

## Olive Trees in Puglia: Migrating and Standing Still

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### **Abstract**

The paper explores migration as it has comingled ancient olive trees, newly migrated workers, rumor, and an outbreak of deadly disease. The Puglia region of Italy has far more olive trees than people, millions of the trees cover the coastal area. Many of the millenary trees, are close to a thousand years old. Extremely old, but not indigenous to Puglia. The olive tree arrived in Puglia from the Middle East with the Phoenicians.

During the economic crisis, northern Italians were offering Pugliese landowners large sums of money to dig and ship exemplars of these very large (and quite strikingly beautiful) ancient trees to a new 'home', where they would be treated as living trophies. Thugs were hired to dig up and steal other trees and truck them away.

The Pugliese region, horrified at the loss of the trees declared them monuments, and using a GIS system, began giving each a stamped badge with a number. The numbers and an accompanying photograph of hundreds of thousands of the trees have been entered into a searchable database.

Care for the trees is predominately provided by African immigrants. Uninterested in doing manual field labor, young Pugliese are themselves emigrating to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Immigrant farm workers must report every three months to the authorities; they, like the trees, are registered with the state.

As has been widely reported, a deadly outbreak of *Xylella fastidiosa* has arrived in Puglia, having traveled there with a shipment of South American house plants. The disease threatens to decimate the Pugliese olive groves. For now, the trees are rooted in place and the ancient ones registered, but swirling around them with enormous force are huge threats, some imagined, some terribly real: migration, disease, politics, European conspiracies, and environmental change due to global warming.

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