The Sacred Tree

The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations

By

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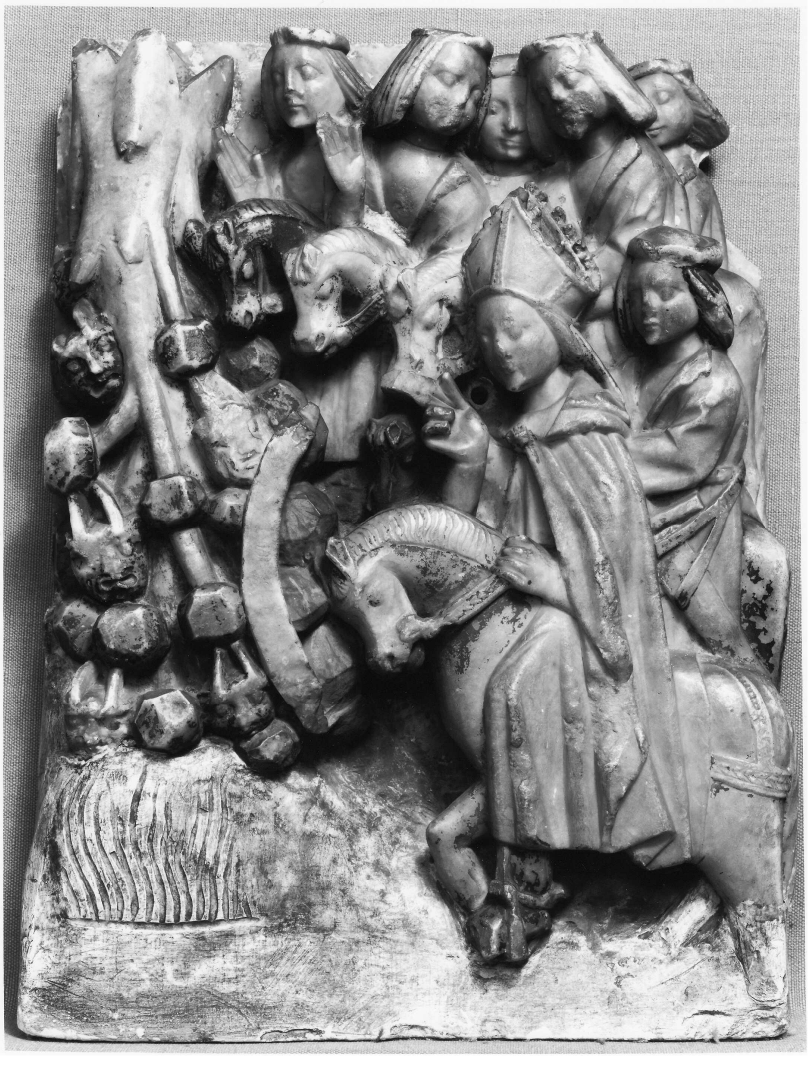

Fifteenth century English alabaster depicting Boniface felling the Oak of Jupiter, gifted by W. L. Hildburgh to the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1946.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study grew out of my doctoral research into the conversion of the post-Roman Germanic kingdoms to Christianity, published as *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples* (Cassell, 1998). The focus of that work was the process of religious conversion: the transition from Paganism to Christianity among the Germanic peoples of late antiquity and the early medieval era. Except where exposition of pre-Christian beliefs and practices could shed light on the conversion or on certain distinctive features of later indigenised Germanic Christianity, it contained little exploration of what Germanic Paganism was like. It now seems to me to be inadequate to have examined such far-reaching and, in many cases, traumatic socio-political shifts without further investigating their effects on indigenous Pagan beliefs, rituals and social arrangements.

The motif of the sacred tree offers a way into such a research project, as it is a near-universal symbol in pre-modern cultures, and yet has a particular and recognisable manifestation within the Indo-European cultural matrix, yielding rich ancient and medieval case studies. Further, trees featured in a number of key texts utilised in my doctoral thesis, ranging across Greco-Roman, Celtic and Germanic sources. In the years following the publication of my dissertation, the dim outlines of a monograph that almost exactly paralleled *Conversion Among the German Peoples*, but which concentrated on the sacred tree, its significance and function for the pre-Christian Pagan societies, and its transformation in the encounter of Paganism with Christianity, began to emerge.

Research and writing are often slow processes and more than a decade has passed since the initial idea for this book first germinated. My first conference paper on the topic, “Sacred Groves and Holy Trees,” was delivered in the University of Sydney at a Society for Religion, Literature and the Arts conference in 1998, and since then I have had many opportunities to discuss ideas, sources, interpretative paradigms, and research problems in academic settings, including the Leeds International Medieval Congress, the annual conferences of the Australian Association for the Study of Religion, the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies conferences, and, more informally, at meetings of the Sydney Medieval and Renaissance Group. I thank those who have given me useful feedback on these papers and presentations, in particular Sybil Jack, John O. Ward and Lyn Olson. I am also grateful to the undergraduate students in my classes on Celtic and Germanic mythology, who raised interesting issues in discussions and wrote fascinating essays that provoked me to further thought, and also those (chiefly family and friends) with whom I have discussed my work in a more desultory fashion.

I wish to thank my fellow staff in the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney, particularly Garry Trompf and Christopher Hartney, for support and encouragement, and the staff in Religious Studies at the University of Edinburgh, particularly Alistair Kee, Jim Cox, Jeanne Openshaw and Steve Sutcliffe, for making me welcome and facilitating my work during periods of research leave between 2003 and 2010. Jonathan Wooding, of the University of Wales, Trinity St David, regularly informed me about the publication of new books on the significance of trees in the Middle Ages. Chris Hartney also helped me with translations from French sources, as did Avril Vorsay with translations from German sources, for which I am grateful. Thanks are also due to Venetia Robertson who prepared the index.

My research assistants over the years, especially Dan Bray, Dominique Wilson and Alex Norman, patiently searched library shelves and Internet databases, tracked down obscure references, read and edited drafts, and did a multitude of small but essential tasks without which this book would never have appeared. Special thanks are due to Dan Bray, who drew my attention to certain crucial issues that I might never have fully appreciated, including: how the spread of Christianity in the Middle Ages involved the destruction of an indigenous way of life; the increasing politicisation of academic studies in “Paganism” from the 1990s onward; and the relation that historical investigations of these topics might have to contemporary religio-spiritual developments, including modern, revived Paganism.

Finally, I am always thankful to Don Barrett for his sympathetic interest in my researches and his patience in discussing problems and assisting me to clarify ideas prior to, and during, the writing process.

My doctoral supervisor, Eric J. Sharpe (1933-2000), and my father John R. Cusack (1940-2004), both died before this project was completed. This book is affectionately and respectfully dedicated to their memory.

INTRODUCTION

PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN SACRED TREES

On Friday 10 December 2010 the English newspaper, *The Guardian*, featured a story entitled “Police Hunt Attackers of Glastonbury Thorn.” Readers were shocked to discover that the trunk of one of Britain’s best-known and beloved sacred trees, the Glastonbury Thorn, had been virtually severed by vandals a week earlier on 8 December. According to a legend known as the Somerset Tradition, this tree located on Wearyall Hill came into existence when Joseph of Arimathea, reputedly the uncle of the Virgin Mary and an early follower of Jesus who provided the tomb from which the resurrected Christ emerged, “thrust the staff he brought from the Holy Land into the soil and it miraculously blossomed.”[1] The image of the staff bursting into flowers was an eloquent vernacular explanation of the Resurrection; that which had been dead was, against all natural expectations, restored to life. In the Middle Ages the Glastonbury Thorn was arguably the most famous tree in the Christian world, and part of a thriving pilgrimage centre, which included the magnificent Glastonbury Abbey and the tombs of King Arthur and his Queen, Guinevere (which were opened on occasion for illustrious guests, such as Edward I and Eleanor of Castile, who visited on 1278 CE).[2] Christians believed that Jesus had visited Glastonbury as a child in the company of Joseph of Arimathea, who was a tin-merchant who traded with Cornwall, and that they had there erected a church to the Virgin Mary. This esoteric Christian belief was referred to in the preface to William Blake’s great poem “Milton,” which is today best known as the popular hymn “Jerusalem,” with music by Sir Hubert Parry.[3]

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[1] Maev Kennedy, “Police Hunt Attackers of Glastonbury Thorn,” *The Guardian*, 10 December (2010): 15.

[2] Chris Barber and David Pykitt, *Journey to Avalon: The Final Discovery of King Arthur* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1997), 256.

[3] Justine Digance and Carole M. Cusack, “Glastonbury: A Tourist Town for All Seasons,” in *The Tourist as a Metaphor of the Social World*, ed. Graham Dann (Wallingford and New York: CABI International, 2002), 263-280.

During the Protestant Reformation there was significant hostility to Catholic devotional practices such as pilgrimage and reverence for material objects that were considered sacred. Reliquaries and shrines were destroyed, as were images of the saints; monasteries and convents were dissolved. The Roman Catholic Church was disestablished and Anglicanism became the state church.[4] The Glastonbury Thorn did not escape this religious upheaval unscathed, but was felled by Parliamentary soldiers during the English Civil War. The present tree was regrown from cuttings secretly saved by the citizens of Glastonbury. The 2010 press coverage emphasised the tree's Christian significance; the *Telegraph's* Richard Savill quoted Katherine Gorbing, the director of the Glastonbury Abbey heritage site, claiming "the vandals have struck at the heart of Christianity." He also noted that each year "a sprig from another Holy Thorn tree in the town is cut for the Queen, a tradition which dates back more than a hundred years."[5] Further information suggested that, rather than this being a specifically religious attack, the vandals may have intended to strike at the owner of Wearyall Hill, Edward James, a businessman arrested the previous week over the collapse of Crown Currency Exchange, in which he was a major shareholder. Whatever the truth of the matter, the Glastonbury Thorn has weathered the vicissitudes of two thousand years, and local residents hope that it will survive this vicious assault and be restored to life and vigour in the spring.

What is particularly interesting about the attack on the Glastonbury Thorn is that in early twenty-first century Britain it is a sacred tree that is of great importance to both Christians and Pagans. The boggy lands of the Somerset Levels have been settled since the Neolithic at least, and the oldest wooden trackway in Britain, the Sweet Track, which dates from approximately 3,800 BCE, passed by the Glastonbury lake village. This prehistoric habitation site has been linked to the Isle of Avalon, where King Arthur rests until the hour of England's greatest need. The first known Christian community dates from the seventh century CE, during the Anglo-Saxon period. The modern town is home to Wiccans and other Pagans, adherents of Goddess spirituality, Arthurian seekers, and participants in a multitude of esoteric disciplines, as well as a range of Christian denominations. This lively spiritual scene has manifested in formal bodies such as the Isle of Avalon Foundation, the Chalice Well Trust, and the Fraternity of the Inner Light, founded by the occult Christian Dion Fortune (Violet Mary Firth) in 1924. Fortune promoted Arthurian connections of Glastonbury; as Adrian Ivakhiv states, "the publication of her *Avalon of the Heart*, alongside the more popular novels of John Cowper Powys [author of *A Glastonbury Romance*, 1932] and the Romantic poetry of Tennyson [*The Idylls of the King*, 1856-1885], popularised the idea of Glastonbury as the legendary Isle of Avalon and, later, as a 'heart chakra' of the earth."[6] The geography of the region, dominated by Tor, is believed by many to be powerful; the alleged town lies in the centre of the mystical "Glastonbury Zodiac," identified in the 1920s by the artist Katherine Maltwood, which is, as Marion Bowman explains, "a huge planisphere ten miles in diameter in the landscape around Glastonbury, hailed as the original Round Table of Arthurian myth."[7]

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[4] Margaret Aston, "Puritans and Iconoclasm, 1560-1660," in *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560-1700*, eds Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (New York: St Martin's Press 1996), 92-94, 121.

[5] Richard Savill, "Vandals Destroy Holy Thorn Tree in Glastonbury," *The Telegraph*, 9 December (2010), at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/religion/8192459/Vandals-destroy-Holy-Thorn-tree-in-Glastonbury.html, accessed 21 December 2010.

Modern Paganism is a revived, revitalised tradition, the existence of which has been made possible through the liberal religious climate of secular modernity. Institutional Christianity has been diminishing in influence in the West since the late nineteenth century, and has experienced accelerated decline since the 1960s, the decade of the counter-culture, in which the boundaries of lifestyle choice, religion and spirituality, politics and sexuality, were extended further than ever before, or arguably since.[8] The Pagan revival, too, has its roots in the nineteenth century but came to prominence in the second half of the twentieth century. Paganism is polytheistic and eclectic, and privileges experience over theoretical, doctrinal speculation. Pagans venerate the Goddess, remedying the extreme masculinist influence of the Judeo-Christian God, and asserting that the Divine is embodied, natural and this-worldly rather than disembodied, spiritual and other-worldly. Tim Zell (now Oberon Zell-Ravenheart), who with Lance Christie co-founded the Pagan Church of All Worlds in 1962, expressed these beliefs powerfully in 1971; "we now know that out planet, Mother Earth, is inhabited not by myriad separate and distinct organisms … rather that aggregate total of all the living beings of Earth comprises the vast body of a single organism … the being we have intuitively referred to as Mother Earth, the Goddess … is not merely a mythical projection of our own limited visions, but an actual living entity."[9] One consequence of the Pagan revival has been the rejection of the Biblical notion that the earth was created by God for human use; rather, it is asserted that humans are part of the biosphere and have no special status *vis-à-vis* other living beings.

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[6] Adrian Ivakhiv, *Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics at Glastonbury and Sedona* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 82.

[7] Marion Bowman, "Ancient Avalon, New Jerusalem, Heart Chakra of Planet Earth: The Local and the Global in Glastonbury," in *Handbook of New Age*, eds Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 294.

[8] Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs: The Revolution in English Life in the Fifties and Sixties* (London: Pimlico, 1992 [1969]), 19-30.

Scholars have observed that it is easy for human beings to ascribe meaning to trees because they are satisfyingly homologous with people. Archaeologist Miranda Aldhouse-Green notes that "both trees and humans … have 'bones'; both 'bleed' when injured and both trees and people stand tall and upright."[10] Trees are alive in a way that stones, however impressive, cannot be. In the landscape trees are frequently dominant and inspirational, like the giant California redwoods (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) which grow to remarkable heights, or the ancient Huon pines of Tasmania, which can live for up to three thousand years. Even in the comparatively urban environs of the town of Cirencester, the Earl of Bathurst's residence Cirencester House is shielded from prying eyes by a huge and impressive yew hedge (reportedly the tallest in Europe); and the remarkable churchyard of Saint Mary's Painswick in the Cotswolds is peopled by ninety-nine clipped yews, which in combination with the monumental tombs, "form a truly surreal landscape."[11] Modern Pagans have a proprietary interest in sacred trees, in that they are a feature of nature, and thus part of the sacred, the physical world that is infused with the divine.

This book is a study of the sacred tree in the ancient and medieval historical eras. The aim of the research has been to investigate the meanings ascribed to sacred trees by Greek and Roman, Germanic and Celtic Pagans (among others), and to discover how those meanings were transformed in the transition from Paganism to Christianity. Ancient Pagans believed trees could express profound cosmological and spiritual truths; they were frequently connected to the image of the world (*imago mundi*), which often took the form of a giant human being, and to the notion of the centre (*axis mundi*), which both mapped territory and connected the earth to the heavens above and the underworld below. As part of nature individual trees and groves of multiple trees were infused with the divine presence of deities minor and major; from the tree-spirits (*hamadryads*) whose lives were coterminous with the trees they inhabited, to Zeus himself, the sky-father and lord of the Olympian gods, who spoke to his petitioners through the rustling leaves of the oaks in the sanctuary of Dodona. Trees marked out physical territory, conferred identity on the peoples who lived in within the vicinity of their sheltering branches, functioned as meeting places for religious and political assemblies, and were places of Druidic education. The meanings of the living tree were transferred through a process of abstraction to the pillar monument, which, as Ken Dowden argued, "stand[s] on the fertile conceptual margin between stone and tree."[12]

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[9] Tim Zell, "Biotheology: The Neo-Pagan Mission," in *Green Egg Omelette*, ed. Oberon Zell-Ravenheart (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2009), 29.

[10] Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Seeing the Wood for the Trees: The Symbolism of Trees and Wood in Ancient Gaul and Britain* (Aberystwyth: University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, 2000), 22.

[11] Simon Jenkins, *England's Thousand Best Churches* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1999]), 224.

Christian missionaries sought to convert the Pagans from their errors, believing that the Pagan gods were at best non-existent and at worst demonic. Missionaries routinely cut down holy trees and often used the wood to build baptismal chapels and churches, seemingly converting not only the people, but also the sacred power embodied in the tree. Yet Christianity had its own tree monument, the cross on which Jesus was crucified, and which came to signify resurrected life and the conquest of eternal death for the devout. As European Pagans were converted to Christianity, their tree and pillar monuments were changed into Christian forms; the great standing crosses of Anglo-Saxon northern England played many of the same roles as did Pagan sacred trees and pillars. Their iconography educated viewers, their size and prominence mapped the landscape, and they formed the nuclei around which monastic settlements grew.[13]

Yet there are very few sanctioned holy trees that persisted within Christianity. Trees did form part of the landscape of church precincts and pilgrimage sites; for example, many Welsh churchyards feature large and ancient yew trees.[14] However, the most famous Christian holy tree was and is, as noted above, the Glastonbury Thorn. Water sites, the holy wells and springs associated chiefly with Pagan goddesses, proved easier to integrate into the Christian religion. This was no doubt due to the centrality of the ritual of baptism, which is, as Richard Morris comments, "a cleansing in *fons vitae*; the crossing of a boundary, an exchange of one life and family for another; and an image of death and rebirth."[15] In the twenty-first century trees are once again of spiritual significance, not only for those who are religious, but also to the large number of secularists, because of the devastating impact of environmental destruction and the rapid loss of biodiversity and animal habitats that have resulted from the industrialised nations' rapacious exploitation of natural resources. Some scientists even speak in the language of Gaia, the Earth Goddess, in a attempt to persuade people that the environment must be cherished and protected. Failure to do so will imperil the future of humanity, and potentially obliterate all human achievements.

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[12] Ken Dowden, *European Paganism: The Realities of Cult from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000, 59).

[13] Angus Winchester, *Documents in Stone* (Lancaster: Lancaster University Television, 1995).

The violent attack on the Glastonbury Thorn is, in ecological terms, an attempt to kill a living being, a being that is kin to humankind and which participates in the common life of our planet. It can also be construed as an attack on history and tradition; the Glastonbury Thorn has conferred a special identity on the town for more than a thousand years, and provides a multivalent symbolic presence that unites Pagans and Christians, and signals the presence of sacred nature in the midst of a bustling, commercial community. The life of the Glastonbury Thorn hangs in the balance; its future is in doubt. The majority of the sacred trees and tree-derived monuments discussed in this book met their end hundreds, even thousands, of years ago. Yet the media coverage of the Glastonbury Thorn's ordeal testifies to the continued power of the sacred tree, and to its continued relevance as a symbol. Through an examination of the sacred trees of the past much may be discovered about the myriad ways that modern humans create and sustain meaning in their lives and make peace with each other and with nature.

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[14] Andrew Morton, *Trees of the Celtic Saints: The Ancient Yews of Wales* (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2009).

[15] Richard Morris, "Baptismal Places 600-800," in *People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600,* eds Ian Wood and Niels Lund (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991), 18.

CHAPTER ONE

METHODOLOGY: THE MEANINGS OF SACRED TREES

> The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. *Genesis* Chapter 2, Verse 9[1]

Introduction

This chapter establishes that the tree is a fundamental symbol in the Pagan religions of the ancient world, and that its power is principally derived from the fact that trees can function as homologues of both human beings and of the physical universe. With reference to Mary Douglas's theory of "natural systems of symbolizing … [showing] tendencies and correlations between the character of the symbolic system and that of the social system,"[2] it will be demonstrated that the tree's resemblance to the human form and its multivalent symbolic possibilities, which encompass the mapping of kinship systems, the bridging of multiple worlds, and the embodiment of the totality of the cosmos, results in its centrality in polytheistic religious, political and social organization.[3]

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[1] *New International Version*, at BibleGateway.com, http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%202:9&version=NIV, accessed 19 December 2010. I have deliberately chosen the leading quotations for each chapter from the Judeo-Christian Bible, rather than from other possible sacred texts. This is because the tree symbol is often associated with Paganism, and this study traces how in certain early medieval cultural contexts the sacred tree went through dramatic shifts as communities were converted to Christianity. The quotations from the Bible show that the tree symbol was an inherent part of the Judeo-Christian worldview (probably inherited from, or at least shared with, neighbouring Ancient Near Eastern cultures).

[2] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1973), 12.

While the problems attendant on the use of the term “religion” are recognized, this study follows Benson Saler’s trenchant assertion that the “power of religion as an analytical category … depends on its instrumental value in facilitating the formulation of interesting statements about human beings.”[4] The argument seeks to recover the meanings attached to sacred trees, and to demonstrate why these meanings are religious, and how they enable “interesting statements” to be made about ancient and medieval human beings. It is important to recognize that the term “religion” has two mutually reinforcing etymologies in Latin; “*religio* which Cicero took to be from *relegere*, ‘to re-read,’ with the implication of ‘tradition’ as that which is ‘re-read’ and so passed on; and with Lactantius from *religare*, ‘to bind fast,’ with the implication of that which binds people to each other and to the gods.”[5] Religion therefore has strong affinities with tradition and knowledge that is handed down from generation to generation (a community constituted over time), and it involves the collective identity of a people (in bonded relationship with their gods). Trees and tree symbolism form part of tradition and traditional knowledge, and trees often function as sites where the divine is encountered, satisfying both etymological criteria for “religion.”

A brief introduction to the Indo-European cultural matrix and an analysis of the characteristic qualities of Indo-European religion and culture will be provided, as background for the investigation of sacred trees in the Greek, Roman, Celtic and Germanic traditions in subsequent chapters. The evidence for how and why the tree acquired the abovementioned religious meanings will be adduced, along with discussions of specific tree myths and tree-rituals in ancient and medieval societies, particularly those of Indo-European origins. Links and affinities with non-Indo-European cultures will be noted where relevant. The scholarly problems of examining mythological texts from a post-Enlightenment perspective will be considered. Finally, it will be noted that the cosmic picture instantiated by the sacred tree is this-worldly, local and pluralistic, and is thus diametrically opposed to the cosmic picture of the monotheistic religions, which is other-worldly, universal and exclusive. This stark contrast sets the stage for a significant clash of cultures when the Pagan Romans, Celts and Germans (among others) encountered Christianity in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

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[3] This study intends to go beyond Stephen Reno’s phenomenological attempt to “describe patterns of meaning in religious expressions, without explaining how those patterns came to be” while accepting his caution that generalizing from a particular symbol is fraught with difficulties. See “Religious Symbolism: A Plea for a Comparative Approach,” *Folklore* 88/1 (1977): 81.

[4] Benson Saler, “*Religio* and the Definition of Religion,” *Cultural Anthropology* 2/3 (August 1987): 398.

[5] Gavin Flood, *After Phenomenology* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999), 44.

"Trees … Are Good to Think With"

Crucial to any understanding of the sacred tree is the issue of the nature and function of symbols. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines a symbol as a thing "naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought."[6] The English word "symbol" derives from the Greek verb *symballein*, which means to "throw together, put together, bring together,"[7] emphasising the making of a unity from separate things. This unity also implies the creation of a new meaning, which comprehends the meanings of the constituent elements. Religious symbols may thus possess a multiplicity of meanings, but these meanings are neither confused nor confusing. Rather, they constitute a conceptual language that is capable of translating humans and human life-events into cosmological terms.[8] This study does not concern itself with the origin of symbols, but it is worth noting that nature, in the widest sense, is the basis of many religious symbols.[9] It will be argued that, while the sacred tree as a symbol has a primary cosmological meaning, it also has a plethora of subsidiary meanings that are complementary and agglomerative rather than disjointed or contradictory.

Moreover, the meanings of the tree symbol are intimately engaged with the societies that produced and reverenced it. Within the study of religion, there are two main scholarly approaches to the study of symbols that have been developed. The first restricts the examination of the symbol to the culture within which it is found; the second admits comparative material from other cultures, and may accept that there is "a universal system of symbols." Following Ingvild Gilhus, this study attempts to chart a slightly different path. Comparisons with a broad range of cultures are admitted in the data collected; but the concentration is on Indo-European derived cultures and specific historical contexts (the ancient and early medieval eras). This produces a substantially "limited historical approach" rather than "the broad comparative approach,"[10] though the value of comparison is acknowledged and on occasion non-Indo-European examples may be examined.

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[6] H. W. Fowler (ed.), *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Third Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 1239.

[7] Gerhart B. Ladner, "Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism: A Comparison," *Speculum* 54/2 (April 1979): 223.

[8] Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1985), 3-5.

[9] Reno, "Religious Symbolism," 77.

The argument of Mary Douglas's *Natural Symbols* is complex, but for the purposes of this study it is sufficient to expound certain key aspects that will function as a heuristic device for the examination of sacred trees and their symbolism. Douglas asserts that all symbol systems are human cultural products and exhibit intimate relationships with the social systems that give rise to them. Further, she argues that the human body is available to all as an exemplar of a system and forms the basis of societal arrangements. Different types of social system, therefore, result from different attitudes to physicality and embodiment. Douglas posits that there are four types of social systems:

> [for] one, the body will tend to be conceived as an organ of communication. The major preoccupations will be with its functioning effectively; the relation of head to subordinate members will be a model of the central control system, the favourite metaphors of statecraft will harp upon the flow of blood in the arteries, sustenance and the restoration of strength. According to another, though the body will also be seen as a vehicle of life, it will be vulnerable in different ways. The dangers to it will come… from failure to control the quality of what it absorbs through the orifices; fear of poisoning, protection of boundaries, aversion to bodily waste products and medical theory that enjoins frequent purging. Another again will be very practical about the possible uses of bodily rejects, very cool about recycling waste matter and about the pay-off from such practices. The distinction between the life within the body and the body that carries it will hold no interest. In the control areas of this society controversies about spirit and matter will scarcely arise. But at the other end of the spectrum … a different attitude will be seen. Here the body is not primarily the vehicle of life, for life will be seen as purely spiritual, and the body as irrelevant matter. Here we can locate millennial tendencies from our early history to the present day. For these people society appears as a system that does not work.[11]

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[10] Ingvild Gilhus, "The Tree of Life and the Tree of Death: A Study of Gnostic Symbols," *Religion* 17 (October 1987): 347.

[11] Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 16-17.

Of particular significance in this fourfold typology is the fact that the first and third social systems are world-affirming and positively disposed to the embodiment and the natural world, where the second and fourth are world-denying and negatively disposed to embodiment and the natural world. This is often seen as a basic distinction between Indo-European Pagan traditions (and, indeed, most polytheistic religions) and the Semitic monotheistic religions that replaced them in Europe through a programme of evangelism and conversion in the ancient and medieval historical eras.[12]

Douglas maps the different types of social organization she has identified by onto a vertical and a horizontal axis, where the vertical is the "grid" and the horizontal the "group." Above the horizontal axis the grid is strong and there is a "system of shared classifications," whereas below the horizontal axis the grid is weak and "a private system of classification" will be found. From right to left along the horizontal axis, are various positions for the individual to adopt *vis-à-vis* the grid; from a high level of conformity on the right to "voluntary outcasts" on the left, who prefer freedom no matter what the cost.[13] Modernity has been characterised by a retreat from institutional religion and an increase in individualism, privileging the left of the horizontal axis. For Douglas, the break between pre-modern and modern societies is decisive because of the radically different attitudes to ritual that manifest in the two types of social organisation. Rituals are concomitant with symbols; Douglas views the increased emphasis on privacy and the internalisation of values in the modern West, along with the post-Reformation drive to re-interpret

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[12] James G. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Chapter 5, "Germanic Religiosity and Social Structure," 107-133, offers a list of nine postulates that affect the transformation of a society from a non-soteriological to a soteriological religion. These are: the promise of salvation appeals more to individualist that to collectivist societies; where a desire for salvation exists within a society, that society is predisposed to adopt a universal religion; the offer of salvation coupled with a community was the greatest appeal of Christianity in the later Roman Empire; the social structure and ideological currents of the declining Empire were in many ways inherently conducive to the promise of salvation offered by Christianity; societies where there is little desire for salvation are usually more interested in the temporal benefits of religion; Christianity was generally world-rejecting and Indo-European religion was generally world-accepting; the Germans were not desirous of salvation; and for Christianity to make inroads into Germanic culture when that culture did not desire salvation, it had to accommodate the world-accepting ethos of Germanic society.

[13] Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 84.

Christianity in terms of beliefs rather than visible externals such as institutions and rituals, as resulting in a qualitatively different social system from those of pre-modern cultures.[14] She argues, however, that moderns do not suffer any "absolute impoverishment of [their] private symbolic life,"[15] but only disaffection from public symbol systems.

In investigating the meanings of sacred trees in Pagan cultures, the issue of ritual is paramount, as the significance of particular trees was often expressed through rituals of communal importance. Rituals are, according to Victor Turner, "prescribed formal behaviors for occasions not given over to technological routines."[16] Such behaviours are often referred to as "sacred," in opposition to the profane everyday reality that Turner identifies as technological and routine. Rituals also concretise abstract concepts; they embody and perform communally held beliefs. Turner, further, notes that rituals and symbols unite two very different types of *significata*, ideological or related to social structures, and sensory or physiological.[17] "Sacredness" is a notoriously problematic concept, but one that is of great importance in the study of religion and spirituality. The sacred is generally understood in opposition to the profane or everyday. The early sociologist of religion Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and the phenomenologist and historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), though differing profoundly in their methodologies, both based much of their approach to the study of religion on the sacred/profane distinction.[18] Religion, it is argued, has a special, though not exclusive, relationship with the sacred. In pre-modern societies it has sometimes contentiously been claimed that all activities were sacred, that the taken-for-granted modern Western distinction between sacred and profane or sacred and secular simply did not exist.[19] This notion has implications for the study of myth, as it has also been asserted that mythic modes indicate closeness to the sacred. Broadly, myths are interpreted in modern scholarship according to various academic theories. These include historicism, allegory, psychoanalytic analysis, comparative mythology, and interpretations that view myth as being in a special relationship to ritual. This “myth-ritual” analysis has gained influence because it is able to absorb aspects of other approaches without losing sight of the specific cultural and historical context of the particular myths and rituals being analysed.[20]

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[14] Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 25 and 30.

[15] Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 152.

[16] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 19.

[17] Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 27-28.

[18] For Eliade see Douglas Allen, "Mircea Eliade's Phenomenological Analysis of Religious Experience," *The Journal of Religion* 52/ 2 (April 1972): 170-186. For Durkheim, see Tomoko Masuzawa, "The Sacred Difference in the Elementary Forms: On Durkheim's Last Quest," *Representations* 23 (Summer 1988): 25-50.

[19] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," *The Journal of Religion* 52/2 (April 1972): 139.

Mircea Eliade had a peculiarly romantic approach to the subject of the sacred, arguing consistently that technological modernity has resulted in alienation from the sacred for modern individuals, where in ancient cultures it was present in all aspects of life and was readily available to all. Recently it has become fashionable to criticise Eliade’s theoretical contribution to the study of religion. This is uncontroversial, in that academic discourses develop and change, often in response to socio-political conditions. Eliade is sometimes attacked in an *ad hominem* fashion for his right-wing politics but, more importantly, he is criticised for his promotion of an essentialist definition of religion as a *sui generis* category, and for his ahistorical and quasi-theological theoretical formulations.[21] However, any investigation of sacred trees cannot proceed freely without reference to Eliade and the employment of Eliadean categories. While it is necessary to exercise restraint, wholesale dismissal of his interpretations of the data is precipitate and unwise. As Hilda Ellis Davidson notes that “his work has been of great importance for the better understanding of symbols in early religion, and that the major symbols may be included in ritual, but are by no means wholly dependent on it … His work helps to explain the persistence of certain patterns hard to understand, and the long life of certain symbols in literature and art.”[22] Eliadean interpretations of sacred trees are most effective when they are grounded in extensive textual and archaeological evidence from the historical and geographical context under examination, which transforms them from being ahistorical and essentialist to being firmly rooted in the historical and particular.

The next section will introduce the repertoire of symbolic meanings that human societies have ascribed to trees. The variety represented is notable and the seriousness with which the meanings are understood gives the modern, Western secularist pause. Trees, as Maurice Bloch observes, are, for humans, "good to think with." Why might this be so? Bloch's explanation resonates with a multitude of twenty-first century discourses, including those of environmentalists, modern Pagans, and deep ecologists. He argues that the "symbolic power of trees comes from the fact that they are good substitutes for humans. Their substitutability is due to their being different, yet continuous with humans, in that they both share 'life'."[23] Contemporary ecologists unhesitatingly reject the anthropocentric Judeo-Christian model that places humans above and in control of the rest of nature, and assert that the only possible ethical sense of shared life must be based on the interrelatedness of humans with all nature.[24] This position superficially resembles the ancient, polytheistic apprehension of the natural world, but in fact is a distinctively modern construction informed by the devastation of the natural world through deforestation, industrial harnessing of natural resources, and the radical reduction in biodiversity that results. Ancient views of the world are stranger; in some cases more alienating, and yet much more fascinating.

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[20] Ken Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 34-35. Chapter 2, “How myths work: the theories,” is essential reading on this subject.

[21] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[22] Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 152.

The Sacred Tree as *Axis Mundi* and *Imago Mundi*

Bloch's position lends credibility to the argument that all parts of a tree, leaves and branches, trunk and roots, fruit, blossoms and sap, may be accorded sacredness. Further, the wood of sacred trees may be used to produce ritual objects, including statues, amulets and various receptacles.[25] However, comparative studies of sacred trees foreground two particularly important (and related) meanings ascribed to them. These are the tree as *axis mundi* ("'hub', or 'axis' of the universe"),[26] and the tree as *imago mundi* (representation of the world). Peter Chemery cautiously notes that there "seems no way to reconstruct the process whereby the tree came to represent both the cosmos and it (*sic*) cardinal axis," but is confident that this identification was an early stage in human religious development. It is also widespread; Australian Aboriginal ritual sites often feature a combination of trees, water and stones, and the occurrence of a stone altar and pillar "characterized sacred places throughout India and East Asia."[27] Both these models (the natural landscape and the constructed site) indicate that early humans placed value on the construction of scale models (or microcosms) of the world (the macrocosm), reduced or abstracted to its core elements, as ritual or sacred sites.

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[23] Maurice Bloch, "Why Trees, Too, Are Good to Think With: Towards an Anthropology of the Meaning of Life," in *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspective on Tree Symbolism*, ed. Laura Rival (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), 40.

[24] Roger S. Gottlieb, "The Transcendence of Justice and the Justice of Transcendence: Mysticism, Deep Ecology and Political Life," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67/1 (March 1999): 154-160.

[25] Pamela R. Frese and S. J. M. Gray, "Trees," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), Vol. 15, 26.

[26] Lawrence E. Sullivan, "Axis Mundi," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 2, 20.

The *axis mundi* is a centre, a pole that runs through the multiple levels of the universe, linking heaven, earth and the underworld. In addition to trees there are many other images and structures that can function as an *axis mundi*, for example temples (especially those deliberately built as "sacred mountains,"[28] such as Ta Keo and Pre Rup at Angkor, in Cambodia), mountains, cities, and ladders that extend through the worlds.[29] As such, the tree is a logical candidate for this role, and the pillar that may represent it is an abstraction from the living tree performing the same function. The sacredness of the tree as *axis mundi* may derive from its linking of the profane human region with the abodes of the gods and the dead.[30] Referring to Turner's criteria for ritual mentioned earlier in this chapter, the linking of the three levels of the cosmos corresponds to the ideological dimension, and it accords with the physical fact of the tree's roots reaching deep into the earth and its branches reaching to the sky.

The concept of the centre is vital to the significance of the tree as *axis mundi*. The altars and ritual sites referred to offer an important insight into the nature of the "centre." It is not unique; rather it is replicable, and its replication arises logically from the human need to identify otherwise indiscriminate territory and to inscribe upon it the lineaments of sacredness. Eliade takes the implication of this further, asserting that sacred places "reveal themselves" to humans, and that this is the repetition of the “primeval hierophany” or first apprehension of sacredness.[31] It is precisely this type of mystical, quasi-theological statement that motivates much of the criticism of Eliade, and it is undeniable that he appears to regard the sacred in an essentialist fashion, never questioning its reality nor situating it within a precise historical or sociological context.

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[27] Peter C. Chemery, "Vegetation," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 15, 244.

[28] Ian W. Mabbett, "The Symbolism of Mount Meru," *History of Religions* 23/1 (August 1983): 64-83.

[29] Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image*, with M. J. Abadie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), Vol. 2, 190.

[30] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard Trask (Harmondsworth: Penguin Arkana, 1989 [1964]), 117-118, and 125-126, describes shamanic ascents of sacred trees to access the spirit realm.

However, the elements of Eliade’s interpretation, or perhaps more accurately, his descriptive vocabulary (some places are accorded sacredness, human beings perform ritual actions which acknowledge that sacredness, replication of the sacred place occurs when new territory is conquered) can be used, as long as the necessary historicizing and situating of these unanchored factors takes place. The next section is an exposition of the emergence of meanings attached to sacred trees in the context of early Indo-European society, which utilises some Eliadean terminology, but avoids the atemporal focus and quasi-theological implications that he intended. With regard to making places sacred through ritual, repetition is the key again, as it appears that myth and ritual are intertwined in the social organization of early humans. Myths, meaning-making narratives which involve the gods and other supra-human significant beings, offer patterns for re-enactment within human society.

Mary Douglas, a sociologically oriented anthropologist, favours the view that “rites are prior and myths are secondary in the study of religion,”[32] and there is considerable support for her position that people performed certain actions before they articulated second-order interpretations of those actions. Robert Segal approvingly notes that, for Douglas, “ritual, and religion generally, serve to make a statement about human experience, not to make man feel better or act better. If ritual *is* a means to an end, the end is intellectual or, better, existential: the experience of an orderly world.”[33] But modern studies of oral cultures coming into contact with Western colonial powers have supplied intriguing cases where an idea, story or incident (functionally equivalent to a myth) has given rise to new rituals, which are then adopted by the community. Tony Swain has analysed the reactions to white settlement of Aboriginal Australians, and claims that exposure to both white Christian ideology and white physical presence (to recall Turner’s two *significata* that rituals aim to hold in balance) stimulated new indigenous conceptualisations and rituals which were developed in response to the whites. These included incorporation of the notion of a supreme being, a cargo-cult like emphasis on material goods such as the whites possessed, apocalyptic expectations that the whites would be expelled from the land, and new rituals (the *bora* ring grounds, the Mulunga cult, and other examples).[34]

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[31] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1996 [1958]), 368-369.

[32] Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 30.

[33] Robert Segal, “The Myth-Ritualist Theory of Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19/2 (June 1980): 182.

However, in many cases it is impossible to prove one way or another whether action or concept has primacy. The nature of the study of religion tends to favour the analysis of concepts, with ritual and action often functioning only as supporting evidence. In this study myths, rituals, folklore and comparative evidence will all be drawn upon to elucidate the meanings of sacred trees, as the concern is to provide the fullest possible account in the specific historical context of each case study. With the image of the tree as *axis mundi*, what is most important is the fact that ritually marking out a sacred space/place renders territory comprehensible and, further, clarifies how people fit into it. In a very clear statement, Anthony Winterbourne noted that:

> where one space (or time) is as good as any other, no space (or time) carries significance – and the world is deprived of meaning. This goes some way toward explaining why all territory previously unknown must be consecrated in some way, for such organizing of a space to some extent is a repetition, a re-enactment of the paradigmatic work of the gods. We find an echo of this in the Norse tradition whereby a piece of wood from an erstwhile dwelling was cast adrift from a boat, and the new dwelling built where the wood came ashore. Settling in a territory thus amounted to founding a world, and the new land would be provided with a religious or cultic focus just as the old one had had. There is no paradox in that the world might thus possess many such centers, for we are dealing here not with geometrical space, but with lived, sacred space. As such, this mythic view of space-time has a completely different structure that permits an infinite number of such breaks, and thus permits, also, an infinite number of links with the transcendent.[35]

The tree as *imago mundi*, the representation or the embodiment of the cosmos, is both a very ambitious and a seriously religiously profound conception. This is because of the persistent homology in Indo-European cultures between humans, the cosmos, and trees. It is logical that, if the sacred tree is the cosmos, other subsidiary meanings will be attached to it or be comprehended by it. These include the symbol of the tree of knowledge, which possibly derives from associations with deities or the putative presence of spirit beings living within the tree and conferring upon it oracular functions,[36] the tree of life and death (which connects through vegetative fertility with creation and bears within in it the potential for eschatology and the end of the world),[37] and the "family tree," in which the kinship structures of human beings are mapped onto the form of the tree.[38]

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[34] Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially Chapter 3, “A New Sky Hero From A Conquered Land,” 114-158.

[35] Anthony Winterbourne, *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 46.

The tree=human=world equation also results in myths that claim that trees were crucial in the creation of human beings, as well as in the creation of the universe. The *Elder* or *Poetic Edda*, a thirteenth century collection of poems constituting the major source for Scandinavian mythology, contains the poem *Völuspá* ("The Sybil's Prophecy"), in which the gods create human beings from two logs (or tree trunks) discovered on the shore:

> To the coast came, kind and mighty
> from the gathered gods three great Aesir;
> on the land they found, of little strength,
> Ask and Embla, unfated yet.[39]

Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth-century *Prose Edda*, a commentary on the myths and manual for aspiring poets, more plainly states "[a]s Bor's sons walked along the sea shore they came across two logs and created people out of them …"[40] The tree names are usually taken to mean "ash" and "elm," and the gods that animate them are Óðinn and his brothers Vili and Vé (or Hœnir and Lóðurr). There is an analogous myth in Ainu tradition, where God created human beings by selecting a "piece of wood to use as the spine and frame; the empty space was filled with earth."[41] A fascinating possible linguistic relationship, between the Greek *cosmos* (now signifying the physical world but originally signifying "order" or "pattern") and the Latin *quercus* (oak), may further reinforce this identity between the human, the tree and the universe.[42]

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[36] Chemery, "Vegetation," 244.

[37] Edwin O. James, "The Tree of Life," *Folklore* 79 (Winter 1968): 246.

[38] Claire Russell, "The Tree as a Kinship Symbol," *Folklore* 9/2 (1979): 222.

[39] Anon, *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), 3.

[40] Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed. and trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1987), 13.

[41] Y. T. Hosoi, "The Sacred Tree in Japanese Prehistory," *History of Religions* 16/2 (August 1976): 102.

Additionally, the tree often bears fruit that confers immortality, as with the golden apples of the Hesperides or the apples of Iðunn, the Scandinavian goddess (which keep the gods youthful, though not actually immortal);[43] or it provides the raw ingredients for a sacred and intoxicating drink. The most interesting example of this is the holy beverage *Haoma*, known from ancient Iranian ritual (and its Vedic counterpart *Soma*). In myth Soma/Haoma is a deity or "divine priest" as well as a plant, offering a precise example of the homology between anthropomorphic being and tree.[44] These conceptions of the sacred tree will be further supported by Indo-European evidence in the next section, where the important human-tree and human-cosmos identifications are explored through the analysis of cosmogonic myths that attribute the creation of the world to the sacrifice of a primordial being.

Introducing the Indo-European Cultural Matrix

As early as the beginning of the seventeenth century linguists had remarked on the affinities between the various language families of Europe, often employing religious terminology as a case study. Joseph Scaliger (1540-1609) utilised the words for "god" to identify four language groups, in which the "transparent relationship of what we today call the Romance languages was recognized in the *deus* group (for example, Latin *deus*, Italian *dio*, Spanish *dio*, French *dieu*), and contrasted with the Germanic *gott* (English *god*, Dutch *god*, Swedish *gud*, and so on); Greek *theos*; and Slavic *bog* (such as Russian *bog*, Polish *bog* and Czech *buh*)".[45] At the end of the eighteenth century, Sir William Jones decisively linked

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[42] Winterbourne, *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism*, 77.

[43] Thomas L. Markey, "Eurasian 'Apple' as Arboreal Unit and Item of Culture," *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 16/1-2 (1988): 60-61.

[44] Veronica Ions, *The World's Mythology* (London and New York; Hamlyn, 1974), 55. See also Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees* (Bombay: British India Press, 1922), 301-316, for a detailed description of the *Haoma* rituals and the complex mythology that underlies them.

[45] James P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 9-10.

Sanskrit and its modern Indian descendents with European languages; philologist Thomas Young coined the term “Indo-European” in 1813, and the “Indo-European hypothesis” was fully developed by the mid-nineteenth century.

The earliest written Indo-European languages are Hittite and Sanskrit, both attested from the second millennium BCE. However, linguists have sought to identify the original language from which all Indo-European daughter languages derived, and later archaeologists sought the original homeland from which the speakers of Proto-Indo-European ventured east and west to become a dominant social and political force. Both quests remain problematic, and at the start of the twenty-first century there are two major hypotheses that are academically supported. Julian Baldick describes the two sets of dates and two geographical regions:

> the homeland has been placed respectively in the Caucasus, in Turkey, and in the steppes of southern Russia. As for the period of the Proto-Indo-Europeans, it has been normal to put it around 4500 to 2500 BCE, though some … have recently proposed a much earlier dating, which would coincide with the Neolithic invention of agriculture and its spread from the Near East in the ninth millennium BCE to the fifth. Such a dating would have the Proto-Indo-Europeans setting out from the Caucasus or Turkey. The more conventional dating would put them first in the steppes to the north of the Black Sea, developing an increasingly inegalitarian warrior society in the fifth millennium, and then, from the end of that millennium to the end of the third, invading and colonizing other regions.[46]

To elucidate the sacred tree, the various words for different types of trees in Indo-European languages will be examined, as will myths and rituals recorded by those cultures that developed literacy (for example, Vedic India, ancient Greece and Rome), and by outside observers in the case of those cultures that did not (for example, the Celts and Germans, for whom literacy came with Christianity in the early Middle Ages).

The nature of Indo-European society, and the religion which characterised that society, are of great interest. The Indo-Europeans were semi-nomadic pastoralists, who amassed herds of sheep, goats, pigs, and, most importantly, cattle. Cattle were “the source of most foods, and the measure

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[46] Julian Baldick, *Homer and the Indo-Europeans: Comparing Mythologies* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1994), 5.