

Buying a Piece of Athena

My paper analyzes how Athena, patron goddess of the Athenian city-state, was implicated in the production, supply and economic exchange of the olive. Ever since the influential publication of Moses I. Finley (1985) and Karl Polanyi (1981) the idea that the ancient economy, like Greek religion, was deeply embedded in the social, political and cultural structures of its time has gained much momentum in Classical Studies. Their approach has, moreover, resulted in the recent adoption of New Institutional Economics (e.g. Scheidel 2007; Bresson 2007), a model that takes into account the institutions that influence the performance of every economic system. In my paper I draw on the NIE model to examine how Athenian institutions mediated a simultaneously sacred and economic bond between the divinity of Athena and her commodity, the olive.

The first part of my paper focuses on the close association between Athena and the olive. I explain how Athena's so-called "mode d'action," i.e., her cunning intelligence and technical knowledge (Detienne and Verth 1971), was imagined to play a vital role in both the cultivation of the olive tree and the production of olive oil. The second part, then, examines how the Athenian institutions of the Areopagus Council and the Panathenaic festival not only regulated the distribution of olive oil in Attica, but also perpetuated Athena's sacred bond with the olive. By continually stressing the goddess' divine protection over the olive in the processes of its cultivation, production and commercialization, both institutions promoted the olive — a Mediterranean staple food — as a typically Athenian luxury product of great monetary and sacred value. Anyone buying a jar of Athenian olive oil thus also believed to buy a piece of Athena. As a final conclusion, I demonstrate how my argument might be part of a larger project that describes how Greek religion engaged with the economic sphere in Classical Athens.

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