



## ΓΗ ΤΗΣ ΕΛΙΑΣ : A story of the 5000-year old Cretan olive tree whose leaves were used to weave the crown for the winners of the Olympic Marathon Race in 2004

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If you watched the opening ceremony of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games on August 13, you would have noted that the official welcome to the 16,000 athletic participants and 72,000 spectators was delivered under an olive tree [*Ελία* in Greek; pronounced *Eliá*]. The Olympic winners, besides given medallions and a bouquet of

herbal flowers, were crowned with a wreath made from olive branches. During the closing ceremonies for the Olympics 2004 on August 29, the crowning of Stefano Baldini of Italy, the winner of the men's Marathon race, was with a special wreath from an olive tree that is reputed to be 5000 years old. That tree is located in Vouves in western part of the island of Crete. This is my story of the 5000-year-old "lady" olive tree, the *Καβουση Ελία*, whose branches crowned the winner of the women's Marathon Race on Sunday, August 22.

While Ms Mizuki Noguchi of Japan, with her "omanori" talisman tucked under her running suit, began her victorious race from the ancient sacred site of the Marathon battle and was sprinting through the historic 42-km route, Matheos Pahlitzanakis of the village of Kavousi in north-eastern Crete was showing me the branches that were clipped from the *Καβουσι Ελία* to make the wreath that crowned Noguchi, 2 hours and 26 minutes later in downtown Athens. We watched on TV her crowning at the marble Panathinaikon Stadium that was built by the Greek philanthropist **Averof** to serve as the venue for the 1896 inaugural modern Olympics when a Greek shepherd Spyros **Louis** won the first ever Marathon race.

Matheos was one of the people in the village of Kavousi who instigated the recognition of the Kavousi Elia. He lived in Dayton, Ohio for several decades before returning to his native village of Kavousi, sufficiently endowed to live a life of **cultural leisure**. An economist by training, Matheos was a success in business, a gainful stock shopper, and, like most intellectual Greeks, a lay philosopher. He had come to my house in Columbus to discuss the poetry of K. Palamas at one of our poetry nights. For the official clipping ceremonies held by the Kavousi Elia, Matheos wrote an ode: *Πέντε χιλιάδες χρόνια, σ' όρκο θεών, κλονάρια υφαίνω νά στεφανώσω, τήν Παγκόσμια Ειρήνη, περιμένω ... [For five thousand years, I vowed to the Gods, branches I weave to crown, World Peace, I await ...]*

Elaiá and Elissaion had arrived in Crete from Anatolia 5000 years ago on a boat from the Levant. Wandering like most of their ancestors as part of the Caucasian diaspora that had started with the cataclysmic flooding of what is now called the Black Sea. Like their ancestors, Elissaion and Elaiá carried with them seeds from trees and crops everywhere they traveled in the Mesopotamia region where their clan had settled centuries earlier. In Kavousi, they settled by a small creek on the hill that overlooked the sea, but high enough to be protected from pirates. Elissaion, as was the family practice in Pontos, dug channels to divert water from the creek onto the side hills where Elaiá planted the seeds that she had carried **sewn into her clothes**. Grapes, apples, pears, and vegetables grew immediately under the munificent Cretan sun.

Then on August 22, 2996 BC, a silvery plant rose from the heart of the rocky earth. Their little girl Elaiís was born that day also. Both the seedling and the little girl grew up together and multiplied. The silvery tree became the Kavousi Elia that produced daughters and sons [*one of them was transplanted in Vouves*] and her protector Elaiís bore children. Without ever realizing it, they had started a revolution that brought great wealth and power not only for Crete but also for the entire Mediterranean for the next 5000 years. Today in Greece, there are 120 million olive trees, ten trees for every Greek. Olive production in Greece has been uninterrupted over the past 5000 years! In ancient times, **cutting down an olive tree was punishable by death**. That legal protection, her titanic resilience against climatic changes and weather extremes, and innate tenacity were the reasons the Kavousi Elia survived these last 5000 years!

The Kavousi Elia grew in size and numbers under the *Azoriá* knoll that rises on the south side of the village of Kavousi, but during the Bronze Age, the only people in the area lived on top of the hill below, from where they had a wonderful view of the sunrise. Professor of Archaeology Hatzopoulos of the University of North Carolina unearthed a settlement of the Middle Bronze Age nearby where he found evidence of intensive cultivation of olives. Kavousi Elia was surrounded by several precipitous mountains that peaked over her giving her **solitude and protection**. Solitude is 1 of the 5 key elements for olive tree prosperity: the other 4 being in order of importance: sun [*it comes almost every day in Crete*], stony soil [*that is all there is in Crete*], periods of drought [*no rain in Crete from April to October*], water [*it is sufficient in the winter and spring months*]. Olive trees have a partiality to sea breeze, but prefer to be far enough from the high winds to enjoy the silence of the inland





Olive tree cultivation spread from Crete to Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine, and west to Magna Grecia in Italy and beyond when those areas became civilized eons later. According to the Greeks, barbarians used animal fat as an energy source, while civilized people used olive oil. Amazingly enough only recently have the nutritional and salutary values of olive oil been recognized, too late to prevent the obesity epidemic besetting fat consuming countries.

The world's greatest ever poet, Homer, called olive oil "**liquid gold**";  
 Tragedian Sophocles wrote, "**the tree that feeds the children**";  
 Modern poet Myrivilis wrote, "**olive oil is for the mouth what light is for the eyes**"!

Kavousi Elia has a perimeter of 19 meters [62 feet; 9 feet diameter at the bottom where the trunk rises from the earth]. It has a gorgeous plume that rises to 20 feet and spreads over an area of 40 feet in diameter. However, what I

find the most fascinating of the olive tree is the trunk! The trunk reflects the thousands of years of the agony and the ecstasy of survival. It reminds me of the suffering I sensed in the Prado Museum in Madrid Spain when I first stared at the body of Christ on the Cross as painted by El Greco [Actual name: Theotokopoulos]. I recently visited again the house outside the village of Fodele where El Greco was born. His house was and still is camouflaged with olive trees. I am sure that Theotokopoulos as a child playing under the olive trees noted the strange shapes that the trunks of olive trees took over their long life and suffering under the burning sun, and he might have even visited the Kavousi Elia for added inspiration. Despite her age, and the historic snowfall of February 2004 that froze the whole island for the first time in centuries, the Kavousi Elia had the strength to grow new branches in the 2004 Olympic Year right off her bushy trunk! I was amazed at her tenacity! I could not resist, I too cut a branch of the Kavousi Elia for myself!



The beauty of the Kavousi Elia attracted dignitaries and deities to her site. King Minos of Knossos visited her when she had reached her first millennium. Minos, the creator of the first civilization that gave us the first ever alphabet, **sanctified olive production**, but was clever enough to share the knowledge with his trading partners in Anatolia where Jesus Christ spent His last night praying in an olive grove before being crucified. We Orthodox Christians use olive oil not only for nutrition and medicinal purposes but also for our religious sacraments at birth, baptism, marriage, and at death. Theseus, the visiting prince of Athens, in one of his amorous excursions with local princess Ariadne spent some time under the plume of the Kavousi Elia! Goddess of Wisdom Athena planted a branch from the Kavousi Elia on the Acropolis, and it brought unprecedented prosperity to the city. The grateful people named the city Athens in her name and built for virgin Athena the Parthenon, the finest temple ever. In 2004, the Kavousi Elia sent another branch back to Athens, this time to crown an Olympic winner.

**"Source of Health, Emblem of Civilization, Icon of Peace, Symbol of the Olympic Games, Eliá, I salute you! Happy Birthday! May you live another 5000 years"**  
 Eliséo