Spring 2009

Book Review: Olive Cultivation in Ancient Greece.
By Lin Foxhall

David B. Hollander
Iowa State University, dbh8@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs

Part of the Agricultural Economics Commons, Agronomy and Crop Sciences Commons, Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons, European History Commons, and the Other History Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs/108. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Book Review: Olive Cultivation in Ancient Greece. By Lin Foxhall

Abstract
Lin Foxhall is among the foremost authorities on ancient agriculture and, with Olive Cultivation in Ancient Greece, she continues her practice of making important contributions to that field and also to ancient economic history. Foxhall insists on examining the ecological and cultural context in which agriculture takes place, so her study is not narrowly focused on olive cultivation but looks at olive and olive oil were produced. Foxhall provides background information about the olive tree and also lays out the parameters of her study. She is concerned with “the place of the olive in the agricultural regimes and economies of Classical, and to the much lesser extent, Archaic Greece, between the sixth and third centuries BCE” (1).

Disciplines
Agricultural Economics | Agronomy and Crop Sciences | Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | European History | Other History

Comments
This book review is published as Hollander, D.B., Olive Cultivation in Ancient Greece. By Lin Foxhall., Agricultural History. 2009 83(2); 280-281. Posted with permission.
England in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was conditioned by market possibilities, work that found its fullest exposition in *English Seigniorial Agriculture*. His approach is therefore Boserupian and optimistic, finding that where the market stimulus existed, agriculture could respond with the development of new techniques to increase productivity. As population pressure was reduced after 1350, there was a corresponding retreat from the sophistication and specialization of the pre–Black Death period.

Norfolk also brought the possibility of a collaboration with another Cambridge contemporary, Mark Overton, who was pioneering the collection of productivity data from probate inventories. Two of the essays are jointly written with Overton and construct long series of data by matching Campbell’s manorial data for Norfolk with Overton’s sixteenth to eighteenth-century probate data, with the surprising conclusion that Norfolk agriculture, ca. 1700, was no more productive than it had been four centuries before.

What the casual reader might not appreciate is the extent to which this developing research was underpinned by prodigious quantities of data, first from manorial accounts drawn from Norfolk, then the south-east, and finally nationally. It also used a further dataset based on the *Inquisitions post mortem*, data treated with a statistical and cartographic sophistication that found its fullest exposition in *England on the Eve of the Black Death: An Atlas of Lay Lordship, Land and Wealth* (2006). As his Tawney lecture to the Economic History Society at their 2008 conference showed, Bruce Campbell is still way out in front, and these volumes are only an interim statement of his work.

R. W. Hoyle
*University of Reading*


Lin Foxhall is among the foremost authorities on ancient agriculture and, with *Olive Cultivation in Ancient Greece*, she continues her practice of making important contributions to that field and also to ancient economic history. Foxhall insists on examining the ecological and cultural context in which agriculture takes place, so her study is not narrowly focused on olive cultivation but looks at the Greek farm household as a whole and the families and markets for which olives and olive oil were produced. Foxhall provides background information about the olive tree and also lays out the parameters of her study. She is concerned with “the place of the olive in the agricultural regimes and economies of Classical, and to a much lesser extent, Archaic Greece, between the sixth and third centuries BCE” (1). She excludes Ptolemaic and Roman olive cultivation from consideration, although the latter
topic does occasionally receive some attention if only to provide a contrast with earlier, less intensive Greek practice.

Chapter 2 continues the preliminaries by discussing theory, sources, and methodology. Foxhall follows Moses Finley in emphasizing the embedded nature of the ancient economy and doubting the applicability of modern economic terms and concepts to the Greek world. She reviews some earlier approaches to the development of Greek agriculture and is especially critical of Victor Davis Hanson’s *The Other Greeks*. As for the sources, Foxhall stresses the difficulties. The evidence, textual and archaeological, is hard to interpret and focuses predominantly on wealthier households. The preliminaries conclude in Chapter 3, which provides a nice discussion of the land, buildings, equipment, terraces, walls, drainage, irrigation, labor, and livestock, as well as the crops in cultivation.

The next three chapters, focusing much more closely on the olive, form the heart of the work. Chapter 4 considers the question of demand. The olive was, of course, a staple of the Greek diet but the Greeks also used olive oil as fuel for lamps, in the manufacture of perfumes, and to clean themselves. Foxhall’s dedication to her subject becomes clear when she notes that she “found that it took 25 ml of olive oil to rub down and clean one moderately grubby six year old child” (92). Chapter 5 turns to the cultivation of the olive tree and treats, among other topics, grafting, pruning, and harvesting. Chapter 6 looks at the processing of olives, particularly the crushers and presses used to extract oil. Foxhall includes a lengthy and somewhat arduous survey of sites from which archaeologists have recovered such equipment. The relative lack of specialized processing machinery dating to the Archaic and Classical periods suggests, she argues, that the preferred technology tended to be “modular, ephemeral and relatively small scale” (136).

The final two chapters consist of a discussion of ornamental gardens and a conclusion. An extensive bibliography, *index locorum*, and general index follow the text. The book is amply illustrated, engagingly written, and, in most respects, well produced though it has quite a few typographical errors. *Olive Cultivation* is essential reading for students of Greek agriculture and the ancient economy. Foxhall’s nuanced approach to the question of self-sufficiency is particularly welcome, and her suggestion that wealthy households pursued what she terms “domestic production” rather than subsistence production may represent a significant contribution to our understanding of ancient household management.

David Hollander

*Iowa State University*