wider trans-Mediterranean cultural identity based on the culture of the olive.

Attempting to delve into the many facets that the olive heritage holds for stakeholders and communities, to critically approach the formation of this heritage, but also to raise awareness on the olive heritage and its developmental potential, the Olive4All project applied a series of investigative methods in the three participating countries. Focussing on Greece, a total of 137 semi-structured interviews were carried out among various stakeholders of the olive situated in Messenia (i.e., professional farmers, amateur or professional producers, millers, professionals of agricultural processing, olive pickers, tourism and cultural development agents, restaurateurs, traders focusing on olive products, olive/oil consumers, children), in order to reveal their beliefs, perceptions and attitudes towards: a) their relationship with the olive tree; b) the olive tree heritage; c) olive consumption and sustainable development; and, d) territorial development. Additionally, 55 qualitative structured interviews addressing OT visitors of various olive sites across the country (e.g., olive groves, mills, museums, etc.), revealed the visitors' demographic profile, their visiting behaviour and satisfaction degree, and also explored their beliefs, attitudes, expectations and suggestions towards the olive heritage and its enhancement through OT programmes and services (detailed results in Kouri & Kondakis, 2024a; Kouri & Kondakis, 2024b). Furthermore, a quantitative questionnaire investigation among 311 OT visitors highlighted the visitors' demographic profiles; visit motivators; previous OT experiences; satisfaction degree and expectations from OT visits; and, level of interest concerning suggested OT products. Finally, extensive research on various sources and published research, including statistical data and scientific bibliography, was carried out, revealing, among others, that scientific research on OT in Greece is almost non-existent (Hernández-Mogollón et al., 2019; Dias et al., 2023; Kouri & Kondakis, 2024b). Consequently, the produced data and results of this project are invaluable, as they form an initial basis for the strategic development of OT in Greece.

This paper combines the main data and research results, which were generated in the framework of the Olive4All project through all the investigative methods applied and described briefly above, in order to draft a SWOT analysis for the development of OT in Messenia in the Peloponnese, which was the project's focal regional point for Greece.

Development of the Olive Heritage in Messenia

Messenia (or Messinia) is situated in southwest Greece and together with the regional units of Arcadia, Corinthia, Laconia and Argolis, comprise the Region of the Peloponnese. Messenia is bounded by mountains to the north and by the coast to the south and west. Kalamata is the prefecture's capital and a main administrative, economic, commercial and industrial centre. Messenia has a total of 146,080 inhabitants, representing the greatest share (27%) of the total population of the Region of the Peloponnese (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2023). The agricultural sector is

sturdy, producing mainly olives/olive oil, figs, grapes, raisins and wine. Messenia is the second most productive olive/olive oil area in Greece (ΕΛΣΤΑΤ, 2016), strongly supporting the local economy, while the olive represents an integral part of the socio-cultural identity of Messenians dating back to prehistoric times.

Indeed, Messenia shows signs of habitation already during the Middle Palaeolithic period, about 120,000 years ago (Θεοδωρακοπούλου, 2020). Around 2050 BC the population grew and engaged in agriculture, which become one of the main occupations during the Mycenaean period. The cultivation of the olive tree produced large amounts of olive oil, which were used in everyday life and religious rites (B.I.O., 2015), while aromatic oil was also produced, as testified by fragmented clay tablets of linear script B, discovered in the palace of Nestor. The value of the olive tree products during this era is revealed by the location of the oil warehouses, adjacent to the throne room (Χρυσουλάκη, 2009; Μπιτσάνης, 2013).

The collapse of the Mycenaean kingdom led to a population decline, resulting in the decrease of olive trees (Σταματελοπούλου, 2019). According to radiometric dating carried out in the area, the olive's systematic cultivation continued later (Αθανασιάδης et al., 1996). During the Classical until the early Roman period, the area became again densely populated and had a high rate of agricultural production (mainly between 500 - 100 BC), while around 350 BC the olive trees reached their highest cultivation rate (Σταματελοπούλου, 2019). In general, Romans granted the inhabitants important economic privileges, but the fall of the Empire affected the area's development (B.I.O., 2015)[1].

During the barbaric raids (app. 300 – 600 AD) olive cultivation declined significantly, but environmental data revealed a re-intensification of the land's cultivation during the middle Byzantine period (8th – 12th centuries AD) (Σταματελοπούλου, 2019). In the 6 centuries of alternating Venetian/Ottoman occupation (1204 – 1821), olive cultivation was widely disseminated and the production, price and exportation of the olive oil increased. It seems that already since the 16th century Messenia was one of the most significant olive-producing areas (Ministry of Rural Development and Food, n.d.). Still, the comparative study of Ottoman and Venetian sources highlighted that the olive trees "had all been in Turkish hands and that in the Venetian period the priority given to Greek immigrants or Italians", allowed limited opportunities to villagers to exploit the -otherwise vast, according to Gell (1823)- olive groves (Davis, 2004: 103). During the 18th century the port of Koroni was a veritable commercial hub, which also traded olive oil (Υπουργείο Αγροτικής Ανάπτυξης και Τροφίμων, n.d.). Following the outbreak of the Greek Revolution in 1821 against Ottoman occupation, in 1824 Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt raided the Peloponnese, vindictively burning and destroying cultivation, including many olive trees.

After the liberation of the Peloponnese, Messenia followed the development of other Greek cities, although the production of olive oil and olives was limited during the 19th century and usually complemented other industrial activities. Still, steam-powered oil mills operated in Kalamata, such as the mills of Stasinopoulos bros., L. Konteas and Linardakis - Stroumbos, as well as the electric oil mill of N. and P. Antonakopoulos. In 1909, the Linardakis - Stroumbos factory also operated a steam-powered soap factory and a kernel oil refinery with an annual production and export of 300,000 *okades* (384.6 tons) of olive soap and 350,000 *okades* (448 tons) of kernel oil (Μηλίτση-Νίκα, 2004). Main milestones to the Messenian economy were the port's construction (1882 - 1901), by which Kalamata evolved through the export of agricultural products (Βερράρου, 2001; Μηλίτση-Νίκα & Θεοφιλοπούλου-Στεφανούρη, 2010), and the city's reconstruction in the aftermath of the 1986 earthquake.

[1] For more on the Hellenistic and Roman Messenia, see Farrington, 2012.

Today, Messenia's climate and soil are considered ideal for olive cultivation. The loamy and moderately water-permeable soil of neutral to alkaline PH, the terrain's hilly relief, as well as the area's temperate microclimate, with an average annual amount of rainfall of 750 - 800 mm/year, a 67.6% average annual relative humidity, and more than 3,000 hours of sunshine/year allow olive cultivation with minimal interventions (Υπουργείο Αγροτικής Ανάπτυξης και Τροφίμων, n.d.). Olive oil production in Messenia is sturdy in comparison to the country's other regions and still resilient, with an estimated production of about 30,000 tonnes for 2023-2024, despite the negative impact of the climate change on the Mediterranean countries', and Greece's, olive oil production (Ανδρονικάκης, 2023).

SWOT Analysis for the Development of Olive Tourism in Messenia.

The combination of the primary data produced during the Olive4All project and of sources and scientific literature studied through content analysis, allows the composition of a SWOT analysis concerning the development of OT in Messenia. The SWOT table (Figure 1) is followed by elaboration of its content, grounded on the collected primary and secondary data.

Figure 1. Situational analysis for the development of Olive Tourism in Messenia.
Source: Author

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
• Olive's diachronic presence in the sociocultural and economic life of Messenia • Mild industrialisation • Renowned PDO Kalamata • Olive-related natural, cultural and agri-food attractions • Foundations, Institutions & Cooperatives engaged in the olive culture • Pristine Messenian OT field; few existing OT programmes • Scientific studies and proposed OT routes • Environmental attributes • Accessibility, tourism infrastructure & developing services • Opportunities for many alternative tourism types	• Changes in traditional olive groves • Abandonment of traditional olive mills • Regression of traditional professions linked to olive oil making • Draining of primary sector from human resources • Lack of: o Awareness regarding the potential of OT o OT know-how o Adequate suitable OT infrastructure o Data and insights on the OT market • Harvesting stress vs. OT • Small differentiation and limited marketing of existing OT programmes • Messenia's fragmented marketing • Problematic co-ordination among various stakeholders
OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
• Olive as part of the UNESCO ICH Mediterranean diet • Official inscription of the Culture of Olive and of the Olive Oil in Greece's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage	• Climate change • Cost and labour intensity of olive cultivation • Destruction of olive groves • Abandonment of the olive's cultural heritage elements

• International rise of heritage tourism; heritage tourism market reflects the OT travellers' main characteristics • Symbolic capital of Messenia as a diachronic olive/oil producer • Promotion of OT by the Ministry of Tourism, cooperatives, etc. • OT as a growing market to draw experiences from wine tourism and agrotourism and tap into existing markets • Recognition of differences among the taste and culinary properties of different olive oil varieties • Good existing practices of developing OT • Entities able to conduct scientific research on OT • Climate change • Increase of farming cost and of olive oil prices • Environmentally-friendly disposal and/or reuse of olive mill waste	• Intensive cultivation • Tourism development • Environmental issues caused by poor olive mill waste management • Conservative mentalities, lack of interest by olive growers • Need for investments • Organisation of OT by foreign tour offices • Commercialisation & fossilisation of living heritage

Messenia's Power Points: A Strength Review

Elaborating Messenia's Strengths, as presented before, the region boasts a diachronic tradition in olive cultivation. This dates back at least to the Mycenaean period, as testified by archaeological findings, particularly of the visitable archaeological site of the Palace of Nestor on the Ano Englianos Hill (Chora, Messenia), which include olive jars and fragmented Linear B tablets depicting three ideograms, which distinguish among the olive tree, the olive fruit and the olive oil (Davis & Μπάλτας, 2005; Μπουλώτης, 1996). Similar to other parts of Greece, the olive oil production processes applied in antiquity, namely grinding, pressing and decantation, have continued almost unchanged up to the 1970s (Πίκουλας, 2003; Καρποδίνη-Δημητριάδη, 2003; Αραπογιάννη, 2016), resulting in a long-established intangible heritage, which defines the Messenian cultural identity, social fabric and financial sector. Indeed, even today, the olives and the olive oil continue to represent core elements of the local economy, religious and social practices, and are evident in all aspects of everyday life proverbs and folk songs[2] (Kouri & Kondakis, 2024a). The local cuisine is characteristically based on olives and olive oil, many restaurants and family taverns use virgin olive products in their dishes, while small businesses specialise on selling the olive's various products (Informant 23, 2022; Informant 27, 2022).

The mountainous, harsh Greek terrain does not offer many plains to pursue ultra-intensive cultivation, contributing to the preservation of traditional olive groves and methods (Kizos & Vakoufaris, 2011; Κουμπούρης, 2018). Despite the area's intense relief, there are also plain fields, but industrialisation is mild, as many olive groves are owned by families and

[2] For example, the folk song "Koftin Eleni tin elia" ("Crop, Helen, the olive tree") and songs which are being recorded by local associations [e.g. the CD "Kalimera sou elia" ("Good morning olive tree") and "Elia - to Liodentro" ("The olive tree")].

are cultivated in rather traditional ways, in slopes, stone wall terraces or fields (Υπουργείο Αγροτικής Ανάπτυξης και Τροφίμων, n.d.; Informant 14, 2022; Informant 15, 2022). According to the most recent to-date published data, Messenia is the second strongest olive producing region in the country, following Heraklion in Crete, with 26,291 holdings and 607,280 stremmas of olive groves (ΕΛΣΤΑΤ, 2016), and it is estimated that Messenia contains around 15 million olive trees (Υπουργείο Αγροτικής Ανάπτυξης και Τροφίμων, n.d.). The capital of Messenia, Kalamata, is renowned as the place of origin of the PDO Kalamata[3] olive oil and table olives variety (produced mainly by the Koroneiki and secondarily by the Mastoidis varieties)– a designation that since 2015 has been extended to the entire regional unit of Messenia (Skiada et al., 2019). The Koroneiki variety, which is mainly cultivated in the region, was named after the city of Koroni. Additionally, an ancient local black olive variety (*mavrolia*) is cultivated. These renowned products of added value contribute to the regions' economic – and consequently sociocultural – development (Bitsani et al., 2019).

Messenia hosts important olive attractions, including centenarian olive trees, preserved traditional olive mills, small to medium-sized family farms and olive groves, which are cultivated in non-intensive ways. Indeed, Messenia boasts 8 centenarian olive trees, which together with other perennial trees (e.g. sycamores, oaks, pines, etc.) comprise the Network of Centennial Trees of the Greek Revolution (Ινστιτούτο Πολιτισμού Μεσσηνίας, 2021), as they survived Ibrahim's desolation during 1826. The most renowned centennial olive is the Mother Olive Tree of Kalamata, the branches of which were used to reinvigorate the decimated olive groves and which is a declared Monument of Nature (Υπουργείο Γεωργίας και Αγροτικής Ανάπτυξης, 1980).

Moreover, a small number of olive groves, olive mills and kernel oil refineries, applying both traditional and modern methods, are visitable, such as the Skarpalezos Olive Oil Factory, the Kontopoulos Olive Oil Press Factory, the Ben Olive mill, the Olive Ergo Anagnostopoulos mills, etc. Other standing monuments testifying to the area's olive heritage, are the non-functioning Liakeas's Olive Oil-Soap Factory, the remaining industrial infrastructure of the Linardaki's Kernel Oil Refinery and Soap Factory in Kalamata, or even stone parts of ancient olive mills, which were discovered integrated in the walling of private olive groves in the Ellinika of ancient Thouria (Αραπογιάννη, 2016). Two traditional olive mills (in Harokopio and in Eksohori) have been renovated by the local authorities and function as olive museums, but there are also many olive-related exhibits in a plethora of sites, visitable monuments and museums, such as Nestor's Palace and the Archaeological Museum in Pylos, ancient Messene, the Kalamata Historic and Folklore museum, the Mourtzinos-Troupakis Tower, etc. Autopsies in 92 small and large settlements of Messenia recorded 81 horse-powered oil mills, for 29 of which evidence of their original condition has been preserved (Υπουργείο Αγροτικής Ανάπτυξης και Τροφίμων, n.d.).

The Municipality of Kalamata organises annually the "Άρτος- Οίνος-Έλαιον" (Bread-Wine- Oil) Festival of Agri-Food Products and Gastronomy, as well as the Panhellenic Olive Oil and Table Olive Festival[4], in collaboration with other Messenian municipal authorities, the Region of the Peloponnese, the Messenian Chamber of Commerce and the University of the Peloponnese. Occasional educational programmes focussing on the olive, olive soap production and other relevant topics, are organised periodically by local museums, the Center for Education for the Environment and Sustainability (KEPEA) Kalamata, which also coordinates the National Thematic Network for Environmental Education "ELIA", targeting children and adults.

[3] Decision no. 440304, Official Gazette B 871/26.11.93.
[4] http://www.kalamata-olivefestival.gr/

Other established institutions, bodies and organisations are also engaged in researching, supporting and promoting the olive's financial, environmental and sociocultural aspects. The University of the Peloponnese boasts the Kalamata Olive Oil Taste Laboratory, the only organoleptic control laboratory in Greece belonging to an academic structure, which also organises the International Table Olive Competition, to promote awareness of the quality characteristics and health attributes of table olives and to support olive consumption[5]. The Captain Vassilis and Carmen Constantakopoulos Foundation (CVCCF) support research and awareness events for people of all ages on the importance of the olive in local sustainable development[6]. Kalamata hosts also the headquarters of the Council of Europe's "Routes of the Olive Tree"[7], further supporting the inter/cultural aspect of the olive. Finally, local producers have formed a number of cooperatives and associations, which promote their financial interests, but also agro/cultural aspects, as demonstrated by the example of the event "On the paths of the olive tree" organised by the Women's Educational Association of Gargalianoi[8].

In addition to the visitable farms and mills, specialised OT programmes have also begun to develop gradually. A modest number of olive farms and olive mills are offering guided tours around their facilities; information on traditional and modern olive cultivation and production methods; and on ways to care for the olive tree. They also sell their olive products directly to visitors and some organise olive/olive oil tasting sessions and olive pairing with other traditional products and dishes. Two of them (Green Land Co-farming and Evonymon-Agros) are members of the Open Farm initiative, with the second one offering participation in olive harvesting. Furthermore, few tourism businesses organise OT programmes, including olive oil seminars and masterclasses, tasting and pairing opportunities, cooking classes and visits to olive sites. A small number of agrotourism hotels and guest houses (e.g. Hamaloni guest house, Agrikies country retreat, Irida Resort Suites, Kalamata Mediterranean Suites and Villas, the Art Farm) offer agrotourism and olive experiences to their guests, including the opportunity to participate in olive harvesting.

At the same time, scientific literature on OT is on the rise (Hernández-Mogollón et al., 2019; Dias et al., 2023), and, even though OT in Greece is still largely under-researched, there are some studies and rich information on the olive culture and relevant resources in Messenia (e.g. Μπούσμπουρας, 2007; B.I.O., 2015; The Routes of the Olive Tree website;). Additionally, a well-researched academic proposal on two cultural tourism routes based on the Messenian olive heritage has been developed (Σταματελοπούλου, 2019). Moreover, recent research on OT, focussing on Messenia, can serve as a basis for further scientific studies in the field (e.g. Bitsani et al., 2019; Kouri & Kondakis, 2024a; Kouri & Kondakis, 2024b).

The region's environmental attributes also support extended tourism seasons, with temperate winters and beautiful, diverse landscapes combining mountains, plains and coastline, which are ideal for outdoor activities. Tourism revenue produced in the Region of the Peloponnese represented merely 3% (€628 million) of the country's total tourism revenue, but post 2013 a significant rise of people working in the tourism industry (mainly in the restaurateur business) is observed, while all statistical data on arrivals, overnight stays and visitor expenditure (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2019; ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2023), support that, although still quite under-developed, the tourism industry in the Peloponnese is strongly on the rise. Messenia can be easily reached through various transportation means, including modern highways, public buses, an international airport, and ports, which serve mainly the mooring of pleasure boats and cruise ships. Particularly cruise ships' arrivals showed a great rising tendency between

[5] https://kalamataawards.uop.gr/en/the-competition/ https://kalamatatastelab.uop.gr/skopos/
[6] https://www.cvf.gr/eng/research
[7] https://www.olivetreeroutes.gr
[8] https://morfotikossyllogosgynaikongargalianon.gr/?page_id=513#elia

2019 and 2022 of about 174%, but this was not reflected on cruise passenger numbers, as only 4,207 passengers seemed to reach Messenia through the ports of Kalamata and Pylos in 2022 (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2023), compared to about 10,000 passengers in 2018 (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2019).

Messenia attracts both inbound but particularly domestic tourism, which is more strongly represented (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2023). Across the area, tourism infrastructure is being constructed at an increasing rate over the last few years, revealing the area's aim to enter the tourism market dynamically. A wide range of accommodation is already on offer, ranging from luxury hotels to short-term rental apartments (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2023). In 2022, 180 tourism units offered 11,761 tourist bed places, of which 6,533 belonged to 4-star and 5-star hotels and 4,801 to 2* and 3* hotels (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2023). This indicates that Messenia is aiming both at high-end and middle-income tourism segments, both of which fuel OT (Kouri & Kondakis, 2024b). Additionally, in 2019, 5,662 tourist bed places of all Key categories (mainly 1-3 Keys) were offered by 420 rooms-to-rent units, as well as 23,592 tourist bed places in short-term rental accommodation (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2023). These could address tourists of lower economic capacity, but also travellers who favour personalised, alternative tourism vs. all-inclusive, more mainstream accommodation models.

Finally, Messenia offers visitors many opportunities to engage in various tourism forms year-round, including sea and sun, wellness, cultural, gastronomic, adventure, sports, hiking, agrotourism, conference, religious tourism, etc. Among other attributes, Messenia boasts 9 NATURA 2000 areas and many picturesque hiking trails[9]; a number of fairs dedicated to agro-products; and, cultural festivals, such as the Kalamata International Dance Festival, but also the Navarinia festival, the International Puppet Festival of Kalamata and the Peloponnese International Documentary Festival, which take place in autumn, during which olive harvesting begins. Furthermore, Messenia is the home of renowned archaeological sites and of a plethora of museums of diverse thematic[10], which attract increasing visitorship. According to 2018 data, Messenia drew the largest share (38%) among museums of the Peloponnesian regional units (37,779 museum visitors), supporting a rising tendency of 26% between 2013 and 2018 (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2019). During the COVID crisis, particularly in 2021, this number drops, to climb slowly again in 2022 to 23,896 visitors, bringing Messenia to the second place with 31% of the region's total museum visitorship (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2023). Similarly, the visitorship in Messenian archaeological sites demonstrated a great rise of over 280% between 2013 and 2018, reaching 221,701 visitors in 2018, only to drop to 209,495 post-COVID, in 2022 (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2019[11]; ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2023). The overall rising trend, in addition to the continued restoration and marketing efforts of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Messenia, allows trusting this rising trend, particularly since the visitorship drop could be attributed to COVID quarantine measures.

Cracks in Messenia's Armor: Scoping out Weaknesses

Even though olive production in Messenia is still rather traditional and has not become ultra-intensive or highly industrialised, the traditional olive landscapes are gradually changing. Sloping, marginally productive areas are ploughed vertically to plant olive groves without constructing stabilising dry-stone fencing, limiting soil and water retention (Μπούσμπουρας, 2007). In other cases, olive groves are moved from traditional stone-wall terraces to lowland, irrigated areas to allow the mechanisation of production (Loumou & Giourga, 2004), while

[9] Indicatively, see https://kalamatain.gr/new/category/news/thematika/pame-volta/
[10] Indicatively, see https://www.efamess.gr/
[11] During the same 5-year period, visitorship to Messenian archaeological sites rose by 279%, bringing Messenia to the third place among the Peloponnesian regional units with a total of 208,154 visitors (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2019).

some olive groves in natural terraces are replaced by solar panels (Informant 8, 2022). At the same time, traditional olive mills are abandoned in favour of the swifter and more efficient industrialised ones (Informant 7, 2022), mainly due to the polluting character of the former and to the investments needed for their restoration and functioning (Informant 2, 2022). Indeed, today olive oil production is almost completely mechanised, in contrast to the olive cultivation and harvesting, in which fewer mechanised means are used (Οικονόμου, 2003). This has also rendered a number of traditional professions (such as basket and cloth weavers as well as potters) and their products redundant (Οικονόμου, 2003), depriving OT from interesting traditional elements and living processes.

Furthermore, urbanisation as well as internal and external migration, particularly during the economic crisis of the 21st century, has deprived the primary sector of human resources, a reality that is reflected on desolated mountain villages and abandoned small family lots, which may be cultivated sporadically during the olive harvesting season (Οικονόμου, 2003).

At the same time, the lack of awareness and of relevant know-how regarding the aspects, benefits, pitfalls and requirements of OT, particularly among policy-makers, tourism and olive stakeholders, can hinder the development of this sector (Informant 28, 2022). Indeed, perceptions among olive growers could be reinforced, that, especially during hectic periods, such as olive harvest, OT could create hurdles instead of opportunities. This could discourage the further development of OT products, particularly since OT has not been widely recognised yet as a rising, profitable form of alternative tourism.

After all, the few existing OT programmes are neither significantly differentiated nor adequately marketed, while OT products include the highlight of visitor participation in harvesting only as a way of exception. Suitable infrastructure is also limited, as OT has only recently begun developing. This could be partly attributed to the skim corpus of scientific OT studies and of relevant data regarding Greece, in general, and Messenia, in particular (Kouri & Kondakis, 2024b), which does not offer a solid basis for drafting a long-term, successful OT strategy for the region. What's more, Messenia depends on the localised marketing strategies of each one of its 6 Municipalities and is not being promoted on a regional level. This way it fails to capitalise on its rich and diverse environmental and cultural attributes and to motivate and support inter-municipal visitor mobility, which would diffuse tourism profit among different communities and also support the creation of an OT network. This fragmentation reflects existing difficulties in the cooperation and coordination of different bodies, which could also spill over OT development efforts, as the latter demand the efficient collaboration of different stakeholders – a feat which is diachronically challenging (Ζαμπούνης, 2003; Kizos & Vakoufaris, 2011; Oliver, 2019).

Opportunity Insights: Unlocking Future Potential

The olive and the olive-oil have been internationally recognised as fundamental elements of the acclaimed Mediterranean diet, which is inscribed in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) List and gains ground internationally as a beneficial, healthy diet. The recent inscription of the Culture of Olive and of the Olive Oil in Greece's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Υπουργείο Πολιτισμού, 2019) creates a veritable opportunity to raise wider awareness among stakeholders regarding the olive's multifaceted contribution, which exceeds the income generated by olive/olive oil production. In effect, benefits extend over the sustainability spectrum, including instigation of entrepreneurship based on the olive and its products; environmental protection and crop sustainability; community cohesion; intercultural dialogue; protection and revitalisation of cultural intangible traditions surrounding the olive; and, OT.

At the same time, the global heritage tourism market size reached US$ 587.1 billion in 2023, exhibiting significant growth trends: cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) dominates the market followed by natural heritage, as travellers seek authentic and sustainable experiences of intercultural understanding and appreciation, but also to enjoy the serenity and beauty of a pristine environment and of natural landscapes (IMARC, 2024). According to the same source, the heritage market is addressing mainly people of higher age, particularly between 51 and 70 years. These trends are also apparent to a significant extent in research on the OT demand-side, as OT visitors are people of higher age and education levels, seeking authentic, educational, quality experiences, and the opportunity to enjoy the peace and sensory stimuli of pristine landscapes (e.g., Millán et al., 2011; Cañero et al., 2015; Orgaz et al., 2017; Pulido-Fernández et al., 2020; Kouri & Kondakis, 2024b).

Messenia can address these visitor expectations, since it still preserves traditional olive groves, farming and production processes, which constitute the region's living heritage. The international promotion of these elements through marketing strategies, in tandem with the national inscription of the olive culture, could brand Messenia as "Olive county", supporting the development of OT. This has been already suggested by Bitsani et al., who stressed that the Messenian olive oil's nutritional character and rich cultural representations, can constitute "a powerful brand name for the area of origin" (2019: 314). A year later, Kitagawa's et al. (2020) empirical research of the Japanese market demonstrated that the promotion and labelling of olives/olive oil using religious and cultural connotations, particularly Greco-Roman images and the Mediterranean terroir of the olive oil, strongly differentiate and render the Mediterranean olive oil preferable in the consumer's mind, compared to oil produced by non-historical producers, such as China, Oceania and the USA. Indeed, the increased importance of symbolic links for consumers was the basis of geographic indications for the European Commission (Kizos & Vakoufaris, 2011). Therefore, relevant story-telling and marketing narratives promoting the diachronic, still vibrant, ancient olive heritage in Messenia, which constitutes an integral part of the cultural identity, social fabric and economic life of the region, could successfully promote Messenian OT in the international market. It is expected that local communities shall embrace this approach, as it cultivates awareness of the local heritage, strengthens local pride and is also linked to increased income and the prospect of sustaining family olive groves and small farming lots, which constitutes a vital demand, in the face of antagonism by major olive oil producers applying ultra-intensive methods.

Aware of international trends, the Hellenic Ministry of Tourism, in collaboration with agricultural cooperatives, is already promoting tourism based on products of the Greek land. In this framework, it has set quality standards for visitable olive mills which produce extra virgin oil, awarding them a special sign, when they host visitors and provide guided tours, accommodation, catering and tasting services (Υπουργείο Τουρισμού, 2022). This does not only reveal the state's acceptance of OT as a budding niche market, but also the aim to set initial quality standards for OT. Additionally, OT combines well with enotourism[12], agrotourism and creative tourism[13], on which scientific studies, best practices and experience exist and can prove invaluable in informing OT strategies and products. OT could also tap into the existing markets of enotourism and agrotourism, by offering a new, added slant on current offerings, increasing their value. After all, in recent years also in Greece, the diversity among the taste, the culinary properties and the ideal pairings of different olive oil varieties has been recognised and is steadily promoted by few stakeholders through specialised tastings and research (Κωνσταντινίδου, 2023).

[12] Indicatively, see Quinta da Pacheca, Portugal https://quintadapacheca.com/
[13] Indicatively, see Art Farm – Marinis, Kalamata https://artfarm.gr/index.php/en/

Imaginative OT programmes are already offered in Greece, even to an initial degree, attempting to combine the olive heritage with visitor perceptions and expectations, building domestic experience on OT (Zampetaki, 2022; Σύνταξη In, 2023). The University of the Peloponnese, the Messinian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, CVCCF, The Routes of the Olive Tree, olive cooperatives and producers can support scientific research on the demand and supply side of OT in Messenia, which would provide invaluable data to inform the strategic planning of OT development in the region.

Finally, two threats may also create opportunities. Firstly, the climate change, causing intense summer draughts, can move incoming tourism towards autumn and even winter. During these temperate seasons olive harvesting takes place, offering an ideal opportunity to develop participative OT products, that would involve visitors in all stages of olive harvesting and oil production. Moreover, all additional tourism forms mentioned above (e.g. sea and sun, hiking, cultural, etc.) can be supported, diversifying the offered tourism experiences and extending the tourism season. What's more, olive cultivation is affected by the climate change as it proves to be temperature- and rainfall- dependent (Γεωργίου, 2024). OT could offer a considerable alternative source of income to farmers, complementing their returns, particularly during seasons of limited production.

Secondly, the increase of farming expenses and of olive oil prices also presents opportunities for OT development. The rise of the harvesting helping hands cost opens the way to the inclusion of tourists to the everyday life of olive producers, which is a core characteristic of this special interest tourism type and is already practiced in other olive-producing countries (Davies, 2023). Indeed, linking OT to volunteer tourism and agrotourism can provide invaluable support to the olive farmers during the intense harvesting periods and, in return, it can offer visitors authentic, hands-on, sociable experiences, which, according to initial research, are elements greatly appreciated (Kouri & Kondakis, 2024b). Furthermore, the steep rise of olive oil prices stimulates perceptions of increased value of the olive oil among consumers, who could buy virgin olive oil [for which Greece is renowned (Κουμπούρης, 2018; Oliver, 2019)] directly from producers at reduced prices, increasing the producers' profit in a mutually beneficial exchange.

Finally, scientific and legal developments that allow new, beneficial uses for the otherwise toxic and pollutant olive mill waste, can address environmental sustainability concerns, satisfy the environmentally-aware OT visitors and create new income for producers (Αραχωβίτης, 2018; elaias karpos, 2022).

Navigating Perils: a Threat Assessment

Climate change causes catastrophic phaenomena (i.e., floods, fires, new pollutants/enemies, draughts, temperature rise, etc.), which threaten the very survival of the OT's main attraction, namely the olive trees. As the case of Spain has already demonstrated, these conditions threaten the sustainability and resilience even of the olive's dry cultivation (Κόκκινος, 2023). At the same time, the rising cost and labour intensity of harvesting and of oil production may cause small family producers, particularly in mountainous areas, to abandon their crop.

The destruction of olive groves for construction projects (Informant 1, 2022) but also the gradual replacement of traditional cultivation, harvesting and production methods by industrialised, intensive ones (Informant 1, 2022) are serious threats for the development of OT, as they can lead to the abandonment of cultural elements, that are integral to the olive's intangible heritage and represent a prominent tourism attraction. The changes in the olive landscapes, mentioned previously, can degrade the natural, scenic terrains of Messenia, deprive olive groves of the rich biodiversity which is so vital to their health, and result in erosion and in increased use of herbicides and pesticides, which are detrimental to the final

quality of olive oil (Sfougaris & Christopoulou, 1997; e-ea.gr, 2023). Changes to the olive landscape but also to traditional cultivation, harvesting and production processes also curtail the distinctive social and cultural connotations of the olive. The latter is thus perceived as less authentic and historic, and, therefore, less interesting and suitable for OT. At the same time, the inability or refusal of small and middle-sized olive mills to invest in proper mill waste management, gravely pollutes the area's water table and rivers, affecting the flora and fauna (Μπούσμπουρας, 2007; Πολυχνιάτης, 2019; Κολυβάρη, 2019; Τσάμης, 2019). This could impact negatively on OT, as olive visitors are environmentally aware and seek to enjoy pristine landscapes, activities in nature, as well as the peace and stillness of olive groves (Kouri & Kondakis, 2024b), stressing the necessity for sustainable practices.

The strong development of the tourism sector in Messenia (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2019; ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2023) does not only present opportunities, but also a serious threat: it could shift much-needed human capital from the primary to the tertiary sector, leading to the gradual abandonment of agriculture. On the other hand, the development of OT in Messenia may be also hampered by conservative mentalities, lack of know-how and of interest by the main stakeholders. Negativism could be particularly exacerbated by the demand for investments, in order to build suitable tourism infrastructure and services, such as those required for obtaining the "Olive Mill Open to the Public" ministerial sign (Κουσούνης, 2023).

Finally, the tourism exploitation of the olive's intangible heritage, if realised without strategic planning and set quality guidelines, can lead to the commercialisation and fossilisation of this living heritage, creating "fauxthentic" experiences for the benefit of visitors, which, however, deprive local communities of their cultural memory and of a vital source of their ever-developing identities. Alternatively, delays in actively embarking on planned initiatives to develop OT in Messenia will allow the capitalisation of the available market by foreign travel agencies and companies, reducing the potential profit for local stakeholders and communities.

Conclusions

To this day very few scientific publications address the development of olive tourism (OT) in Greece (Kouri & Kondakis 2024b). Even fewer examine the potential contribution of OT in sustainable development. Loumou & Giourga (2004) as well as Kizos & Vakoufaris (2011) have explained why traditional olive cultivation meets dimensions of sustainability, particularly for dry, disadvantaged areas. Bitsani et al. (2019) have briefly hinted to the role of the olive/oil in Messenia's sustainable development. This paper contributes to a more thorough examination of the potential of OT to promote sustainable development in Messenia, documented by a variety of primary and secondary data and relevant scientific sources and publications. It thus complements a series of upcoming publications on this topic (Kouri & Kondakis, 2024a; Kouri & Kondakis, 2024b).

This study examined the potential for developing OT in the region of Messenia in the Peloponnese, Greece, by composing a relevant SWOT analysis. The latter was based on a wide set of primary and secondary data, coming from a multitude of sources, including, among others, scientific literature, statistical studies, legal documents, specialised texts, as well as original qualitative and quantitative research, which was carried out in the framework of the "Olive4All" European project, funded by JPI Cultural Heritage. Accordingly, Messenia's strengths and weaknesses, as well as opportunities and threats, supporting or, alternatively, hindering the development of OT were analysed.

The composed SWOT analysis purports that creating and promoting OT products and services in Messenia can create win-win situations for both domestic and outbound visitors

and local stakeholders. Most importantly, OT development can potentially support sustainable cultural heritage tourism and foster the area's sustainable development.

Indeed, on the economic front olive and olive oil production is the lifeblood of Messenia and its local communities, as the region is the second most productive olive/oil area of Greece, producing the world-renowned PDO Kalamata olive oil and table olives. In addition to professional farms, small and medium-sized lots also offer permanent or temporary employment to family members and harvesters. Despite the continuing bulk olive oil sales, oil processing and bottling is being strongly promoted, in order to allow direct sales from producers or cooperatives to consumers as well as standardised exportation, and thus increase the producers' profit.

On the other hand, the stressful and laborious harvesting season, the steep cost of helping hands, and the climate change endangering the health and productivity of olive groves, pose serious threats to this significant financial pillar. Furthermore, the strong rise of tourism infrastructure in Messenia, as supported by relevant statistical data (ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2019; ΙΝΣΕΤΕ, 2023), indicate the region's intention and effort to dynamically enter the tourism industry and attract domestic and outbound visitor segments of differentiated economic potential. However, this investment in the tourism market can prove detrimental to the primary sector, as it would drain the necessary workforce from the fields, potentially leading to the abandonment particularly of small family lots.

Having said that, investments in OT could harmonize the primary and tertiary sectors, strengthening both. More importantly, tourism could support the preservation and further development of the OT's constituent elements, namely olive groves and landscapes, olive mills, as well as human and cultural resources linked to the olive. It is promising that the emerging OT initiatives established in Messenia, mentioned before, sprout mainly from local producers, businesses and authorities; this signifies the realisation of the olive's multi-dimensional financial potential and the active engagement of some stakeholders in efforts to enter the OT market. Indeed, the development of OT could retain and even attract more people to work in the olive-growing and processing businesses, strengthening the sector. Furthermore, linking and networking OT with other tourism forms, such as enotourism, gastronomy or well-being tourism, could attract established market segments, by diversifying the offered products through the olive, and also instigate innovation and entrepreneurship based on the olive and its products. Subsequently, the development of OT in Messenia could create additional sources of income, particularly for producers and processers, which could potentially counterbalance losses caused during seasons of limited production.

The multiple financial benefits of OT can provide a decisive motive to preserve small and medium-sized family olive lots and to engage full-time in olive production. This is particularly important in marginally productive, mountainous areas, in which the strenuous traditional olive cultivation represents a main livelihood means (Informant 21, 2022). By creating real opportunities for increased income, OT can help retain populations in their localities, support them in continuing their paternal agricultural occupation, and strengthen social cohesion and traditional lifestyles. OT can also instigate entrepreneurship, particularly among the younger generation, who can benefit from various informational and educational opportunities, in order to comprehend the potential, requirements and demands of the tourism industry and organise relevant OT offerings. Additionally, agritourism opportunities for OT visitors, which include participation in olive care, harvesting and milling, while working side-to-side with local stakeholders are special highlights much appreciated by OT visitors, provide indispensable helping hands during the stressful harvesting season and allow intercultural communication and appreciation. Moreover, OT visitors can enjoy additional quality amenities and services, such as olive-based well-being treatments, outdoor activities, gastronomy, cooking classes and tasting sessions on olives/olive oil, while taking advantage

of the multitude of alternative tourism opportunities offered in Messenia, diffusing the financial benefits across the region.

As mentioned before, scientific research highlights that traditional elements and pristine olive landscapes represent main attractions of OT. Accordingly, OT can significantly support traditional olive cultivation and harvesting methods, which respect the environmental resources and the olive groves' biodiversity. At the same time, Messenia's hilly relief hinder the expansion of ultra-intensive production methods, while PDO Kalamata extra virgin olive oil requirements are very specific and strict regarding production and processing methods, minimising the use of pesticides and herbicides and favouring biological and manual means (Υπουργείο Αγροτικής Ανάπτυξης και Τροφίμων, n.d.). In this way the olive groves' rich ecosystem and, in a wider sense environmental sustainability, are fostered. At the same time, the gradual modernisation of olive oil mills bears a positive environmental impact regarding the non-hazardous disposal of olive mill waste.

On the other hand, the desertion or even destruction of olive groves due to abandonment, the construction boom and other developmental activities threaten the fundamental element of OT. At the same time, in 1997 around 228 olive mills (most of them three-phased) and 4 pomace oil mills were functioning in Messenia, generating about 200,000 tons of liquid waste for 50,000 tons of olive oil per year (Μπαλατσούρας). Twenty years later, Tsamis (Τσάμης, 2019) revealed the inability and refusal of many olive millers to bear the cost of environmentally sustainable waste disposal according to the country's legal framework, due to economic difficulties, lack of know-how and inadequate state controls, creating a grave environmental problem for the whole prefecture. However, OT visitors are looking for meaningful and enjoyable experiences in pristine, well-preserved and serene landscapes, revealing that they are environmentally aware and sensitised. Therefore, unsustainable waste disposal, which does not take advantage of up-to-date waste management practices, can seriously jeopardise the development of OT in Messenia, and, even more, the sustainability of the area's invaluable environmental resources, upon which much of its tourism industry is based.

Finally, the olive's diachronic presence in Messenia has created a long-lived intangible cultural heritage, which becomes explicitly or implicitly expressed in social and well-being practices, tools, religion, gastronomy, folk sayings, customs, music and songs. As the olive is deeply embedded in the everyday life, landscape and mentality of Messenians, the latter are not always consciously aware of the olive heritage or that, more than a financial pillar, it also represents a strong cultural element imbuing and influencing their very existence. The recent inscription of the Culture of the Olive and of the Olive Oil to Greece's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the creation of olive museums, in addition to the scientific and dissemination efforts of a number of pertinent institutions, are promising to sensitise the local communities on the olive's dimension as a significant cultural heritage. What's more, the olive's Mediterranean reach promotes extroversion and intercultural dialogue, by creating potent cultural symbols and practices that are shared across the Mediterranean peoples. The expansion of olive cultivation outside the *Mare Nostrum* basin could also add in time new elements to this established heritage, revitalising it. Accordingly, the olive's "common language" could be capitalised in OT programmes, in order to attract both domestic and outbound visitors and increase their understanding and appreciation of this intercultural legacy.

Conversely, industrialisation, climate change and the draining of the primary sector of human resources, can lead to the abandonment of olive groves and traditional practices linked to olive cultivation, harvesting and milling, depriving OT from constituent elements. Even more, using the living olive heritage to create tourism experiences could bring about the commercialisation and fossilisation of said heritage, detaching it from its bearers, who imbue

it with meaning and vitality. Besides, such approaches would not resonate well with the more knowledgeable domestic visitors, who represent a main OT market (Kouri & Kondakis, 2024b).

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that OT can have a bright future in Messenia and at the same time support the area's sustainable development, by contributing to the economic, social, environmental and cultural dimensions of sustainability. At the same time, OT would support the olive's cultural and environmental sustainability, by providing motive and means to preserve traditional farming methods, pristine olive groves and the olive's intangible heritage, protecting the environmental, social and cultural resources, which are integral and vital to this special type of tourism. On the other hand, climate change, lack of know-how by stakeholders, conservative mentalities, environmentally destructive practices, but also unplanned and sketchy efforts to hastily commercialise the olive heritage do present serious threats to the olive tree, its ecosystem and its sociocultural living heritage. Therefore, the development of OT must be done attentively and according to strategic planning that should result from consultation and collaboration of all involved stakeholders across Messenia's local communities.

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Conflict interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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