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OLIVE TREE

OLIVE TREE (*zaytun*). The cultivated olive tree (*Olea europaea L*, Oleaceae) is a long-lived, evergreen tree native to the Mediterranean basin. It is valued for its fruit and oil. Olives are picked late in autumn or winter, as the oil content and fruit characteristics change with ripening. Olive cultivars usually fall into one of two commercial uses, "oil," and "table." Harvesting is still done inefficiently; ripe fruits are not picked by hand and carefully, but beaten off the trees with a stick and thus both tree and fruits are damaged. Those for pickling have to be harvested by hand as the fruit bruises easily (Rāhnamā 1995, III, p. 143; Stolze and Andreas 1885, p. 13). Olive cultivation began some 6,000 years ago on the Mediterranean coast of Syria and Palestine. A recent study concluded that "the distribution of cultivar mitotypes has shown that the prevailing displacement of cultivars occurred from East to West. But these cultivar transfers did not exclude an original breeding effort within the western countries" (Besnard, Baradat, and Bervillé 2001, pp. 251-58). The olive tree was also cultivated in Iran as of about 3000 BCE and, as the Persian loanword for both the olive tree and its fruit (*zaytun*) indicates, its cultivation and/or use may have been imported from the Levant. The term is also a loanword in other languages such as Armenian (*zeit*; *jet*), Ossetic and Georgian (*zet'i*) (Lauffer 1919, p. 415).

In the 10th and 11th centuries, olives were cultivated at Nišāpur, Gorgān, Deylam, Rāmhormuz, Arrajān, and Fārs. This distribution of the cultivation of the olive probably also reflects the situation as it existed in pre-Islamic Persia. Olives were eaten as a fruit, at least in the Caspian area (Spuler, *Iran*, pp. 387, 509, quoting Moqaddasi, pp. 318, 353, 357, 407, 420; Eṣṭaḵri, pp. 40, 128, 213;

Ebn Ḥawqal, tr. Kramers, pp. 184, 272, 382; Spiegel 1971, I, pp. 257-58). In the Safavid period, olives allegedly only grew “on the frontiers of Arabia, and in Māzandarān, near the Caspian Sea” (Chardin III, p. 345; Kaempfer 1968, pp. 66, 68 (Rašt, Manjil). Around 1740, they were also said to grow near Ardabil, which is probably a mistake for Manjil (Hanway, *Travels* I, p. 261). Europeans did not like Persian Safavid olives very much, because when offered for sale they were full of sand and rotten (Tavernier 1930, p. 15; Müller 1764, VII, p. 358). This was probably due to the fact that olives and its oil were hardly used in Iran at that time. In Georgia and Armenia, olive oil was very expensive (Chardin IV, pp. 83-84; de Tournefort 1741, III, pp. 157, 173).

In the 19th century olives were mainly cultivated in the Caspian provinces, although they were also cultivated or grew wild in other parts of Persia. In 1817, Frederika von Freygang observed that the wild olive grew from the Caspian shores to the Terek river. The Armenians and Tartars ate the fruit of this tree, and extracted a juice from it called *tolkan* (von Freygang 1823, p. 192). The tree also grew in the south. In 1840, Baron de Bode observed that on the banks of the Hendiān river, near Behbahān, olive-trees grew, near the town of Zaytun (de Bode 1845, I, p. 294). The olive tree was also conspicuous in Baluchistan, where it was often cultivated around shrines (Aitchison 1890, p. 144; Goldsmid, “Notes,” p. 271 (Čāh-Bahār). There were also some good olive trees near Bušehr and Kermān (Fayżābād) and at Ṭārom (Zanjān) (Stolze and Andreas 1885, p. 13; ʿAyn-al-Salṭana 1997, II, p. 1494; Schindler 1881, p. 357).

However, the main concentration of olive-trees was in particular on the Rašt-Manjil route and in the Rudbār-Sefidrud area (the confluence of the Šāhrud and the Qezel-Uzen, on their borders, from Manjil till Raḥmatābād), where one found the largest concentration (entire forests) of olive trees. (Chodzko 1850, II, p. 66; E’temād-al-Salṭana 1989, I, p. 449; Polak 1862, p. 139). In Rudbār alone, in the 1840s, there were 150,000 olive trees, although Churchill estimated the total number of trees at 130,000 in 1896. He further noted that olives were also cultivated “in the district of Genjeh, nearer Resht, and in Taroum to the south. On the right bank of the Sefid Rood the principal villages are Kilishter, Viaieh (where the Kousis factory is established), Rezehgah, Geldian, Harzevil, and Mengil, as well as some 20 or so less important villages” (*DCR* 407, “Report on the Cultivation of Olives in the districts of Ghilan by H.L. Churchill,” London, 1896), p. 2; Mirzā Ebrāhim 1976, pp. 179, 181-82, 189, 245, n. 10/182).

During the 19th century, three varieties of olive trees were cultivated: the *zaytun-e zard*, which only produced edible table olives, and two others that

were only cultivated for producing oil (Chodzko 1850, II, p. 66). This preference for non-edible olives had to do with the fact that Persians did not use olive oil and did not know how to prepare it properly either. It was therefore only used to prepare a fatty soap and lamp oil. Part of the fruits were salted and preserved in vinegar by Armenians and exported to the Caucasus (Polak 1862, p. 139). According to Bohler, the olive oil was so filthy that you could only use it as a lighting fuel (Bohler 1977, p. 6).

Efforts to get Persians to consume olive oil were undertaken by foreigners. At the end of the 1840s, a Russian company erected an oil-mill in Harzevil, at an estimated cost of 120,000 francs, to cash in on the market potential for export to the Caucasus. The royal decree granting the olive-oil concession, however, was made out to a Persian, who had the sole right to buy the olives at a fixed price. The decree stated that after five years the factory had to be transferred to the Persian government. The investment failed due to lack of technical management. The oil was not fit for export and was only used inside Iran. The price in Anzali was 20 francs per *pud* (a Russian unit of weight: 1 *pud* = 16.38 kg). The enterprise was abandoned, and the royal decree granting the concession was not renewed. After sometime the government leased the rehabilitated building to the original owner for 2,500 francs per year. A new attempt to produce olive oil for export was undertaken in the 1850s by a German, but also failed (Melgunov 1868, pp. 186, 261, 263-65, 269-70; Stolze and Andreas 1885, p. 13; Polak 1862, p. 139; Bohler 1977, p. 6; see also Schindler 1881, p. 357). Around 1860, a few Russian Armenians operated an oil-press at Manjil. Eastwick reported that the undertaking “does not seem too profitable, because their number had dwindled from 15 to 8 persons” (Eastwick 1864, I, p. 320). In the 1870s, two French experts tried to succeed where the others had failed. Although they were able to refine a small quantity of olive oil of a quality comparable to fine French table olive oil (Government of Great Britain, “Report on the present State of Persia and her Mineral Resources, &c.; with an Appendix by Dr. Baker on the Diseases and Climate of the North of Persia,” *AP* 67, 1886, p. 313) their business nevertheless failed (De Windt 1891, p. 62; Stolze and Andreas 1885, p. 13). After the departure of the French a few Russian Armenians were able to start a small enterprise at Manjil, which produced a small quantity of excellent oil, equal to the best oil of the Provence. Apart from being pressed part of the olives were salted, preserved, and consumed domestically and in Russia. They were able to make good olive oil (*rowḡan-ezaytun*) at Rašt (Government of Great Britain, “Report by Consul Churchill on the Trade and Commerce of Province of

Ghilan, Mazenderan, and Asterabad for the Years 1876," *AP* 82 (1877), p. 755). The Armenians operated large plantations of olive trees at Rudbār and Raḥmatābād on both sides of the Sefidrud. In Rudbār, for example less than 5 million kg of olives were harvested. The oil produced was too thick and not refined enough to be used as table oil, and thus mainly used for soap manufacturing (Stolze and Andreas 1885, p. 13; Schindler 1881, p. 357.)

In the 1890s, some 43, or according to another source 60, villages in the Rudbār district, between Rostamābād, Manjil, Ṭārom, and Raḥmatābād, were involved olive cultivation. Olive trees were not optimally cultivated. They were planted close together and thus grew into one another, often half a dozen not more per 5 meters. The trees were never thinned, pruned or trimmed; manuring was irregular, while watering was done once week (*DCR* 407, 1896, p. 2; Wills 1894, p. 400; Biddulph 1893, p. 16). There were an estimated 80-100,000 trees with an average yield per year of 85 lbs, resulting in an annual yield of about 6,000,000 lbs (*DCR* 407 (1896), p. 3.; *PRO*/FO (Public Records Office/Foreign Office) 60/527 "Report by Walter Townley," 31 October 1890; *DCR* 191 (1891), Miscellaneous Series, "Report on the Cultivation of Olives in Northern Persia by Mr. Walter Townley," pp. 1-3.) Output might have been doubled if better pressing technology had been used. Messrs. Kousis and Theophilaktos, Greek entrepreneurs who were also active in the timber industry, had the concession for the purchase, pressing, and refining of all olives in northern Iran, which had been granted in May 1890 for a period of 25 years. They built a factory at Rudbār in 1895, and, after having done research in Europe about the pressing and refining of olive oil, they decided to use Marseilles presses, although most of the machinery came from Great Britain. In 1896, Gordon saw the buildings, which they were erecting on the right bank of the river, and Churchill described the difficult undertaking to transport the machinery from the coast to the factory site. The entrepreneurs intended to export the oil to Russia and to that end they wanted the owners of the olive groves to sell their entire harvest to them. However, due to a sudden rise in customs duties on olives and olive oil in Russia their undertaking was not profitable anymore, and they suspended the business. The apprehension, and even some hostility against the factory, that had existed in the district that the purchase of all olives would drive up the price of soap was thus not realized (*DCR* 191, 1891, Miscellaneous Series, pp. 1-3; Gordon 1896, pp. 163-64; Abdullaev 1963, p. 31; *DCR* 407, 1896, p. 4). This did not mean, of course, the discontinuation of the production of olives, whose oil continued to be transformed into soap (Floor 2003, pp. 527-32).

In the first half of the 20th century olives remained a product of marginal agricultural and economic importance. Their production was not even mentioned in books dealing with the agricultural sector of Iran. Olives continued to be grown solely in the Manjil and Rudbār districts of the Elburz, with an average production of 2,500 tons around 1940 (Government of Great Britain, *Geographical Handbook Series: Persia*, pp. 38, 444, 451). In the second half of the 20th century olives and their oil became accepted by the Iranian consumer as an edible fruit and as a vegetable oil to be used in cooking olives and its cultivation therefore received more commercial attention. Although during the last 20 years Iran's production and production share has have almost doubled, Iran only produces more than 0.2% of the world's production. For despite its ancient roots, the production of olives remains a marginal affair. Mediterranean countries account for around 95% of the world's olive cultivation (8,702,000 ha). Globally, Iran only ranked as 17th producer in 2003. The growing importance of olives in Iran's cuisine is also emphasized by the fact that the production of olives, which during more than 800 years had remained limited to the Rudbār-Manjil area in Gilan, now also takes place at other locations in Iran. What is of further interest here is that now Qazvin rather than Gilān province has become the major producer of olives (Table 1).

Although Iran has 90 known varieties of olives, only three kinds are still cultivated for commercial use. (1) The oil-bearing olive (*zaytun-e rowḡani*), which has a white fruit and which represent about 60% of production. These have an oil content ranging from 18-23%; (2) the yellow olive (*zaytun-e zard*), which is a smaller fruit and which represents about 30% of cultivation; and (3) the snake olive (*zaytun-e māri*), thus called because the fruit is drawn-out and slender. It has less flesh than the other olives and is used as a table fruit, because of its special taste. Its cultivation represents about 7% of the total. These three olives each have different varieties such as fast- (*zud-ras*) and slow-growers (*dir-ras*) (Rāhnamā, 1995, III, p. 143).

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Abbreviations used in the text: *AP*= Government of Great Britain, *House of Commons, Parliamentary Papers, Accounts and Papers. DCR* = Government of Great Britain, *Diplomatic and Consular Reports.*

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