

SACRED GROVES AND HOLY TREES

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In the worldviews of the ancient and medieval Celts and Germans the divine was accessed through natural phenomena. The trees and water sources venerated by these peoples were in general associated with specific divinities. Trees were sacred to male deities and water sources to female. The Roman poet Lucan's *Pharsalia* testifies to the sacredness of the oak groves of the Druids, and many of the rivers of Europe bear the names of Celtic goddesses. Christianity had a different attitude concerning access to the divine, and medieval saints such as Boniface felled holy trees like the oak dedicated to Donar (or Thor) at Geismar in an effort to stamp out pagan superstition. This paper explores the importance of trees in Celtic and Germanic religion and mythology, and suggests ways in which this was preserved after the conversion to Christianity.

THEORY

The multifarious dimensions of meaning which may be ascribed to the tree have been elucidated by a number of theorists. Central to any understanding of this complex topic is an understanding 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".¹ In religious iconography symbols may have a multiplicity of meanings, but these meanings are not confused. They constitute a conceptual language which is capable of translating humans and human life-events into cosmological terms.²

The tree has, for Eliade, the following dimensions of meaning: in the combination of stone-tree-altar it constitutes an effective microcosm of the world; it may be an image of the cosmos; it is a symbol of life and fertility; it is the site of theophanies; it is the centre or support of the universe; it is a

symbol of resurrection; and it has a close relationship with humans.³ Claire Russell, a folklorist, has noted that the "family tree" as an image of kinship tends to be more than a metaphor, citing trees which represent family ties or which unite households throughout the world.⁴ Building upon Eliade's and Russell's tentative association of humans and trees, sociologist Mary Douglas in an examination of natural symbols has emphasised that there is always a social dimension when conceptualising the human body.⁵

This insight is vitally important with regards to the tendency of the late antique and early medieval Germans and Celts to associate trees with male deities. Snorri Sturluson, writing in Iceland in the thirteenth century CE, portrays the gods creating human beings from trees:

As Bor's sons walked along the sea shore they came across two logs and created people out of them... The man was called Ask [ash], the woman Embla [elder].⁶

The tree-names given to the people indicate their tree origin. The resemblance between humans and trees is also noted in the *New Testament*. When Jesus restores the sight of a blind man, he says "I can see people; they look like trees to me, but they are walking about".⁷ The dryads, classical Greek tree-spirits, may owe their existence to this resemblance between trees and people.

CLASSICAL EVIDENCE FOR GERMANIC AND CELTIC HOLY TREES

The ancient Celts and Germans were both Indo-European peoples, related by language, religion and culture more closely than to other Indo-European peoples such as the Greeks and Romans. However, most of our evidence for their beliefs comes from Greek and Latin texts, as the Celts and Germans were not literate. Two kinds of tree-veneration emerge from these sources: holy places which were groves of trees, very often oaks; and individual trees dedicated to gods, usually Jupiter or his Celtic or Germanic equivalent.

In the case of the Celts, the groves are holy places in which the priests of the tribe, the Druids, celebrate sacrifices for the benefit of the community. The term "druid" is believed to be derived from *dru* meaning "oak" and

wid, meaning "know". Many Classical authors refer to these sanctuaries: Tacitus notes that the Druids of Anglesey in what is now North Wales worshipped in oak groves; and "Strabo refers to a Celtic assembly place called 'Drunemeton' – a sacred grove, possibly of oaks, somewhere in Galatia".⁸ The most extensive and poetically eloquent description is in Lucan's epic poem, *Pharsalia*, which celebrates Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul. He writes:

He [Caesar] sent men in all directions to fell forest timber... The axe-men came on an ancient and sacred grove. Its interlacing branches enclosed a cool central space into which the sun never shone, but where an abundance of water sprouted from dark springs. Yet this was not the haunt of such innocent country deities as Pan, or Silvanus, or the nymphs: the barbaric gods worshipped there had their altars heaped with hideous offerings, and every tree was sprinkled with human blood. According to the local [Marseilles] tradition, no birds ventured to perch upon these trees; they were proof also against gales and lightning, and would shudder to themselves though no wind stirred. The images were stark, gloomy blocks of unworked timber, rotten with age, whose ghastly pallor terrified their devotees – quite another matter from our own rustic statues which are too familiar to cause alarm. Superstitious natives believed that the ground often shook, that groans rose from hidden caverns below, that yews were uprooted and miraculously replanted, and that sometimes serpents coiled around the oaks, which blazed with fire but did not burn. Nobody dared enter this grove except the priest; and even he kept out at midday, and between dawn and dusk – for fear that the gods might be abroad at such hours.⁹

Lucan's pro-Roman and anti-Celtic prejudices are obvious, but he still provides much valuable information. These sacred sanctuaries were penetrated only by Druids, and sacrifices (including humans) were offered there. Important for the argument concerning the balance of male and female symbolism is the fact that a spring bubbles in the grove. Water, for the ancient Celts a symbol of life and healing, and almost exclusively associated with female divinities, is present within the masculine grove of trees.¹⁰ This is further supported by Tacitus speaking of the sacred grove of the Semnones, a member group of the Germanic people, the Suebi. He describes a solemn ceremony which begins with a human sacrifice:

Reverence is paid to the grove. No one may enter it until he is bound by a cord. By this he acknowledges his own inferiority and the power of the deity. Should he chance to fall, he must not get up on his feet again. He must roll out over the ground. All this complex of superstition reflects the belief that in the grove the nation had its birth, and that there dwells the god who rules over all, while the rest of the world is subject to his sway.¹¹

Tacitus makes no mention of springs, but his comments about the grove being the birthplace of the nation, and the dwelling place of the "god who rules over all" are extremely suggestive. Who was this god? In the pantheons of the Greeks and Romans the chief god is clearly the deity referred to as the "sky-father" – Zeus for the Greeks, and Jupiter for the Romans. Other Indo-European cultures have a similar primacy for the sky god – the Vedic Indian deity Dyaus Pitar (etymologically identical to Zeus Pater and Jupiter) for instance. But the chief god of the Celts and the Germans is not the sky father, whose name has been hypothesised as Tiwaz Fader and who survives in the faded Scandinavian deity Tyr. Woden (Odin), the chief Germanic deity, is a god of war, chaos, death and sorcery, and is usually identified with Mercury in Classical sources; and Lugh, chief god of the Celts, is similarly identified with Mercury, though he is a more attractive deity than Odin.¹² Zeus and Jupiter have the lightning bolt as their weapon, and the god which has a similar weapon in Germanic mythology is Thor (Thunor, Donar) with his thunderbolt. Lucan mentions the peoples' belief that within and around the grove the ground often shook, perhaps indicating the presence of a thunder god also.

When looking at individual sacred trees rather than groves, the best evidence tends to be more from the medieval period, rather than antiquity. However, one type of archaeological item deserves comment. These are the Jupiter columns, of which there are about one hundred and fifty recorded examples, mostly in the Rhineland and eastern Gaul. These are constructed monuments which apparently substitute for holy trees:

... they each consist of four- and eight-sided base carved with figures of gods (generally connected with sun, moon and planets) and inscribed with dedications to Jupiter or his consort Juno. On the top of the eight-sided plinth is a tall pillar, often decorated with foliage-like patterns as if to represent a tree; this in turn is topped by a Corinthian capital. It is at the summit of the column that the sky-horseman rides.¹³

Nora Chadwick observes that Maximus Tyrius, writing in the second century AD, said that "the Celtic image of Zeus is a lofty oak",¹⁴ and when considering the medieval evidence it emerges that the sacred trees are

primarily dedicated to Thor, who is explicitly identified as Jupiter. The trees are dedicated to a male deity, which is one reason for regarding them as male symbols. Extrapolating to Indian religion, we find trees functioning there as male symbols in the ritual of tree-marriage, where barren wives go through a second marriage ritual, performed by a Brahmin, with a tree (usually a pipal, associated with the worship of Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi) standing in for groom. Here the tree's role as source of masculine power and as symbolic penis is readily apparent.¹⁵

CHRISTIANITY ENCOUNTERS HOLY TREES

Christianity, a form of monotheism derived from Judaism, spread throughout the Greco-Roman world. Constantine, emperor from 312-337 CE, showed favour to the new religion, being baptised upon his deathbed. Christianity was a missionary religion, and sought to win converts from all peoples. The Roman world changed dramatically between the third and sixth centuries, with "barbarians" (chiefly Germans and Asians) invading and founding kingdoms within the boundaries of the Empire. The polytheistic barbarians were evangelised from the fourth century onwards by missionaries who were acting as agents both of Christianity and of *Romanitas*, aiming to "civilise" as well as convert.

The first missionary recorded as encountering a holy tree was the late fourth century bishop of Tours, Martin. Christianity was not in general tolerant of the religious beliefs and ceremonies of non-Christians, and enthusiastically demolished temples and broke images of the gods – often winning the admiration of the pagans, who were surprised by their gods' failure to punish this sacrilege and generally concluded that the Christian god was more powerful. On one occasion Martin had demolished a temple and was preparing to cut down a sacred tree when the audience dared him to stand under it as it fell. He did so but averted being killed by the making the sign of the cross. His hagiographer, Sulpicius Severus, describes the scene:

Then indeed a shout went up to Heaven as the pagans gasped at the miracle, and all with one accord acclaimed the name of Christ; you may be sure that on that day

salvation came to that region. Indeed, there was hardly anyone in that vast multitude of pagans who did not ask for the imposition of hands, abandoning his heathenish errors and making profession of faith in the Lord Jesus.¹⁶

This pattern was to be repeated in the lives of later Christian missionary saints such as Willibrord of Utrecht. They had nothing to lose in such testing situations as they did not believe in the power of the pagan gods, and therefore had no fear that their desecration of cult objects would be punished; and they had the souls of potential converts to concentrate on.

The most famous fellings of sacred trees happen in the Carolingian Empire during the eighth century CE. The English missionary Boniface, working in Germany, came across a sacred oak at Geismar which was dedicated to Donar (Thor). Willibrord, the biographer of Boniface, had almost certainly read Sulpicius, and there is a question about the degree of influence that text had on his account of Boniface's cutting down the Geismar oak: "At the sight of this extraordinary spectacle the heathens who had been cursing ceased to revile and began, on the contrary, to believe and bless the Lord."¹⁷ Boniface used the timber from the oak to build a church, which became the core of his second monastic foundation at Fritzlar. This use for the timbers of the sacred oak was acceptable within Christianity: Saint Patrick had erected a church within the old druidic grove of Fochloth, re-dedicating the sanctuary.¹⁸ Charlemagne, the Carolingian emperor, felled a sacred tree at Eresburg, and later on he destroyed the Irminsul, a Saxon object of worship related to trees. Ruth Mazo Karras states that this was a pillar or column, and notes that the medieval scholar Rudolf of Fulda "says it was made from a tree trunk and defines Irminsul as 'universal column, as if upholding all things'".¹⁹ Ellis Davidson notes that "Irmin" was believed to be the name of another sky god, possibly an alternative title for Thor.²⁰

Can it fairly be said that the medieval Celts and Germans held the same beliefs about sacred trees as their Classical forebears did? Ellis Davidson believes that the connection between the thunder god and the oak tree was retained even when there were no trees: in Iceland, a bare land where trees do not grow to any great height due to violent winds, Thor was worshipped in temples which contained pillars, which she believes are derived from the traditional tree. She further elucidates the relationship of the thunder god

and the oak tree by referring to the tendency for oaks to be struck by lightning, and the dramatic spectacle of the power of the god which results.²¹ The description of the Irminsul indicates a further role for the holy tree, functioning as the support and centre of the physical universe. This is found explicitly in Scandinavian mythology, where the great ash tree Yggdrasil ("the steed of Ygg" – one of the names of Odin) extends its roots and branches into all nine worlds. This tree, moreover, has three sacred wells at its roots, reiterating the connection with the water source, which Eliade sees as the source of all life and which is frequently associated with fertility and healing, principally in terms of female power.²²

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE TREE IN CHRISTIANITY

Medieval Christian Celtic and Germanic converts were reluctant to give up their sacred trees, and there is much evidence that at the level of popular piety and folklore many pagan practices continued unchecked. Charlemagne issued a legal document called the *Capitulatio de Partibus Saxoniae* somewhere between 755 and 790 CE, which speaks of harsh penalties for continuing tree and well worship in conquered Saxony. However, Archbishop Unwan of Hamburg was still combating tree worship in the eleventh century, according to Adam of Bremen, the chronicler of the archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen; and he built the Basilica of St Vitus on the site of a sacred grove, intending to do as Patrick had done – to appropriate the sacredness of the old religion for the new.

This appropriation had been approved by the great evangelising Pope Gregory I, who wrote in a letter to Mellitus, a missionary working in England, in 601 CE:

However, when Almighty God has brought you to our most reverend brother Bishop Augustine, tell him what I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, namely that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God. When the people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognising and worshipping the true God. And because they are in the habit of

slaughtering much cattle as sacrifices to devils, some solemnity ought to be given them in exchange for this. So on the day of the dedication or the festivals of the holy martyrs, whose relics are deposited there, let them make themselves huts from the branches of trees around the churches which have been converted out of shrines, and let them celebrate the solemnity with religious feasts. Do not let them sacrifice animals to the devil, but let them slaughter animals for their own food to the praise of God, and let them give thanks to the Giver of all things for his bountiful provision. Thus while some outward rejoicings are preserved, they will be able more easily to share in inward rejoicings. It is doubtless impossible to cut out everything at once from their stubborn minds: just as the man who is attempting to climb to the highest place, rises by steps and degrees and not by leaps.²³

Such a program ensured that the Christianity which took root in Anglo-Saxon England was distinctively Germanic in character, as was the case in all the Germanic conversions. Doubtless Pope Gregory did not intend that the doctrines of the two religions become intermingled, only that the externals be utilised to facilitate a smooth transition. Form and content are not so easily separable, however, and form sometimes determines content.

That being said, there are very few holy trees which persist within a Christian framework. The most famous is the Glastonbury Thorn, which according to legend is the staff of Joseph of Arimathea, which took root and flowered. But there are Christian practices which are possibly derived from the veneration of holy trees. Trees had long been used as meeting and assembly places, and Bede tells how Augustine of Canterbury met with the leaders of the British Church at a place known as Augustine's Oak. In Anglo-Saxon England the erection of standing crosses marked localities and meeting places, and is one possible survival of the holy tree, especially as the original crosses such as that erected by King Oswald of Northumbria to commemorate his victory over a heathen army at Heavenfield, were wooden.²⁴ Later, the crosses were of stone, like the elaborately carved Gosforth, Ruthwell, Irton and Bewcastle Crosses.²⁵ These were often decorated with plant motifs, recalling the "tree-like" carvings on the Jupiter columns.

The Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood* explicitly refers to the cross on which Jesus died as a tree:

It seemed I saw a wondrous tree
soaring into the air...
Wondrous was the tree of victory, and I was stained
by sin.... the tree of the Ruler

was rightly adorned with rich stones...
He who suffered once for the sins of men
here on earth on the gallows tree....²⁶

This poem has sometimes been considered to have had a pagan prototype, perhaps concerning the death of the god of goodness and justice, Balder. However, the reference to the "gallows tree" calls to mind the sacrifice of Odin, being hanged and run through with a spear, on the world-tree Yggdrasil. Odin, though dark and untrustworthy, was often identified with Jesus because he too had died and risen while hanging on a tree. In Scandinavia the rough-hewn gods made from tree trunks (referred to with such loathing by Lucan) were often housed within churches, and it was not till the seventeenth century that they were removed. Ellis Davidson records that people took them home and continued to make them offerings.²⁷ However, in general the masculine symbol of the holy tree and its associated manifestations did not persist within Christianity to any great degree.

HOLY WELLS

Holy wells persisted within Christianity, but proved less problematic than sacred trees. The power of the healing female divinity was reassigned to saints and to the Virgin Mary, and there are still many holy wells visited by Christian faithful to this day. These include Holywell in Flint, North Wales which is dedicated to Saint Winifred, and Walsingham in England, a shrine of the Virgin Mary, which are both particularly associated with fertility and healing. Many of these saints, such as the Irish Brigit, are translated pagan deities which contributed to the ritual continuity.

The reason for the Christian acceptance of holy wells and water sources is not conclusively determined, but it seems likely that the centrality of the ritual of baptism to the Christian community. Baptism utilises water which embodies many ideas: "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".²⁸ This symbolism led to the missionaries appropriating the sacred water sites of the old religion, as Pope Gregory had advised

reconsecrating the temples. This ensured that the sacred water sites retained their positive connotations into the Christian era.

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