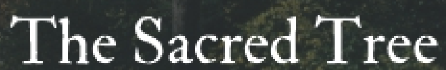

The Sacred Tree

Ancient and Medieval Manifestations

By CAROLE M. CUSACK

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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

[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.

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]

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

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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.

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.

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

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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.

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]

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

[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).

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.

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

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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.

embodiment of the totality of the cosmos, results in its centrality in polytheistic religious, political and social organization.[3]

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

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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.

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.

"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

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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.

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.

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]

[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

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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.

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]

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

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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.

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.

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

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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.

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.

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

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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.

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.

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

[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.

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]

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

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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.

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]

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

[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.

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]

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.

of wealth."[47] Warfare, waged with mounted warriors and horse-drawn chariots, was the prestige activity of the male nobility, and raids on neighbouring people to steal cattle and women were frequent in times of peace. Some agriculture was known in Indo-European societies, but it was less important and less prestigious than pastoralism or war. In addition to war chariots, the Indo-European metalworkers produced sophisticated weapons of war and jewellery for personal adornment.

Although it is not central to this study, mention must be made of Georges Dumézil's influential comparative researches into Indo-European mythology, which began with the publication in 1924 of *La festin d'immortalité*,[48] his doctoral thesis, which asserted that "there was a common set of Indo-European myths concerning the personification of immortality as an intoxicating drink."[49] This work discussed the Soma/ Haoma mythology and ritual referred to above.[50] From 1938 until his death in 1996 Dumézil worked to articulate a coherent sociology of the Indo-Europeans, arguing that the defining characteristic of their society was the division into three social classes (priests, warriors and agriculturalists), and the "tripartite ideology" which was mapped onto all aspects of the world, both natural and social. Stefan Arvidsson explains that for Dumézil:

> [t]he three different "functions" in the tripartite structure appeared … in the social organization as well as in the pantheon of the Indo-Europeans. In the *Vedas*, for example, Dumézil found traces of the three positions: farmers and artisans (*vaisyas*), warriors (*ksatriyas*), and priests (*brahmanas*) and corresponding divinities: the Gods of production (Nasatyas), the God of War (Indra) and the Gods of Sovereignty (Mitra-Varuna).[51]

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[47] Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3.
[48] Hilda Ellis Davidson, "Obituary: Georges Dumézil, 1898-1986," *Folklore* 98/1 (1987): 106.
[49] Baldick, *Homer and the Indo-Europeans*, 20.
[50] In Scandinavian myth, the figure of Kvasir, who is both a divine being (formed from the gods' spittle after a truce) and an intoxicating drink consumed by Óðinn (after Kvasir is murdered), partially parallels Soma/Haoma (though he is not made from the juice of a plant). See Stephen A. Mitchell, "Performance and Norse Poetry: The Hydromel of Praise and the Effluvia of Scorn," *Oral Tradition* 16/1 (2001): 173-175.
[51] Stefan Arvidsson, "Aryan Mythology as Science and Ideology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67/2 (1999): 348.

Thus, the highest position in Indo-European society was occupied by the priestly class, which theoretically outranked even the king. Vedic India had *brahmins*, ancient Persia the *magi*, the Celts had *druids*, and the Romans *flamines*.

In the religion that these priests served, the basic word for "god," Proto-Indo-European **deiwos* meant "celestial, luminous, radiant,"[52] and their cosmic picture located the gods in the diurnal sky, associating them with the heavenly bodies, planets and stars. The gods are also consistently referred to as "immortals," in contrast with humans who are defined by their mortality. We should note "the relation of the Latin *homo*, 'man,' and *humus*, 'soil;' humans are identified as terrestrial beings." [53] The dead are located in the underworld. The three-tier cosmos with the sacred tree as *axis mundi* can thus be identified in early sources. The importance of a number of deities can be reconstructed from linguistic evidence. These include a sky-father **Dyeus*, a sun god **Swel*, a dawn goddess **Ausos*, a fire god **Egni*, a water god **Nepto-no*, and a storm god, with several names deriving from the verb **per* (meaning "to strike").[54] All these deities are personified natural phenomena, which is logical if religion is understood as a human social product, concerning human responses to the experience of life, of being-in-the-body and of interaction with the natural environment.

The Indo-Europeans were fascinated by the origins of the world, and they constantly re-created their version of creation through ritual and symbol. Bruce Lincoln has reconstructed their creation myth as "a complex, polyphonic story" in which the first priest sacrificed both his twin brother and the first ox. He then made the physical universe from the body of the slaughtered twin, establishing the man/ microcosm is to world/ macrocosm pattern that is found consistently in the mythologies of the Indo-European daughter cultures. The twins often bear the names Manu (man) and Yemo (twin). The Indian redaction of this myth is found in the hymn, "Song of Purusha," in the *Rig Veda*:

> When they divided Purusha, how many pieces did they prepare?
> What was his mouth? What are his arms, thighs and feet called?
> The priest was his mouth, the warrior was made from his arms;

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[52] Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice*, 5.
[53] Bruce Lincoln, "Indo-European Religions: An Overview." In *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Vol. 7, 198.
[54] Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice*, 6.

His thighs were the commoner, and the servant was born from his feet.
The moon was born of his mind; of his eye, the sun was born;
From his mouth Indra and fire; from his breath, wind was born;
From his navel there was the atmosphere; from his head, heaven was rolled together;
From his feet the earth; from his ears the directions.[55]

This myth is also found in other cultures, widely distributed across geography and history: for example, two thirteenth-century sources, the Old Russian *Poem of the Dove King* (*Stic o golubinoj knig'*) and the Icelandic *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson contain reflexes of it; as do the Frisian *Code of Emsig*; and the medieval Irish *Lebor Gebala Erenn* ("Book of the Taking of Ireland"), which may date to rather earlier, around the tenth or eleventh century CE. All these texts are preserved within Christian cultures, making them even more remarkable.

This myth makes explicit the connection between creation and sacrifice, and the bringing of order (the original meaning of the Greek word *cosmos*) out of chaos. Sacrifice became the most important ritual in Indo-European societies, because it was the re-enactment of the primordial act of creation, which had first been performed by the gods. The evidence of the *Vedas* suggests the most serious and cosmically significant sacrifice was that of a human being (*purushasamedha*), closely followed by that of a horse (*asvamedha*). Similar rituals are attested to some extent in other Indo-European cultures (for example, the Roman rite of the October Equus[56] and the human sacrifices required by the Rhineland Mercury and the trio of Gaulish gods, Esus, Taranis and Teutates).[57] Interestingly, Jaan Puhvel has suggested that human sacrifice and horse sacrifice are essentially identical in that humans are sacrificed only in times of crisis (usually military crisis), otherwise they are substituted by horses.[58] This produces a homology between human and horse that has implications for the sacred tree, which will be discussed below. Through sacrifice, priests could re-create the world and people could participate in the divine renewal. So, as was argued earlier, rituals resemble symbols in that they

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[55] Lincoln, "Indo-European Religions: An Overview," 199.
[56] C. Bennett Pascal, "October Horse," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 85 (1981): 261-291.
[57] Jaan Puhvel, "Victimal Hierarchies in Indo-European Animal Sacrifice," *The American Journal of Philology* 99/3 (Autumn 1978): 354-362.
[58] Puhvel, "Victimal Hierarchies in Indo-European Animal Sacrifice," 354-355.

draw humans into the sacred realm by employing homologies between sacrificial victim and cosmos, sacrifice and creation, and so on.[59]

The structure of society, moreover, is also derived from the human body. The "Hymn of Purusha" identifies the priestly class with the head, the seat of cognition; the warriors with the chest and arms, which exemplify strength; while the farmers and artisans are identified with the thighs, which are both strong and able to perform hard labour, and have sexual connotations, which connects to the need for fertility in crops, herds and humans. This bears out Douglas's claim that the human body is the basic model for any system developed in pre-modern societies, and James P. Mallory and Douglas Q. Adams note that, "in addition, just as the legs support the body, the herding-cultivating class is seen to support the higher social divisions of their own society," extending the aptness of the homology.[60]

Indo-European cosmology, derived as it is from the model of the human body, exhibits a clear division of the world into a dominant right and a recessive left, which probably reflects the fact that biological right-handedness predominates among humans. "Right" has positive connotations and is associated with strength and masculinity; "left" has negative connotations and is associated with weakness and femininity. From the individual human body, this classificatory system extends to positioning in the universe, resulting in value judgements being assigned to the four cardinal directions. Mallory and Adams explain as follows:

> lexical evidence makes it clear that in IE culture one quite literally "oriented" oneself by facing the sun. In doing so one faced the rising sun in the east and hence the north would be on one's left side while the propitious right side faced south. This can be seen, for example, in Celtic (OIr *dess* "right; south", Wels *dehau* "right; south", and OInd *daksina* "right; south". Terms for north, however, are built on words for "left", e.g., OIr *focla* "north" from *cle* "left; sinister, unpropitious", Wels *gogledd* "north" from *cledd* "left"; the Germanic words for "north" (ON *norðr*, OE *norþ*, OHG *norðan*) but Umb *nertru* "left".[61]

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[59] Emily B. Lyle, "Dumézil's Three Functions and Indo-European Cosmic Structure," *History of Religions* 22/1 (1982): 26.
[60] James P. Mallory and Douglas Q. Adams, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture* (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), 129.
[61] Mallory and Adams, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, 131.

This type of orientation is very nearly universal in the form of relative directions. The three most common relative (to the human person) directions are left and right, forward and backward, and up and down (where each pair is orthogonal to the other two). Thus it can be seen that the human body provides a model of the universe, which renders it intelligible and amenable to categorization, much in the way that the rituals to establish sacred centres discussed above make as yet unclassified terrain familiar, and render it able to be incorporated into existing *schemata*.

Sacred Trees in Indo-European Cultures

Linguists reconstructing the hypothetical language known as "Proto-Indo-European" have stressed the existence of a large number of tree and plant names that are able to be reconstructed. Trees known to the Indo-Europeans include the elm, alder, beech, birch, and hazel, and the chief "sacred trees," the oak, the yew, and the ash. More importantly, the word **nemes*, meaning "sacred grove" and possibly deriving from a root word **nem-* meaning "to bow, to reverence," is attested through actual cognates such as the Old Irish *nemed*, Old Saxon *nimidas*, and Latin *nemus*, pointing to groves of trees being of religious significance from late antiquity at least. Mallory and Adams refer to extensive evidence of the religious symbolism of trees:

> we have to infer that the sacred groves in question consisted in large part of oak trees, bearing, of course, acorns and hung with mistletoe. There are frequent references to sacred groves … we also have Celtic place-names with the element "grove" from Britain, *Aquae Arnemetiae*, to the sacred oak grove of the Galatians of Asia Minor at *Drunemeton*, while Tacitus describes both the sacred groves of the defiant druids on Anglesey as well as the sacred grove of the Germanic Semnones who believed their sacred grove to be the birthplace of their tribe and home of their highest god.[62]

The function of sacred groves is slightly different from that of individual holy trees or pillar monuments, in that the *axis mundi* function is diminished, but the cosmological function is correspondingly enhanced. Tacitus' description of the grove of the Semnones, which will be analysed in Chapter 4, clearly links the trees, a water source, the "highest god" to whom the people are bound, and the origin of the nation, in a complex, multi-layered cosmological formation.

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[62] Mallory and Adams, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, 248.

The sacred tree as *axis mundi* connects with the cosmological directions discussed above, and the three-tiered universe of heavens, earth and underworld is also well-represented in Indo-European texts. The importance of the number three cannot be underestimated, and although there are reservations that may be expressed about the total picture painted by Georges Dumezil, his emphasis on three-fold divisions or classifications within Indo-European cultures is undisputed.[63] The priestly class is associated with the diurnal sky (**dyew*), the colour white (for light and brightness) and the benevolent gods of that sky; the warrior class is associated with the dawn and twilight skies (**regwos*), the colour red, and the transitional deities of that sky; and the agricultural class is associated with the night sky, the colour black, and with the underworld deities (whose names connect with **ansu*, "breath," which in the earliest *upanishads*, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and the *Chandogya Upanishad*, is identified as the crucial distinguishing feature between life and death).

It is fascinating to trace through Indian, Greek, Germanic and Celtic mythology (and other Indo-European corpuses) the division of the gods into two parties. Jean Haudry established that these opposed groups of deities were originally associated with either the nocturnal or the diurnal skies. This can be seen in the names they bear; the names in Vedic religion are the *devas* and the *asuras*; in ancient Iranian religion they are the *daevas* and the *ahuras*; there are also the Lithuanian *dievas*, the Latin word for "god" *deus* and the Scandinavia Æesir, attesting to the persistence of this basic division. Haudry further maintains that the oldest Indo-European cosmology was one in which "the earth was situated in the middle of the world and surrounded by three turning skies, a black one… the white diurnal sky… and a red one: the twilight sky."[64] He explains how this model, revolving around the *axis mundi*, gave rise to social structures and an understanding of time that reflects the three skies:

> [w]e can now understand why the unities of time are homologous: in circumpolar countries, the year actually is homologous to the day; the year consists of a black winter night (a dangerous period), a series of red dawns

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[63] Bruce Lincoln, "Rewriting the German War God: Georges Dumézil, Politics and Scholarship in the Late 1930s," *History of Religions* 37/3 (February 1988): 187-208.

[64] Jean Haudry, "The cosmic religion of the Indo-Europeans," in *Languages and Cultures: Studies in Honor of Edgar C. Polome*, eds Mohammad Ali Jazayery and Werner Winter (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 227.

> and a long white (bright) day. It was natural that the cosmic cycle should have been built on that pattern.[65]

In summary, Indo-European models of the cosmos all feature the *axis mundi*, around which the three-tier universe revolves. The tree is a pervasive image of the *axis mundi*, partly because of the analogous relationship between trees and anthropomorphic beings that is posited in the Indo-European worldview. This extends further, in that the widely authenticated myth of creation within the cultural matrix posits that the physical universe was created from the body of a primordial man, who was sacrificed along with an ox (or other representative bovine) by the first priest. This creation narrative buttresses the Indo-European equation of tree=human=world which, although profoundly alien to moderns whose understanding of the structure and nature of the universe is radically different, can be seen to be a logical and consistent derivation which reinforced both their social organization and the religious content of their mythology.

Further Meanings of the Indo-European Sacred Tree

Cultures do not originate or develop in a vacuum, and at the time of the Indo-European expansion and bid for dominance, the two most significant civilisations were ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. These two cultures had pioneered both agriculture and urbanisation, and an examination of their religion and mythology reveals affinities with the Indo-Europeans where the sacred tree is concerned. In particular, Mesopotamia had several dying and rising deities that were identified with vegetation (such as Baal and Tammuz) and the motif of the tree of life featured frequently in iconography, usually as a date palm.[66] The ancient poem, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (existing in multiple versions in several Mesopotamian languages, including Akkadian and Babylonian), tells of how the hero Gilgamesh and his dear friend Enkidu raided the cedar forests of Lebanon and angered the forest guardian, Humbaba.[67] In the Mesopotamian paradise, Dilmun, which is analogous the better-known Eden of the Biblical tradition, the god of wisdom and the watery depths, Enki, planted a Tree of Life, which was protected by the gods Shamash and Tammuz (paralleling the angel with a fiery sword).[68]

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[65] Haudry, "The cosmic religion of the Indo-Europeans," 232.
[66] Ions, *The World's Mythology*, 23.
[67] N. K. Sandars (ed.), *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).
[68] James, "The Tree of Life," 242.

Religious texts from India in the main support the classic Indo-European creation myth of the sacrifice of the primeval man that results in the creation of the world. There are, however, in this very varied and often contradictory tradition,[69] alternative creation stories and images of the sacred tree. The *Atharva Veda*, one of the four oldest texts (with the *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda* and *Yajur Veda*) presents the view that the Vedic sky god, Varuna, when resting among the primal waters, generated the cosmos when the cosmic tree grew from his navel (paralleling the way that the umbilical cord connects the developing foetus to the body of its mother).[70] This myth is important because it foregrounds connections with the primordial waters (which is suggested by the Mesopotamian god Enki, by the existence of a stream or well at the root of the cosmic tree in many mythological systems, and by the presence of water in microcosms of the universe constructed as ritual centres).[71]

Because Indian tradition is far from monolithic, there are other references to the sacred tree, that foreground different functions and meanings. One of these is the image of the inverted world-tree, with its roots above, and branches with leaves below. The *Katha Upanishad* states:

> Root above, branches below: this primal fig-tree!
> Pure indeed is the root: it is *Brahman*, known as the Immortal.
> In it rests all the worlds:
> No one soever goes beyond it.
> All this, verily, is that tree.[72]

The Indian tradition derived complex philosophies from myths and poetic texts, and the inverted tree, or *asvattha*, can be identified with *samsara* or the wheel of birth, death and rebirth which humans seek to slough off by following various paths to liberation, or *moksha*. Thus, as Edwin James notes, the tree of life is not coded positively in post-upanishadic India, but "complete severance from it has become the aim with the aid of the sacred

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[69] See Roberto Calasso, *Ka* (Milano: Adelphi, 1996) for a modern retelling of Indian mythology, where the inconsistencies and multiple possible beginnings and endings are treated with elegant playfulness.

[70] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas: Essays on the Water Cosmology* (Washington: Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, 1928), 25-26.

[71] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy also cautiously argues for a possible historico-cultural relation between this image and the Biblical Tree of Jesse. See "The Tree of Jesse and Indian Parallels or Sources," *The Art Bulletin* 11/2 (June 1929): 216-220.

[72] Quoted in Campbell, *The Mythic Image*, Vol. 2, 192.

knowledge of the Veda."[73]

More relevant to the argument of this chapter is another myth that attributes a key role to the god Indra, who comes into being from outside the primordial order, which is associated with the *asuras* (the negative deities, contrasted with the positively-coded *devas*). In the world of humans, Indra acts as a demiurge or secondary creator, defeating the serpent or dragon Vritra in order to anchor the primordial hill which is still floating freely on the waters.[74] After it has been fastened it becomes the *axis mundi*; Indra similarly parallels the cosmic tree. Until this point in the creation, the sky has been lying flat upon the earth. Indra here functions as a cosmic pillar, holding up the sky. In other words, he is the cosmic tree (or pillar). Curiously, he is not generally associated with the world tree. Kuiper asserts that this identification is relevant only at creation. This is supported by a ritual, in which there is the erection:

> during the New Year's festival, [of] a pole in honor of Indra. Its most interesting feature is that, during the few days that it stood erected and was worshipped, it was considered to be identical with the god Indra and was sometimes denoted by his name … after some seven days the pole was pulled down, taken away, and thrown into a river, which would not have been possible unless the function of the god himself, whose name it bore, had for the time being come to an end. This … confirms the conclusion drawn from the Vedic evidence that Indra was a seasonal god, whose mythological act consisted in creating and renewing the world and inaugurating a new year.[75]

This fascinating evidence suggests that Indra's festival resembles the Indo-European human sacrifice, in that it is a ritual which renews the world by replicating the creation (albeit a slightly different version of the creation myth). Further, Indra's conquest is of a serpentine being, which reinforces the connection of the sacred tree with a serpent or dragon that lives among its roots.[76]

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[73] Edwin O. James, *The Tree of Life: An Archaeological Study* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), 149.
[74] F. B. J. Kuiper, "The Basic Concept of Vedic Religion," *History of Religions* 15/2 (November 1975): 109-110.
[75] Kuiper, "The Basic Concept of Vedic Religion," 111.
[76] Boris Oguibénine, "Cosmic Tree in Vedic and Tamil Mythology: Contrastive Analysis," *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 12/3-4 (Fall/Winter 1984), 372 furthers this analysis by arguing that Vritra is permanently associated with the

It was earlier noted that human being and horse as sacrificial victims were regarded as identical. This has implications for the tree=human equation, in that if human=horse then surely tree=horse must also be the case? Indian and Scandinavian sources offer some intriguing, though quite fragmentary, evidence on this topic. The Indian religious tradition comprises texts composed over more than a millennium, with contradictory narratives, and a related tradition of philosophical interpretation that often derives very different meanings from the same primary texts. The cosmic tree in the Indian tradition is called the *asvattha*, and its nature is variable, depending on the text being examined. The *Taittiriya Brahmana* explains that the tree "is called *asvattha* because *Agni* [god of fire] or *Yajna-Prajapati* [the Lord of Creatures] fell from the sphere of the gods… during the *pitryana* (i.e. the path of the fathers), and taking the form of a horse (*asva*) remained invisible in it for a year."[77] The cosmic tree also is discussed in the *Katha Upanishad* and the *Bhagavadgita*. The cosmic tree in the *Katha Upanishad*, cited above, is identified with the creator god Brahman and the physical universe, which broadly supports the homologies posited in this chapter.[78]

However, the tree is also a horse (*hippodendron*), as the *Taittiriya Brahmana* makes clear. The Scandinavian cosmic tree is called "Yggdrasil," which literally means "the steed of Ygg," which is one of the names of the sovereign deity Óðinn.[79] Óðinn sacrifices himself by hanging from Yggdrasill, which adds another dimension to how the tree might be ridden and regarded as a horse. Interestingly, there are other similarities between Yggdrasill and the Vedic *asvattha*: both have serpentine creatures living at root level (the dragon Niðhöggr and a nest of serpents). This association is found among other sacred trees; the tree of the Hesperides in Greek mythology is guarded by a serpent, and a great cobra called Muchalinda lives within the Buddhist *bo*-tree.[80] A final significant similarity between Yggdrasill and the *asvattha* is that both trees are associated with destruction and dread. Yggdrasill's fall during Ragnarok (the "doom of the

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cosmic tree/mountain, whereas Indra has only a temporary association with the centre.

[77] John G. Arapura, "The Upside Down tree of the *Bhagavadgita*, Ch. XV," *Numen* 22/2 (1975): 132-133.

[78] Arapura, "The Upside Down Tree of the *Bhagavadgita*, Ch. XV," 135.

[79] Robert Graves (ed.), *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (London and New York: Paul Hamlyn, 1968 [1959]), 251.

[80] Winterbourne, *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism*, 35.

gods") is a fearful portent, and John Arapura comments that "the tree of the cosmos is… also fearful – not an object of comfort but of dread."[81] The horse=tree equation is not supported by extensive evidence, but is a suggestive aspect of the sacred tree that must be noted.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the sacred tree is a vitally important symbol for pre-modern cultures, particularly those belonging to the Indo-European cultural matrix. The meanings of the sacred tree are inextricable from the social organization that both generated them and re-absorbed them through participation in religious *praxis*. The range of meanings comprehended by the sacred tree is extensive, but in this study the concentration is on the symbol of the tree as *axis mundi* and *imago mundi*, as both the centre of the world and the representation of the cosmos. These meanings are dependent on homologies between the tree, the human person (and, to a lesser extent, the horse), and the world. Fundamental to this relationship is the common Indo-European creation myth, where the cosmos comes into being after the sacrifice by the first priest of his twin and an ox (or other representative bovine).

The tree as *axis mundi*, the centre that links the three-level universe, is intimately linked to the tree as *imago mundi*. The significance of tree-like monuments, such as pillars, is here seen to be derivative from the tree and broadly similar in kind. Crucially, the worldview of the Indo-Europeans is world-affirming and has a poorly-developed concept of a spiritual otherworld. Less central, though still valuable and informative, subsidiary meanings also attach to the sacred tree, including identity between the tree and a particular deity, the tree as oracle and medium of communication from the divine to human realms (contributing in human society to legal judgements and other socio-politically significant events), and the tree as marker of territory and site of ritual initiations and kingship ceremonies. The following chapters trace these meanings in specific cultural and historical contexts from ancient Greece through to the end of the Christian Middle Ages. The ancient cultures of Greece and Rome participated to some extent in the cult of the sacred tree, whereas medieval Christianity did not. In the medieval era, the sacred tree came under attack and ultimately was overcome, its symbolic meanings silenced in favour of the salvific, world-denying meanings of the Christian cross.

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[81] Arapura, "The Upside Down Tree of the *Bhagavadgita*, Ch. XV," 142-143.

CHAPTER TWO

SACRED TREES IN THE ANCIENT WORLD: ORIGINS, OAKS AND ORACLES

> There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight - why the bush does not burn up." When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." *Exodus* Chapter 3, Verses 2-5[1]

Introduction

This chapter examines the evidence for the sacred tree in ancient Greece and Rome, and analyses the most important meanings attached to this symbol. The nature of "Greek religion" is disunited and often contradictory, with both important vernacular and elite manifestations.[2] The tree's primary meanings in the ancient world are seen to be associated with origins (the creation of the world), with oracular messages from the gods conveyed to people through the medium of trees, and the holy grove as a place of worship. The oak, dedicated to the powerful sky god Zeus (the Roman Jupiter), dominated ancient shrines such as Dodona, and influenced stylised monuments such as the later Roman "Jupiter column." The Roman deity of boundaries, Terminus, is often represented as a simple wood or stone column. These meanings are narrower in scope than the broad symbolic referents of the sacred tree described in Chapter 1, though there is evidence for the tree=human=world homologies, in that the

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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.

[2] W. Den Boer, "Aspects of Religion in Classical Greece," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 77 (1973): 1-21.

cosmology of Pherecydes of Syros preserves a reflex of an *imago mundi* myth, and the development of anthropomorphic sculptures of deities appears to have progressed from initial unworked logs or planks, suggesting the identity of the tree and the god or goddess.

The approach employed in this chapter is methodologically pluralist, with a phenomenological concern to entertain the widest possible range of sources in order to elucidate the significance of the sacred tree in ancient Greece and Rome. Where the study of "Pagan beliefs" or Paganism is concerned, there are striking differences in approach exhibited in different disciplines; among medievalists and historians the prevailing mood is one of scepticism, whereas in religious studies there is greater willingness to speculate and draw upon comparative evidence. However, a more inclusive stance on the part of the investigator can be justified; as Anthony Winterbourne has noted, "we will learn, sometimes, by taking what we see at face value, as a working hypothesis, as evidence for paganism as it was lived and understood."[3]

Scholarship over the past thirty years has produced something of a revolution in the study of both Greek and Roman religion and mythology. The great importance of Minoan and Mycenaean religion to classical Greek religion is established, with a broader legacy from the Helladic to the Hellenic periods hinted at.[4] Major shifts in method and theory include the rethinking of the "myth and ritual" school by Walter Burkert and others to demonstrate convincingly the vital nexus between the two areas of research;[5] the rebirth of the comparative approach, which insists on the importance of the neighbouring Near Eastern societies to the development of Greek culture (to which certain scholars, such as Martin West, are making significant contributions);[6] and the archaeological investigation of

[3] Anthony Winterbourne, *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Norse Paganism* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), 21.
[4] C. G. Thomas, "A Mycenaean Hegemony? A Reconsideration," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 90 (1970): 184.
[5] Ken Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 34-35.
[6] See Charles Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) and Martin L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Ken Dowden's review "West on the East: Martin West's *East Face of Helicon* and its Forerunners," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 121 (2001): 167-175, which is valuable because it

cult sites in the landscape.[7] The work of Ken Dowden, in both Greek and Roman religion, has also been of major importance. The findings of these scholars are employed to strengthen the analysis of the significance of the sacred tree in the ancient world.

An Introduction to Greek Religion

The beginnings of Greek religion are obscure, although there is evidence that "continuous settlements commence with the Early Neolithic in the seventh millennium."[8] The agricultural culture of Greece was disseminated from the east, with the Anatolian site of Çatal Hüyük playing a crucial role in the definition of religious themes and motifs to be found in later Greek sites, chiefly the cult of the "Great Goddess". The existence of this deity is problematic (as the absence of texts makes interpretation of the archaeological record difficult) but Çatal Hüyük features "wall reliefs of a Great Goddess with uplifted arms and straddled legs – clearly the birth-giving mother of the animals and of life itself."[9] From around 3,000 BCE the mainland Greek culture is designated Early Helladic, and the culture of Crete and the Aegean islands is designated Cycladic.

The concept "Greek religion" connects potentially discontinuous instantiations, as the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures were both destroyed after attacks by the Sea Peoples around 1,200 BCE (the Hittite Empire collapsed at the same time), and this precipitated a "dark age" of four hundred years. This ended with the emergence of Archaic and Classical religion and the texts of the Ionian Homer (the epic poems, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) and the slightly later Boeotian Hesiod (c. 700 BCE, *Works and Days*, *Theogony*, *The Catalogue of Women*, and assorted fragments). The relation of early Greek culture to the migrating Indo-Europeans, discussed in Chapter 1, is particularly difficult to establish. The earliest written Greek is Linear B from Crete in the fourteenth century BCE, but it has been argued that the Greeks emerged in the Aegean and on the mainland

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details the various methodological paradigms in scholarship which classicists and ancient historians often reject *tout court*.

[7] See Susan Guettal Cole, "Demeter in the Ancient Greek City and its Countryside," in *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, ed. Richard Buxton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 133-154.

[8] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, trans. John Raffan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 11. This book was originally published in German in 1977.

[9] Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, 12.

in approximately 2,200 BCE or the slightly later date of 1,900 BCE. Moreover, there were non-Greek Indo-European peoples in the region at the same time, including the Luwians (a people related to the Anatolian Hittites).[10]

The Greeks themselves were not a homogeneous people, with the Ionians and Dorians forming the two dominant groups among others. By the Classical period four main dialects of Greek still existed; Doric, Ionic, Aeolic, and Arcado-Cypriot. Nor was "Greece" ever a united nation or empire in the modern sense; what developed was a culture of city-states, and for periods of time certain states were dominant within demarcated geographical areas (for example Mycenae in the Late Bronze Age and Athens in the Classical period). Religious sanctuaries often celebrated particular regional variants of "pan-Hellenic" deities, and were of great importance. These developed from approximately 1,100 BCE - 800 BCE, and were greatly diverse. Catherine Morgan lists a few significant early sites as follows:

> for example, the open-air roadside shrine at Isthmia (where there is evidence for dining, but little else, from c. 1,100 BC onwards) with the first temple at Kommos (perhaps as early as the eleventh century BC). The large votive deposits at Kombothekra and Olympia included bronze and terracotta figurines and tripods, dedicated by communities across western Greece from the late tenth century onwards, and cave shrines such as that at Polis on Ithaka, and the Attic hilltop sanctuary on Mt Hymettus (with evidence for dedication and dining probably connected with the cult of Zeus Ombrios) began in Protogeometric [1050-900 BCE] times.[11]

Van Leuven argues that early sanctuaries are of two basic kinds, single and double, each with two variants in plan. He further argues that Mycenaean religion focused on "five principal goddesses and a somewhat independent god."[12] The goddesses Athena, Hera and Artemis, who are directly related to the Minoan cult, are represented, and the god is most likely Zeus.

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[10] Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, 16.
[11] Catherine Morgan, "The origins of pan-Hellenism," in *Greek Sanctuaries: New Approaches*, eds Nanno Marinatos and Robin Hägg (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 19.
[12] J. C. Van Leuven, "The Mainland Tradition of Sanctuaries in Prehistoric Greece," *World Archaeology* 10/2 (October 1978): 145.

The religion that developed was based on the city-state (*polis*) and was remarkable for its central place in civic life.[13] In the classical period political leaders sought advice from oracles, particularly those of Apollo at Delphi and Delos, and that of Zeus at Dodona, and cultural activities such as drama, poetry and athletic feats were structured within large, city-based festivals such as the Dionysia (where plays and rituals were offered in honour of Dionysos) and the Panathenaia (dedicated to Athena Polias, the goddess of the city) in Athens, and the Olympic Games, in honour of Zeus Olympios, held every four years on the banks of the River Alpheios in the north-west Peloponnese.[14] The worship of the Olympian pantheon and the continuous activity at shrines and sanctuaries link the later, documented religion (from approximately 800 BCE onwards) with earlier, archaeological remains.

Ancient Greek religion was not dogmatic and the mythology does not seek to present a systematic theological picture. The anthropomorphic deities are like humans in their loves and hates, sexual passions, and advocacy of their various half-divine children and human devotees. Mythological texts are not like monotheistic "scriptures" in that none possessed religious authority. It could be argued that the Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, enjoyed unparalleled authority throughout ancient Greece, but this does not mean that they were the basis for a complex understanding of religious phenomena or a developed theology; as Dowden commented, they offer a *hieros logos* ("sacred account"), and thus possess authority, but variant accounts exist and they, too, have authority.[15]

The Tree and the Goddess in Minoan and Mycenaean Religion

The urban cultures of Minoan Crete (flourishing from approximately 3,500 to 1,450 BCE)[16] and Mycenae (flourishing from approximately

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[13] Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "What is *Polis* Religion?" in *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, 23.
[14] Paul Cartledge "The Greek Religious Festivals", in *Greek Religion and Society*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1985), 98-127.
[15] Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology*, 96.
[16] Dating Minoan religion is a difficult and contentious issue. This chapter follows Peter M. Warren, "Problems of Chronology in Crete and the Aegean in the Third

1,600 to 1,100 BCE)[17] left a notable imprint on the religion and mythology of archaic and classical Greece. Crete came under Mycenaean rule about 1,450 BCE after a period of peaceful economic and cultural exchanges between the two civilizations. Minoan religion remains problematic, in that there are no religious texts currently available. The Linear B script was translated by Michael Ventris in 1952 and found to be an early form of Greek, but the texts were primarily inventories and economic records; the Linear A script remains untranslated and the language it records (often called Eteocretan) is speculatively connected with either Semitic languages,[18] or with Etruscan and Rhaetic (by linguists hoping to establish a "Pelasgic" or pre-Indo-European linguistic presence in the Mediterranean).[19] Thus, evidence for Minoan religion is limited to cult sites, iconographic representations of cultic activity, items associated with cultic activity, and (possibly) fragmentary survivals that can be identified in later Greek mythology and ritual.

Yet it can be confidently stated that the sacred tree (and the pillar or *baetyl*, its derivative), which was associated with a goddess, was central to the religious life of Crete. In Cretan iconography, the tree, the bird, the goddess, the bull (or the "horns of consecration"), and the *labrys* or double-axe, are the most common religious symbols. Dietrich describes a bronze votive tablet found at Psychro, an important double cave sanctuary (Late Minoan I, *c*. 1,500 BCE), which bears an image that is also found on Minoan gems. The scene demonstrates:

> the sacredness of the tree which was perhaps representative of a deity. The significance of the tree, again, appears from the second scene on the tablet where a bough of the tree is shown between the horns of consecration: the bird on top … [is] usually the epiphany of a Minoan goddess, either as part of, or related to, the tree. The tree and, at the upper edge of the tablet, the sun and the moon – perhaps symbols of the passing of the seasons –

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and Earlier Second Millennium B.C.," *American Journal of Archaeology* 84/4 (October 1980): 487-499.

[17] This too is contentious. See Cynthia W. Shelmerdine, "Review of Aegean Prehistory VI: The Palatial Bronze Age of the Southern and Central Greek Mainland," *American Journal of Archaeology* 101/3 (July 1997): 537-585.

[18] Gary A. Rendsburg, "'Someone will Succeed in Deciphering Minoan': Cyrus H. Gordon and Minoan Linear A," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 59/1 (1996): 36-43.

[19] J.-P. Olivier, "Cretan Writing in the Second Millennium BC," *World Archaeology* 17/3 (February 1986): 382-383.

> portray the concerns of a nature goddess, one or even several of whose aspects, we might suppose, were revered by her worshippers in the cave.[20]

The trees depicted in Minoan iconography were impressive, and often enclosed by a wall (designating their sacred, "set apart" nature), and are generally identified botanically as either olives or figs.[21]

From later Greek sanctuaries it can be seen that the crucial elements of a holy place were the boundary, marking it off from the profane space around it, and an altar, which was a place of sacrifice.[22] This is one element of the much earlier Indo-European religious matrix that the Greeks retained. Sacrifices could involve blood or be bloodless (such grains and fruits), but they must be burned on the altar to be received by the gods. The relation of ritual to symbols such as the sacred tree therefore remains important. John Pedley observes that "the Greek words for sanctuary were *hieron* (sacred) and *temenos* (a place set aside: from the verb *temno*, meaning "to cut off"… In early times rituals of worship, supplication, gift giving, sacrifice, and purification took place in the open air in sanctuaries often marked only by a special spot hallowed by nature – a tree, a rock, a hilltop, a cave, a spring – and an altar."[23] Sanctuaries are also places of refuge, as they have the status of *asylion hieron* (an "inviolable precinct").[24] The development of temples, constructed sacred spaces, therefore conforms to the discussion of the *axis mundi* in Chapter 1. The sacred centre is originally located in nature, but, as it can be replicated, temples, cities and other built environments become sacred centres. These buildings often incorporate pillars and older features (for example, the Thespian Eros was represented by a stone, as was Dionysos at Thebes),[25] but the aniconic portrayal of deities as pillars was gradually replaced by anthropomorphic depictions from the Archaic period onward.

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[20] B. C. Dietrich, *The Origins of Greek Religion* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 83-84.
[21] Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, 28.
[22] Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "Early sanctuaries, the eighth century and ritual space: Fragments of a discourse," in *Greek Sanctuaries: New Approaches*, 11.
[23] John Pedley, *Sanctuaries and the Sacred in the Ancient Greek World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 29.
[24] Ulrich Sinn, "Greek Sanctuaries as Places of Refuge," in *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, 158.
[25] Arthur Evans, *The Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult and its Mediterranean Relations* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1901), 27-28.

The identity of the Minoan tree goddess is disputed, as is her relationship with the goddess of the palace, and the snake goddess. Four names for the goddess are attested in the sources; Athena, Artemis, Hera, and Eileithyia. The fourth was a Minoan goddess of birth. Dietrich has argued that the goddess is a unity, with different facets, and the later compartmentalization of the goddesses into distinct individuals is not reflected in the earliest Minoan evidence: "[t]he functions of all these goddesses, therefore, one must suppose to have been compatible. The spheres of the palace goddess and the chthonic goddess of fertility and birth originally were related."[26] One contentious issue has been whether Minoan religion focused exclusively on a female deity, or whether the goddess had a consort. There are no male gods depicted in Minoan iconography. However, the prevalence of the double-axe (*labrys*) in iconography suggests that an early form of the god Zeus (where the double-axe represents his lightning- or thunder-bolt) may have been the consort of the great goddess. Nilsson thinks that this parallels the Great Mother and the sky or weather-god found in Asia Minor (either Zeus Stratios of Labranda in Caria, or Sandan, worshipped in Tarsus).[27] The labyrinth of the palace of Knossos, the haunt of the Minotaur in the mythological tales of the Athenian hero Theseus, literally means "the house of the double-axe," strengthening the case for a sky- or thunder-god in Cretan religion. The probable combination of the Great Goddess and Zeus in Crete is suggestive. If Dietrich's conviction that the tree "was symbolic of, or in some way represented" the goddess is accurate, the worship of the tree goddess and the sky-god would exactly parallel Pherecydes of Syros's cosmology, featuring the primal deities Zas and Chthonie, which is influenced by "eastern" sources. This text retains a vague but identifiable reflex of the Indo-European symbol of the tree as *imago mundi*, and is discussed in the next section.

The cult of the pillar is also observable in Minoan iconography, providing a link with mainland Mycenaean religion. Arthur Evans's pioneering research into the cult of the sacred tree and pillar, while requiring modifications in view of subsequent scholarship, remains important. He argued that monuments like the Lion Gate at Mycenae are manifestations of the pillar cult (and that the famous sculpted monument depicts the pillar being worshipped by animals) and that there was also a cult of the "pillar of the house," which began as a hewn tree trunk in

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[26] Dietrich, *The Origins of Greek Religion*, 137.
[27] Martin Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion*, Second Edition (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1950), 220-221.

wooden houses but was retained in later stone dwellings. Evans also noted that Pindar described the Homeric hero Hector as the "pillar of Troy".[28] With reference to cults associated with free-standing columns, Martin Nilsson reasons that:

> [a]lthough it is not very clear what the role of the column is in these representations it may be assumed with some probability that they are free-standing sacred columns. The representation of a cairn on the glass plaque seems to be certain enough. *Baetyls*, sacred stones, columns, and cairns being so frequent in later Greek and Semitic cults and in other parts of the world, it would certainly be astonishing to find them absent in Minoan and Mycenaean Greece. The big stalagmite in the cave of Eileithyia which is enclosed by a stone setting and has in front of it a stone which may have been an altar was certainly the object of a cult.[29]

Evans also foregrounds the liminal imagery of the arch or doorway, further asserting that the tree and the pillar are also liminal, which is attested to by their being the sites of initiatory ritual.[30] Later in this book evidence from medieval Scandinavia and Ireland will be collected in support of this contention.

Evans also suggested that the best method to attribute meaning to the Mycenaean instances was to consider the better-documented later mainland Greek examples of the tree and pillar. The greatest number of Mycenaean-era images of the goddess and the tree are nearly thirty gold signet rings from Mycenae and other sites, which were described and analysed by Persson in the 1940s.[31] His analysis suggested that the scenes all featured the goddess and vegetation or trees in a variety of seasonal settings. Like the statuettes of the goddess from Minoan Crete, the goddess of the engraved signet rings is depicted bare-breasted and in a long, full, tiered skirt. She is shown in various poses: under the tree receiving gifts from devotees; dancing amid devotees; in conjunction with snakes; in the context of an enclosed shrine with a central pillar; and in high, rocky landscapes.[32] The goddesses of the later Olympian pantheon replicate

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[28] Evans, *The Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult and its Mediterranean Relations*, 60.
[29] Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion*, 258.
[30] Evans, *The Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult and its Mediterranean Relations*, 83.
[31] A. W. Persson, *The Religion of Greece in Prehistoric Times* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1942).
[32] K. D. White, "The Sacred Grove: A Comparative Study of Some Parallel Aspects of Religious Ritual in Ancient Crete and the Near East," *Greece & Rome* 1/3 (October 1954): 119-123.

certain of these attributes and provide evidence for continuity between prehistoric and historic Greek religion.

The goddess Athena, a possible descendent of the Minoan palace goddess, has a sacred tree, the olive, which she bestowed upon the citizens of her city, Athens. Olive oil was presented to the victors at Athena's principal festival, the Panathenaia.[33] Herodotus, in Book 8 of the *Histories*, tells of the rivalry between Athena and Poseidon for patronage of Athens. The two deities offered the citizens gifts in return for the honour of being the city's patron. Athena's gift of the olive outweighed the saltwater spring that resulted when Poseidon struck a rock with his trident. This aetiology leads into Herodotus' account of the burning of the Acropolis and the desecration of the sacred olive by the Persians during the Persian Wars. This act of violence proved pointless, as the olive had "by the next day miraculously germinated a cubit-long shoot."[34] Sourvinou-Inwood views the olive as the "guarantee" of the goddess, the visible sign of the relationship between Athena and her *polis*, Athens.

The other notable Greek holy tree with an edible fruit is the fig, associated with Demeter and found on the Sacred Way, the road between Athens and her cult site at Eleusis, famed throughout the ancient world for its Mysteries.[35] Demeter is a Mother Goddess, though of what remains a mystery. Etymologically her name does not suggest either an earth mother or a corn mother, though she is associated with the earth and the corn that is planted in it. Several male deities are connected with the tree and pillar cult, through being represented in pillar or cairn form (most notably Hermes, the god of travellers and those who live by their wits, whose devotees erect roadside cairns, but the Arcadian sanctuary of Zeus on Mount Lycaeus also had two engraved pillars at the entrance),[36] and Apollo is connected to the *axis mundi* by the fact that the navel stone of the world, the *omphalos*, was located at his sanctuary at Delphi.

Another significant goddess associated with the tree cult is Hera, in classical Greek mythology the sister-wife of the sky- and thunder-god Zeus. She has an earlier instantiation as a goddess of the Argive region, where the epithet "Eileithyia" as attached to her, connecting her with the

[33] Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, 141.
[34] Sourvinou-Inwood, "What is *Polis* Religion?," 23.
[35] Evans, *The Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult and its Mediterranean Relations*, 6.
[36] Robert Graves (ed.), *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (London and New York: Paul Hamlyn, 1968 [1959]), 98.

Minoan goddess referred to earlier.[37] Her two major sanctuaries were situated between Argos and Mycenae, from which comes her Homeric title, *Here Argeie*, "Argive Hera," and on the island of Samos.[38] Her special tree was the *lygos* (willow), and at the Samos Heraion (which Herodotus described as the largest Greek temple of his time), there was a local tradition that:

> Hera was born here, under the *lygos* tree, on the banks of the river Imbrasos, and that the earliest image of her was nothing more than a wooden plank. Another foundation story, though, said that the Argonauts had brought the wooden Hera from Argos. However … this *lygos* was evidently Hera's sacred tree, and the focus of early worship. Every year, the sources say, at the festival of Hera, the cult statue was bound with branches from the tree. Every year the statue was carried in procession to the sea, where she was washed, furnished with new garments and jewels, and returned to the sanctuary.[39]

Apart from Samos and in the Argive region, Hera was widely worshipped as a Great Goddess. She is the patron of weddings and marriage, and although Zeus romances many others divine and human women (including Leto, the mother of the twin deities Apollo and Artemis, associated with the palm tree), Hera is his queen.

Hera's jealousy of Zeus' philandering in mythology provides the basis for the Great Daedala, a festival held every sixty years in Boeotia by a confederation of cities led by Plataea. Walter Burkert explains that this festival explicitly links to the sacred tree: "*daedala* are wooden figures made from tree trunks, probably only roughly hewn. At the festival one of these is decked out as a bride, set on an ox-cart with a bridesmaid to accompany her, and taken with all the pomp of a bridal procession from the river Asopos to the summit of Mount Kithairon."[40] On the mountain a temporary altar is erected and a bull and a cow are slaughtered to Zeus and Hera, and then the sacrifices are burned with the *daedala* as offerings. The myth that explains this ritual concerns one of Zeus and Hera's frequent quarrels, where to regain his wife Zeus pretends he will marry "Plataea" the daughter of the river Asopos, who is in reality a tree trunk in bridal clothes. Hera, enraged, arrives and tears off the "bride's" clothes, then, in triumph, has her "rival" burned. As will be seen, this myth and ritual

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[37] Dietrich, *The Origins of Greek Religion*, 179.
[38] Burkert, *Greek religion: Archaic and Classical*, 131.
[39] Pedley, *Sanctuaries and the Sacred in the Ancient Greek World*, 156-157.
[40] Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, 135.

combination resembles the myth told by Pherecydes of Syros. Further evidence for the importance of the sacred tree in Hera's cult is found at the Heraion (temple of Hera) on Samos, a Late Archaic building of enormous size, with one hundred and fifty-five columns in the original structure. It was rebuilt many times, and in the fifth century of the Common Era a Christian church was erected on the site.[41] The 1963 excavations located a great tree stump that was originally believed to be Hera's sacred *lygos*, but was found to be a juniper and probably part of the sacred grove, which was east of the great altar.[42] Votive offerings at the Heraion include several little boats and a statue of the goddess holding a boat. Whether this connects to her arrival in Samos on the Argo, mentioned above, is not clear.

To conclude this section, there is strong evidence for a dominant female divinity in both Minoan Crete and Mycenae, and this goddess has a special relationship with a sacred tree (and sometimes, with a pillar, whether of stone or a log or plank of wood). The meanings of the tree symbol are not apparent from the purely iconographic evidence, though Dietrich is of the opinion that the tree represents the goddess or is to be identified with her. This would support the contention in Chapter 1 that the primary and most powerful meaning of the tree is that it is identical with the cosmos and the anthropomorphic deity (tree=human=world). It is admitted that ancient Greek religion does not exhibit striking inheritances from the Indo-European cultural matrix, but there are suggestive traces that will be further explored in the next section. The cults of the Olympian goddesses and their trees (Athena and the olive, Hera and the willow, and Demeter and the fig) demonstrate the continuity of the Greek religious tradition from the prehistoric to the Classical period, as does the pervasive presence of the sky god Zeus, who is associated with the oak.

The Tree as *Imago Mundi* in Ancient Greece: Pherecydes of Syros' Cosmology

The emergence of ancient Greece in the sixth century BCE as a culture with a distinct and original intellectual (specifically philosophical) orientation has provoked much scholarly research, some of it quite controversial. Working within the Indo-European hypothesis it should not

[41] Helmut Kyrieleis, "The Heraion at Samos," in *Greek Sanctuaries: New Approaches*, 127.
[42] Kyrieleis, "The Heraion at Samos," 135.

be surprising that elements of ancient Greek religion, society and intellectual culture might resemble, or indeed be found to draw upon, societies further east, in particular India and Persia (Iran). However, the extent of the influence of "eastern" myth on the three oldest surviving books, which are all treatises on the origin and nature of the world, those of Pherecydes, Anaximander and Anaximenes, is still a contentious subject.

Written books emerge from oral cultures and Pherecydes of Syros, often claimed to be the teacher of Pythagoras, wrote the earliest known Greek book (the *Heptamychos* or "seven recesses"), a prose account "partly narrative in form, and partly a statement of how the world works now, the function of the gods, and the fate of souls after death."[43] Little is known for certain of Pherecydes, though his father's name, "Babys" or "Babis," is eastern rather than Greek. The fragmentary survival of this book, known only from one text discovered in the late nineteenth century in Egypt,[44] makes interpretation of Pherecydes' teachings difficult, but there is a broad consensus on the general content. His account of the origin of the physical universe begins with three primordial figures: Chronos, Zas and Chthonie (broadly identifiable with Kronos, Zeus and Gaia as featured in later mythology, although West has disputed that Pherecydes explicitly went "on to say that Zas and Chronos eventually went on to become Zeus and Kronos").[45] There is also a relationship between Pherecydes' primordial figures and the account of creation given in Hesiod's *Theogony* (c. 750-650 BCE).

Studies of the sacred tree in ancient Greece and Rome usually argue that, while sacred trees can be proven to have existed, the range of meanings that they bear is limited. The tree as *imago mundi* (the classic "cosmic tree") is generally accorded very little attention, as there is no evidence for it in the elaborated mythological texts that have survived, such as the two epics of Homer (*Iliad*, *Odyssey*) and the poems of Hesiod (*Theogony*, *Works and Days*). However, the sacred tree as *imago mundi* is of importance for Pherecydes, as the climax of his origin story is the wedding of Zas and Chthonie, the first and most significant *hieros gamos*, or "sacred marriage." Chthonie is associated with a tree (the "winged oak") in the text, and after the marriage Zas, a craftsman god, "embroiders

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[43] Martin L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971), 6.

[44] Martin L. West, "Three Presocratic Cosmologies," *The Classical Quarterly* New Series 13/2 (November 1963): 157.

[45] West, "Three Presocratic Cosmologies," 158.

for her a cloak with the detailed features of the earth" on it.[46] After donning the robe Chthonie is transformed into Ge (the same name as the later Gaea or Gaia, the earth goddess). West interprets this to mean that the tree is the world (*imago mundi*) and is also Ge. This conforms to the homology outlined in Chapter 1 of tree=world=human (anthropomorphic being). The goddess Ge is female, whereas the Indo-European primordial sacrificial victim is male, but the similarities far outweigh the differences.

West's identification of the cosmic tree in Pherecydes' text was first seen as speculative and insufficiently supported.[47] However, it has been vindicated and extended by other scholars,[48] and it now appears that West correctly identified in Pherecydes' fragments a cosmology where the earth goddess is identified with a tree, forming a sacred centre, and the tree has a source of life at its roots and a serpent that is associated with it. All these elements are familiar from other instances of the sacred tree, and West is content to admit that they were at one time well-known in Greece, but by the time of Pherecydes they had become uninfluential: "Hesiod and others speak of the 'roots' of the earth and sea, though it seems to be a dead metaphor, and they have no real conception of a world tree. Large trees are sometimes described as reaching up to heaven or down towards Tartarus; it is a possibility, but hardly more, that a description of the world tree was the prototype from which such expressions were coined."[49] It is worth noting that, while Pherecydes' text is an example of elite religious thought, one strong theme in ancient Greek vernacular religion is the veneration and deification of nature; the woodlands teem with nymphs and satyrs, and the rural landscape is filled with "simple rustic shrines and local festivals."[50] White comments that it is natural features that determine the location of later built shrines and temples, and that the recognition of a site as sacred involves a theophany, the perception that a deity is manifest in the landscape, in the manner of Eliade. White's focus is on drawing parallels between Greek and Semitic tree and pillar sanctuaries, which is

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[46] M. R. Wright, "Review of Hermann S. Schibli, *Pherekydes of Syros*," *The Classical Review* New Series 42/1 (1992): 66.
[47] G. S. Kirk, "Review of M. L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*," *The Classical Review* New Series 24/1 (March 1974): 82-86.
[48] See Simo Parpolo, "The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52/3 (July 1993): 161-208 and Hermann S. Schibli, *Pherekydes of Syros* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1990).
[49] West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, 58.
[50] White, "The Sacred Grove," 113.

not particularly significant for the argument of this chapter, save that it offers archaeological evidence for the arguments West made concerning Pherecydes' cosmology. What is vital is the sense for the Greeks that the landscape is divine; and that the earth, Gaia, is a goddess.

Ken Dowden took this contention further, arguing cogently that the landscape is foundational for Paganism, and that buildings are secondary, both because they emerge later in time and because they "stand for" natural features rather than having intrinsic meaning (this point could be extended to anthropomorphic statues as opposed to pillars and planks). Citing Jean Przyluski, he states that trees, rocks and water form the basic Pagan site; "the rocks that are the bones of the ground, the waters that give it fertility, and the trees that are its most impressive display."[51] When the implications of this contention are fully absorbed, it is clear that the identity of the tree or pillar, and the world, is reinforced by the cult site, and the ritual activities that take place at it; the cult site is itself a model of the world, a microcosm (like the tree). Dowden believes that pillars occupy the space between unworked stones and trees, and that large stones, being relatively immobile, denote fixity (of place, and of death through memorialisation, and of law, making them appropriate to swear oaths upon).[52] This interpretation sheds light on the potential of the stone to embody the *axis mundi*, discussed in the next section.

The *Axis Mundi* in Greek Religion: Apollo, the Oracle of Delphi and the Omphalos

The ancient Greeks thought that Delphi, near Mount Parnassos, was the centre of the world, and the poet Pindar referred to it as "the shared hearth of Hellas."[53] The oracle was dedicated to the Olympian god Apollo (son of Zeus and Leto, twin of the hunting goddess Artemis, and patron of the arts and healing), and it flourished from the ninth century BCE to 391 CE, when the Christian Emperor Theodosius I closed it down, along with the Olympic Games and the Platonic Academy of Athens, as part of a programme of dismantling all remaining Pagan sanctuaries and practices. The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* told how the site was originally sacred to

[51] Ken Dowden, *European Paganism: The Realities of Cult From Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 35.
[52] Dowden, *European Paganism: The Realities of Cult From Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, 61-64.
[53] Pedley, *Sanctuaries and the Sacred in the Ancient Greek World*, 135.

Gaia, goddess of the earth, and was served by a monstrous female, Delphyne, and Gaia's serpentine son Python. Python (or Typhon) and Delphyne were vanquished by Apollo, but the games held at Delphi were called the Pythian Games, and the priestess who delivered the oracles to petitioners was called the Pythia. She did so while sitting on a stone called the *omphalos*, or "navel," which marked the centre of the world (there were similar navel stones in Minoan and Mycenaean cult, such as the *omphalos* in the Cave of Eileithyia on Crete).

To deliver oracles the Pythia was seated upon a tripod, the legs of which fitted into holes in the *omphalos* stone for stability, and ancient writers such as Strabo, Iamblichus, Pliny the Elder and Plutarch (who was himself a Delphic priest) suggest that the god's messages were received by her while she was in an ecstatic trance. Some scholars have been intrigued by the suggestion that a *pneuma enthusiastikon* (or hallucinogenic vapour) assisted the Pythia's trance. Plutarch said the smell was fragrant and came from "a circular hole, about ten centimeters in diameter, in the so-called *omphalos* or 'navel' stone on which the tripod rested."[54] Littleton thinks this hypothesis is persuasive, and suggests certain agents that might produce ecstatic trance or at the very least a receptive state for mediumship (including *cannabis sativa*), but Fontenrose rejects it, his whole study contending against the interpretation of the Pythia as a shamanic or mediumistic figure.

There was a sacred grove at Delphi, and the argument of Fontenrose that the tomb of Python is there is interesting in this context. Trees were often planted in the vicinity of the graves of heroes, and they became identified with the groups of female mourners traditionally present at a hero's funeral. Forbes Irving notes that this is clearly related to mythological cases such as the "sisters of Phaethon, who are transformed as they mourn beside their brother's tomb and as trees 'still cradle him in their arms.'"[55] Fontenrose argues for Delphi as the burial site of Python, who was the original oracular medium:

> [a]ccording to Clement of Alexandria, Python received worship there, and the Pythian games were first celebrated as funeral games in his honour, when an *epitaphion* was sung for him. Moreover it was said either that his

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[54] C. Scott Littleton, "The *Pneuma Enthusiastikon*: On the Possibility of the Hallucinogenic 'Vapors' at Delphi and Dodona," *Ethos* 14/1 (Spring 1986): 78.

[55] P. M. C. Forbes-Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 129.

> bones and teeth were kept in the kettle that stood upon the mantic tripod, or that his hide was wrapped around the tripod. But most interesting of all was the evidence that the *omphalos* of Delphi was his tomb. This is said by as good an authority as Varro; and it is supported by Hesychios, who says the same thing, and by a Pompeian mural painting … which shows Python coiled around the *omphalos*. If all this evidence is put together, it appears that some bones kept in the tripod kettle were considered to be Python's, and that something wrapped around the *omphalos* was said to be his hide. Those writers who put his skin on the tripod seem to have confused the one fact with the other. In any case, tripod and *omphalos* together have something to do with Python's remains.[56]

Remembering the connections detailed in Chapter 1 concerning the serpent that dwells at the roots of the sacred tree, Fontenrose's argument takes on new significance. The *omphalos* is a stone that is the functional equivalent of the sacred tree as *axis mundi*, the point around which the world revolves, and which penetrates through the physical universe. Python/Typhon is the serpent or dragon that is found at the roots of the tree (other examples of this motif were given in Chapter 1), which West, in his analysis of Pherecydes' *Heptamychos*, claimed was once a widespread religious concept among the Greeks. Another important suggestion, made by Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, is that the sacred navel stone reaches from this world into the underworld, whereas the sacred tree reaches from this world into the heavens.[57] The sanctuary at Delphi offers only tangential, but interesting, evidence for the sacred tree in ancient Greek religion. The sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona contains far more valuable data for this study.

The Oak Tree and the Sky/Thunder God: Zeus and Dodona

Zeus, the ruler-deity of the Olympian pantheon, was worshipped all over ancient Greece in both urban and rural sanctuaries. Many of these temples and oracles had significant associations with sacred trees, most commonly the oak (Zeus is often represented wearing a crown of oak leaves). The sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia in the north-west Peloponnese was a large *temenos*, or sacred place, called the *Altis*. This name is derived

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[56] Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and its Origin* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), 374-375.
[57] Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006 [1995]), 18-20.

from *alsos*, a grove of trees, and a grove was one of the focal points of the sanctuary. In an interesting parallel to Fontenrose's arguments concerning Delphi, Pedley notes that other important early features included "the Altar of Zeus, which consisted mainly of a large mound of ashes, the piled-up residue of innumerable sacrifices, and the Pelopion, the grave mound of the hero Pelops. The grave mound, as a place of worship, was later given its own enclosing wall and gateway."[58] The quest for the sacred tree in ancient Greece is on far firmer ground when the relationship between the god Zeus and the oak tree or oak grove becomes the focus. The sanctuary of Pelasgian (here probably meaning only "pre-Achaean") Zeus at Dodona, in Epirus, was a grove of oak trees. Zeus himself was believed to reside in one especially aged tree, and communications from the god were received in a number of ways, including the casting of lots, and interpreting both the rustling of the trees and the sound of the sacred spring within the grove. Dodona was a very ancient cultic site, and the oldest of the Greek oracles, and Herodotus asserted that the oracle was introduced to Greece from Egypt. Dodona is mentioned in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, texts dating from approximately 800 BCE; Odysseus visits Dodona on his return to Ithaca, and the *Iliad* (16.233) describes the priests there, who are barefoot, so as always to be in contact with the earth, and sleep on the floor of the sanctuary, "to encourage revelatory dreams."[59] Many other heroes consulted Zeus at Dodona, though it was later overtaken by Delphi in significance.

A range of ancient writers attest to the site's foundation legend, which has Deukalion, the ancient Greek Noah, led to the site by a dove as the floodwaters that destroyed the previous generation of humans abated.[60] Deukalion brought together other survivors and sacrificed to Zeus, and the Greeks never doubted that Dodona transmitted the authentic voice of the king of the gods. He spoke through the leaves of the oak,[61] the thunder and lightning, the sound of the spring, "the brazen cauldrons in his sacred precinct, and through the medium of the doves that nested in the tree."[62]

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[58] Pedley, *Sanctuaries and the Sacred in the Ancient Greek World*, 119.
[59] Pedley, *Sanctuaries and the Sacred in the Ancient Greek World*, 89.
[60] D. M. Nicol, "The Oracle of Dodona," *Greece & Rome* Second Series 5/2 (October 1958): 131.
[61] There are scholarly exchanges about whether there are natural or scientific explanations of the communication by means of the leaves. See E. Watson Williams, "The Oracle of Dodona: A Postscript," *Greece & Rome* Second Series 6/2 (October 1959): 204.
[62] Nicol, "The Oracle of Dodona," 133.

The Dodonaean Zeus was the patron of various phenomena other than his traditional sky and thunder concerns. At Dodona Zeus is also a water deity; this connects with the tradition that the prow of the Argo was made from wood cut from the oak of Dodona by Athena, and the fact that the sanctuary was named for the *naiad* Dodone, a water nymph.

Further, the Dodonaean Zeus was oracular, which connects him with chthonic powers and the earth.[63] Uniquely, his consort there was the goddess Dione, and their daughter was Aphrodite, goddess of love.[64] The barefoot priests described above were called Selloi or Helloi, and Homer does not mention any priestesses. But there *were* priestesses serving the oracle at Dodona, and Herodotus foregrounded their role when he gave an account of the origin of Dodona, which was founded when an Egyptian priestess was carried off by Phoenicians from Thebes. Herodotus calls the priestesses Promenia, Timarete and Nikandre, which are generally assumed to be titles (like "Pythia," or perhaps the names of the Fates, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos). It has been argued that in earlier times there were real doves in the oak that were a medium of oracles, but that later developments mean that the priestesses were referred to as "doves." H. W. Parke suggests that the archaeological evidence, which demonstrates that there are no "traces of buildings earlier than the fourth century B.C.", fits the model of a sanctuary where natural elements are of vital importance and closeness to the sacred earth, the waters and the trees was sufficient.[65]

Philostratos gave a description of the oak as festooned with garlands and asserts that "it is always the oak itself which is said to utter the oracle."[66] This is the case whether the oracles are delivered through the waters, the cauldrons, or the two pillars which have attached to them a scourge and a copper pot, which strike each other when the winds rage.

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[63] The case for the threefold nature of Zeus at Dodona (sky, earth, water) was first made by Arthur Bernard Cook in the early twentieth century in a series of articles including Cook, "Zeus, Jupiter and the Oak (Continued)," *The Classical Review* 17/8 (November 1903): 403-421, and Cook, "Zeus, Jupiter and the Oak (Conclusion)," *The Classical Review* 18/7 (October 1904): 360-375. Some of Cook's evidence, and much of his reasoning, would not be accepted in contemporary scholarship, but his analysis is nevertheless bold, interesting and deserving of respect.

[64] Nicol, "The Oracle of Dodona," 134.

[65] A. W. H. Adkins, "Review of H. W. Parke, *The Oracles of Zeus*," *The Classical Review* New Series 21/2 (June 1971): 235-237.

[66] Nicol, "The Oracle of Dodona," 138.

This strengthens the identification of Zeus with the oak tree itself, though unfortunately there is no overt cosmic dimension in terms of the tree=human=world equation discussed in Chapter 1. The athletic games at Dodona were dedicated to the water-god, Zeus Naios, as part of a local festival called the Naia. The victors were awarded bronze crowns of oak leaves. Later writers such as the Roman Silius Italicus (late first century CE), Pausanius and Philostratos (both late second century CE) all testified to the site's continued importance. Pausanias said that the temple and the sacred oak were the most significant things in Epeiros. And "there is evidence that the tree and the oracle were still in existence in the middle of the fourth century."[67] This temple was destroyed by the invading Goths in the mid-sixth century CE.

For the argument of this chapter, it is important to note that the sacred oak of Dodona is unequivocally identified with Zeus and speaks with his voice. Though his consort Dione can be equated with the earth, Pelasgian Zeus is here uniquely an earth-god, and he is also a water-god (where in other Greek contexts his characteristics as a sky-father and god of thunder and lightning are prominent). It was noted earlier that there is no overt cosmic dimension in Zeus being identified with the oak, but if it is accepted that at Dodona he is still the god of the sky, as well as the earth and the waters, that could mean that he is to be identified with the totality of the universe, and the equation tree=human=world might thus still be faintly visible in the ancient Greek sources.

Further Associations of the Sacred Tree in Ancient Greece

Greek religion also features an assortment of minor divine beings, including nature-spirits such as water nymphs (*naiads* or *hydriads*) and mountain nymphs (*oreads*).[68] The term *dryad* (from Greek *drys*, "oak") is generally used to refer to all tree nymphs, but there were different types of minor divine being associated with particular trees (for example, the nymphs of ash trees were called *Meliai*). *Hamadryads* were nymphs associated with particular trees, whose lives were coterminous with the tree they inhabited, so they died when the trees were cut down or died.[69]

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[67] J. H. Philpot, *The Sacred Tree: or The Tree in Religion and Myth* (Felinfacht: Llanerch Publishers, 1994 [1897]), 97.

[68] J. P. Postgate, "On the Alleged Confusion of Nymph Names: Appendix," *American Journal of Philology* 18/1 (1897): 74-75.

[69] Pierre Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, trans. A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop (Oxford: Blackwell Reference, 1986 [1951]), 179.

The poet Callimachus, in the *Hymn to Delos*, tells of an oak nymph's anguish when her tree is struck by lightning. Greek mythology abounds in tales of tree nymphs who were loved by human men. Chrysopelia, a *hamadryad*, married Arcas (the eponymous hero of Arcadia) after he saved her life by diverting a flooded river that threatened the survival of her oak. They had two sons who were the ancestors of the Arcadians, Elatus and Aphidas.[70] Similarly, Rhoecus earned the favours of the *hamadryads* when he built supports for an oak that was on the verge of falling. This tale ends less happily, in that he is warned against infidelity by the nymphs but disobeys and is blinded by a bee as a punishment.[71]

The god Apollo is particularly associated with the pursuit of women who are transformed into trees in order to elude him. Apollo's other connections with trees have been discussed above. The most famous of these maidens is Daphne, who is turned into a laurel by her father (a river god, whose name is given either as Ladon or Peneus) rather than succumb to the god's advances.[72] Apollo thus wears a laurel wreath, and this wreath becomes the prize awarded to victors in poetic and athletic contests in Greece and to military victors in Rome. Dryope, the daughter of Dryops (a name also derived from *drys*, "oak"), is ravished by Apollo in the form of a snake, when she was with the *hamadryads* on Mount Oeta, tending her father's sheep. She married shortly after and had a son, Amphissus, who built temples to his father, Apollo. She was turned into a poplar tree by the *hamadryads*, who took pity on her and allowed her to join their ranks.[73] Dryops was the eponymous ancestor of the Dryopes, the "men of oak." The woods were also the home of the forest deity Pan and his *satyrs*, creatures that were half-human and half-goat, and *sileni*, who were *ipotanes*, creatures that were part-human and part-horse (though usually having human legs rather that the lower body of a horse, like *centaurs*). The cult of Pan was confined to Arcadia until c. 500 BCE, when it began to spread due to the Athenian conviction that Pan had assisted them to defeat the Persians at the battle of Marathon. Pan was both pastoral and benign, and yet dangerous: representing "the psychic force which could grip the traveller lost in the wilds, 'panic' fear."[74]

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[70] Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, 101-102.
[71] Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, 405.
[72] Forbes-Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths*, 129, 133, and 136.
[73] Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, 142.
[74] S. C. Humphreys, "Review of Philippe Borgeaud, *The Cult of Pan in Ancient Greece*," *Man* New Series 25/3 (September 1990): 536.

Finally, there are mythological sacred trees that are guarded closely because of the treasure they bear. The most famous example is the tree of the Hesperides (four divine maidens who live at the utmost west of the world), which is closely guarded because of the golden apples it bears. It is not clear what special property these apples possess, although it is often assumed that through eating one a mortal might become immortal.[75] Heracles, assisted by the Titan Atlas, stole one of these apples as one of his Twelve Labours. Another important tree with a treasure is that in the sanctuary in Colchis that bore the Golden Fleece, stolen by Jason and the Argonauts on a quest. This fleece had originally been a remarkable ram, the gift of the god Hermes to Phrixus and his sister Helle, the children of King Athamas of Boeotia. The ram helped them escape their stepmother; but tragically "Helle fell into the sea and gave her name to the Hellespont."[76] When Phrixus arrived in Colchis he sacrificed the ram, hanging its fleece on a sacred tree.

It has been mentioned in passing that several deities in ancient Greece were represented in aniconic form as unshaped planks or pillars. The Titan Atlas, whose name literally means "pillar," manifests as three (or sometimes two, recalling the Pillars of Hercules, a real feature of Mediterranean geography) pillars, when he holds up the weight of the sky. In later chapters it will be demonstrated that the Scandinavian gods Heimdall (and to a lesser extent Thor) are associated with the World Pillar, as is the Vedic god Indra. Some scholars have demurred that Atlas's plural pillars contradict this connection with the *axis mundi*,[77] but it is here argued that such centres are plural and replicable, and thus this objection does not carry sufficient weight to dismiss the association.

The Sacred Tree and Pillar in Rome

The traditional date of the founding of Rome is 21 April 753 BCE, the feast of the Parilia, which was dedicated to shepherds and their flocks. The powerful Roman Empire began as a collection of villages on the hills surrounding the Tiber River; farming and warfare were its formative influences. Religion penetrated every part of human life for the ancient Romans. Ancient Roman culture and religion were deeply influenced by

[75] Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology*, 138.
[76] Graves, *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, 196.
[77] J. Gwyn Griffiths, "Review of E. A. S. Butterworth, *The Tree at the Navel of the Earth*," *The Classical Review* New Series 22/3 (December 1972): 430.

neighbouring cultures; the influences that can be identified in Roman religion include Etruscan, Alban, Sabine, Syrian, Persian and Greek. The Etruscans developed a remarkably sophisticated culture and conquered extensive territories, and were mentioned by the Greek author Hesiod, writing in around 700 BCE. Greek and Roman accounts of the Etruscans are rarely complimentary, but the archaeological remains of Greek settlements have been identified from the sixth century BCE, and these reveal considerable interaction between Greeks and Etruscans.[78] Roman religion is a problematic subject because there is substantial influence from Greece in particular, as the Romans deliberately emulated the Greeks in artistic, cultural and intellectual matters. The Roman alphabet is derived from the Greek alphabet, and the philosophy and theology of Rome were largely adapted from Greek ideas. This is also true of the content of what the Romans wrote, and there is no major mythology of totally Roman origin. Further, Roman religion lacks almost all the narrative mythology found in Greece and concerns itself almost exclusively with the correct performance of ritual. With reference to the Indo-European cultural matrix, Dowden suggested that:

> the father of the family – the *paterfamilias* whose *genius* the Roman household worshipped – had great authority (it was very much a patriarchal society). And the chief god was a corresponding "father of gods and of men"… His name is connected with the daytime sky: he is a "sky father". On earth, a corresponding religious authority perhaps belonged to the Roman king … as it had to his Indo-European forebears. But there is little which can easily be traced to the Indo-European heritage: the importance of the hearth (and of fire in general, tended by (Vestal) virgins), horse-sacrifice, and the strange (not quite neuter) word for priest, *flamen*, apparently the same word as the Sanskrit *brahman*.[79]

The evidence from Rome for the sacred tree and pillar is much less extensive than that found in ancient Greece. The important symbol of the tree as *imago mundi* is almost entirely occluded, although that of the tree as *axis mundi* has some significance.

The Romans, due to their cultural dependence on Greece, felt compelled to produce a tale of the origin of their city based on the Greek model, and hence there are the efforts of Virgil and Livy. Virgil was born

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[78] H. H. Scullard, *A History of the Roman World 753 to 146 BC*, Fourth Edition (London: University Paperbacks, 1980), 25.
[79] Ken Dowden, *Religion and the Romans* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1992), 13.

in 70 BC and died in 19 BC with his great poem, the *Aeneid*, still unfinished. This epic told a legendary narrative of Rome's origins that connected the Romans to the Trojan War, and thus the Greek epic, Homer's *Iliad*. It also explicitly identified Aeneas as founder of Rome with Augustus, the founder of the Roman Empire.[80] The *Aeneid's* hero, Aeneas, was the son of the goddess Venus and the Trojan mortal Anchises. Virgil's epic claims that Aeneas escaped from Troy's burning ruins and travelled with the remaining Trojans to seek a new homeland. Along the way he had a doomed love affair with Dido, queen of Carthage, who committed suicide when he left her to pursue his destiny. After vainly attempting to settle in Thrace, Crete and Sicily, he finally reached the banks of the Tiber. There he helped Latinus, a local king, in his struggle against the Rutuli. He defeated their champion Turnus, and married the daughter of Latinus, Lavinia, and built a town named in her honour, Lavinium (which later became Rome). He succeeded to the throne of Latinus, and died mysteriously after only four years' reign.

A second origin myth ascribed the foundation of Rome to the semi-divine twins Romulus and Remus, the sons of the god Mars and the Vestal Virgin Rhea Silvia. She placed the infants in a basket and left them floating on the Tiber. The basket was deposited before the grotto Lupercal, under the fig-tree Ruminal. There a she-wolf suckled the infants. The adult brothers decided to found a city, and carefully studied the flight of birds for omens. In the section of sky apportioned to Romulus, there were twelve vultures. In Remus' section there were only six. Romulus proceeded, with a plough harnessed to a white cow and a white bull, to draw a furrow that would mark the boundary of the new city. Remus jumped over this furrow in derision and Romulus killed him. Some historians view this rivalry between brothers as reflecting the rivalry between the two principal districts of ancient Rome, the Aventine (associated with Remus and sometimes known as "Remuria") and the Palatine (associated with Romulus). In order to people his city, the Roman Quadrata (with four districts, Palatina, Esquilina, Suburana and Collina), Romulus founded a place of asylum. Outlaws and other disreputable men flocked there. Romulus took advantage of a rustic festival, the Consualia (dedicated to Consus, the god of grain storage), to abduct the daughters of the neighbouring Sabine tribe whom he had invited to the ceremonies, as wives for his men. Like Aeneas, Romulus died (or disappeared) mysteriously.

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[80] Jasper Griffin, "Virgil," in John Boardman, Jasper Griffin and Oswyn Murray (eds), *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 627-635.

Romulus' father was the war-god Mars, his protector was the sky-god Jupiter, and after his death and deification, he was identified with a third deity, the civic god Quirinus (these three gods are known as the "Archaic Triad"), and worshipped under that name.[81]

The oak is sacred to Jupiter, the sky father and equivalent of the Greek Zeus, and Livy states that on the Capitoline Hill the temple of Jupiter Feretrius was built on the site of a holy oak.[82] Jupiter's sky and light-giving characteristics are well-documented, as is his connection with the weather. Moreover, his mastery of all elements (resembling that of the Dodonaean Zeus) is documented by Arthur Bernard Cook: he is Jupiter Feretrius, a chthonic earth deity; a dedication to Jupiter Indiges speaks of his "presiding over the stream of the river Numicius," hence his being master of the waters; and his traditional connections are with the sky.[83] As with Zeus, the sacred tree of Jupiter was the oak and his consort Juno wore the crown of oak leaves. On the Caelian Hill there was an oak grove and the hill itself was known as the Mons Querquetulanus: on the Capitol there was an oak dedicated to Jupiter Feretrius; and in Praeneste oaks were very prominent and the oracles received at the shrines of Fortuna Primigenia and Jupiter Arcanus were inscribed on oak tablets.[84] The importance of Jupiter is demonstrated in human terms by the ritual costume of the Roman kings: the gilded crown of oak leaves, a throne of wood that was possibly originally a tree stump, and the *fasces* or axe bound with rods that represented the thunder- or lightning-bolt.[85] In the Republican period Julius Caesar was likened to Jupiter Capitolinus, an impression that was reinforced, according to his biographer Plutarch, by the appearance of a "great comet, which showed itself in great splendour for seven nights after Caesar's murder, and then disappeared."[86] This phenomenon paved the way for the identification of the later emperors with Jupiter and their consorts with Juno.

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[81] Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967 [1960], 21-35.
[82] H. Munro Chadwick, "The Oak and the Thunder-God," *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 30 (1900): 35.
[83] Arthur Bernard Cook, "The European Sky God: III The Italians," *Folklore* 16/3 (September 1905): 262-274, *passim*.
[84] Cook, "The European Sky God: III The Italians," 280-281.
[85] Cook, "The European Sky God: III The Italians," 302.
[86] Plutarch, "Life of Julius Caesar," in Plutarch *Lives*, Vol. 7, ed. Bernardotte Perrin (Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1919), 607-608.

The most famous Roman sacred tree was on the Palatine Hill; this was the *ficus Ruminalis*. Varro stated that this fig tree had been planted by shepherds in the distant past, in honour of the milk goddess Rumina, as its sap resembled milk.[87] The twins, Romulus and Remus, the offspring of Mars and the Vestal Rhea Silvia, were found beneath the fig and suckled by a she-wolf, a circumstance appropriate to a tree dedicated to a milk goddess. Hadzits notes that because Rumina faded in significance the tree came to be called the *ficus Romularis*, a variant title mentioned by both Ovid and Livy.[88] This association with Romulus introduces the sacred pillar, as there was on the Palatine the tomb of Romulus, which continues the Greek pattern discussed above of a tree or pillar (stone) which functions as an *axis mundi* which had in the near vicinity a significant tomb. Evans comments that the monument to Romulus appears to have been a pillar, the *niger lapis* ("black stone") which was flanked by two lions.[89]

The other important pillar cult in Pagan Rome was that of the god of boundary markers, Terminus. There is a law ascribed to Numa Pompilius, the second of the traditional line of kings (who may have been a real person and at least bears an Italian name), which states that whoever ploughed up a boundary marker would be *sacri*, outlawed, along with his oxen. *Sacri* has an etymology related to "sacred," and possesses the same sense of being set apart. Siculus Flaccus, a late but informative author on land surveying, commented with regret concerning the abandonment of ancient customs. He explained how boundary markers were set up in the past:

> They used to stand the stones themselves on the surface of the ground near the places where they meant to dig holes and fix them. The stones they would anoint, veil and garland. In the holes made for the stones to go into, when they had made sacrifice and burned the flesh of the slain victim on blazing sticks, they would, with their heads veiled, let some of the blood drip, and also throw in incense and grain. They would add honey-combs, wine and other materials customary for the ritual of boundary stones.

[87] G. Hadzits, "The *Vera Historia* of the Palatine *Ficus Ruminalis*," *Classical Philology* 31/4 (October 1936): 305.
[88] Hadzits, "The *Vera Historia* of the Palatine *Ficus Ruminalis*," 311.
[89] Evans, *The Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult and its Mediterranean Relations*, 31-32.

> When all the offering was burned, they would set the stones on top of the hot ashes and then fix them carefully.[90]

These ceremonies were not merely for establishing the boundary marker; every year the landowners between whose lands the markers stood met at or near them and offered sacrifice again. Ovid addresses a boundary stone (also the god Terminus) "whether you are a stone or a stake fixed in the ground, you too have *numen*." A Terminus stone stood on the Capitoline Hill in Rome, between the Forum and the Campus Martius, and was venerated there. It is not known whether this was because it was the site of an ancient boundary, or as a representative of all such stones. If the latter was the case, that would suggest that the Terminus stone on the Capitol was an *axis mundi*, which was replicable elsewhere through the medium of all other boundary stones.

Tree-derived monuments are also known from ancient Rome. Most important are the Jupiter columns, of which approximately one hundred and fifty examples are known, mostly from the Rhineland and eastern Gaul. These are sculpted pillars, which are often quite elaborate. Archaeologist Miranda Green states that "they each consist of a 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."[91] She adds that the sky-horseman hurls his thunderbolt at a monster that is half-human and half-snake, recalling the serpents and dragons at the roots of the cosmic tree, described in Chapter 1. These monuments were also adorned with carvings of oak-leaves and acorns. These columns are Romano-Gaulish, rather than Roman proper, and Green draws attention to the fact that "the Graeco-Roman author Maximus of Tyre makes the interesting comment that the Celtic [his word] representation of Jupiter was a tall oak tree."[92]

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[90] Quoted in H. J. Rose, *Ancient Roman Religion* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1949), 16.

[91] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (Gloucester and Totowa NJ: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 62.

[92] 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), 14.

It is important to remember that, despite the fame of the columnar monuments of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, such pillars were rare in the ancient world.[93] Their concentration in regions that were Celtic and Germanic may be significant, in that these peoples maintained the veneration of the oak tree and the thunder god well into the medieval era, as is demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4. Jupiter columns are very rare in Lower Germany (where there are piers as well as columns) and are often paired with altars that are dedicated to *Iuppiter Optimus Maximus*.[94] These monuments reinforce the association of the sacred tree with the sky father in Indo-European derived cultures, and are testimony to the importance of the sacred tree, in that the monuments would have been expensive to erect and involve considerable artistic skill.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the evidence for the veneration of the sacred tree in ancient Greek and Roman religion. It has been demonstrated that, while many of the inheritances from the Indo-European matrix are only dimly visible in Greece and Rome, there is still a discernible presence in Greek texts (chiefly in the cosmology of Pherecydes of Syros, which is supported by fragments of mythology and cult practice) of the sacred tree as *imago mundi*. The two deities that are equated with the tree are Cthonie/Ge, the bride who wears the cloak that bears the image of the world (and who is cognate with Gaia the earth goddess) and Zas/Zeus, the bridegroom who makes it for her (who is cognate with the later Classical Greek Zeus, the sky-father who is also conceived of as lord of the world, for example at Dodona). This is evidence for the tree=human=world equation discussed in Chapter 1.

Greece also supplies ample evidence for the concept of the tree as *axis mundi*, although the best example of this is the omphalos of Delphi, a stone rather than a tree. Given the strong causal derivation of the pillar from the living tree, the presence of aniconic pillars and rough statues that barely hint at anthropomorphic form suggest that the equation tree=human was widely known and accepted in Greece. This is most powerfully expressed in the cult of the sacred oak of Zeus at the Dodonaean oracle

[93] Fred S. Kleiner, "Review of Helene Walter, *La Colonne Ciselée dans le Gaule Romaine*," *American Journal of Archaeology* 77/1 (January 1973): 107.
[94] Diana E. E. Kleiner and Fred S. Kleiner, "Review of Gerhard Bauchhenß and Peter Noelke, *Die Iuppitersäulen in den germanischen Provinzen*," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 42/1 (March 1983): 74.

sanctuary. The tree was Zeus, and the voice of the oracle (through whatever medium employed) was always the voice of the tree. Moreover, Zeus at Dodona took on the qualities of an earth and water deity, which when coupled with his sky attributes made him the deity of the entire physical universe, providing perhaps the only incidence of the tree=world=human equation in Ancient Greece.

This chapter also reviewed subsidiary meanings of the sacred tree in ancient Greece and briefly considered evidence for the cult of the tree, and its derivative the pillar, in ancient Roman religion. Roman evidence is much more fragmentary than that of Greece, and generally exhibits the primary meaning of the tree as *axis mundi*. The pillar cult, associated with both the god of boundaries, Terminus, and Jupiter, has a significant presence, and the relationship between the Terminus pillar on the Capitoline Hill and the many Terminus stones throughout Roman territory resembles that of the Eliadean *axis mundi*, or centre, and its replicable subsidiary centres.

CHAPTER THREE

SACRED TREES IN ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL CELTIC SOURCES: DRUIDS, KINGS AND SAINTS

> Therefore no other trees by the waters are ever to tower proudly on high, lifting their tops above the thick foliage. No other trees so well-watered are ever to reach such a height; they are all destined for death, for the earth below, among mortal men, with those who go down to the pit. *Ezekiel* Chapter 31, Verse 14[1]

Introduction

This chapter commences with an examination of the ethnographic writings of Greeks and Romans concerning the Celts of the ancient world, concentrating on the difficulties of reconstructing the mythology and religion of the Celts from this "outsider" or *etic* testimony.[2] A discussion of the oak grove as a place of worship for the Celts in the classical accounts introduces the theme of the sacred tree. The problem of the conversion to Christianity of the "barbarian" peoples in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, and the effects that exposure to this universalising cultural and religious tradition had on indigenous cultures such as those of the Celts and Germans, is highlighted. The most obvious effect of Christianity was the arrival of literacy, but the contents of texts written in early medieval Europe are disputed. Scholars range from asserting that such texts contain authentic traditions from pre-Christian religion, to

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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.

[2] Celtic Studies is also a disputed field, with many contending that "the Celts" are an artificial construction that cannot be sustained by reference to the evidence. See D. Ellis Evans, "Celticity, Celtic Awareness and Celtic Studies," *Zeitschrift fur celtische Philologie* 49-50 (1997): 1-27 for an exposition of and partial rejoinder to these debates.

arguing that such texts are entirely Christian products and their monastic authors knew nothing of "Paganism."[3] In elucidating the meanings of the sacred tree, the transition from Paganism to Christianity is crucial.

The methods through which Christianity appropriated the sacred tree are also important. This study is informed to some extent by a post-colonial approach. The way in which the barbarians of antiquity and the early Middle Ages were represented in the records of the Greco-Roman world and the literate culture of medieval Christianity has strong affinities with the situation of indigenous peoples colonised by Western nations in the modern world. The academic disciplines of ancient history and medieval studies have been slow to incorporate insights from post-colonial studies. Those exceptions, such as Jane Webster and Stephen L. Dyson, are herein relied upon.[4] Attention to suppressed voices requires that a wide-ranging search for possibly admissible evidence be conducted. After considering the evidence for Celtic sacred trees in antiquity, medieval Irish and Welsh texts are examined. The principal meanings of the sacred tree in medieval Irish texts connect with the marking of territory or "centres," the initiation or inauguration of kings (rulers of that territory), and the pronouncement of law (by kings and their mouthpieces, the poets, who derive their authority from the tree). It is demonstrated that the sacred tree as *imago mundi* is almost absent from the Celtic sources, though the sacred tree as *axis mundi* retains a prominent position.

Approaching The Celts in Ancient Sources

The ancient Greeks and Romans were deeply interested in the customs of neighbouring peoples and a tradition of ethnographical and geographical writing developed in Greece from around 500 BCE with Hecataeus of Miletus (c. 550-476 BCE) as one of its earliest exponents.[5] This tradition of writing reached a high point with Poseidonios of Apamea's (c. 135-51 BCE) now-lost multi-volume *History*. The twenty-third book of this *History* was an ethnography of Gaul, written around 80 BCE, which now

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[3] Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1991), 66.

[4] For example, Jane Webster, "Necessary Comparisons: A Post-Colonial Approach to Religious Syncretism in the Roman Provinces," *World Archaeology* 28/3 (February 1997): 324-338; and Stephen L. Dyson, "Caesar and the Natives," *The Classical Journal* 63/8 (May 1968): 341-346.

[5] J. J. Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 60 (1960): 194.

exists only in fragments preserved by four later authors; Athenaeus, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo and Caesar.[6] Classical ethnographies are problematic sources, in that authors recorded material primarily for its exotic qualities, which indicated the "barbarous" nature of the peoples so described and underlined the "civilized" nature of Greek and Roman society and culture.

With regard to the relations that existed between the Romans and Celtic peoples, a range of authors indicate that Rome feared the Gauls and held strong cultural prejudices about them. The Celts of the ancient world had sacked both Delphi and Rome, and Plutarch's "Life of Marcellus" notes that the Romans feared the Gauls "more than any other people. For Rome had once been taken by them…"[7] Artistic depictions of Celtic peoples by sculptors reinforced this perception; Rome possessed copies of the Ionian Greek "Dying Gaul" and "Gaul Slaying His Wife" (technically sculptures of Galatians, not Gauls). These images of the Gauls, "a people fierce in battle yet unacquainted with discipline, wild creatures clad in torque and trousers," were very powerful and extremely popular, judging by the number of Roman marble copies.[8]

Very few writers mention religious beliefs or practices related to trees among the ancient Celts; notable exceptions include Pliny the Elder's account of the mistletoe and the oak in Book 16, Chapter 95 of his *Natural History*, Tacitus' *Annals*, Book 14, Chapter 30 which tells of the destruction of the sacred groves of Mona (Anglesey), and Lucan's description of a sacred grove near Marseilles in his epic poem *Pharsalia*, an account of Caesar's campaigns in Gaul. These sources provide information about the Druids, the learned class within Celtic society; the Druids were central to religion and socio-political decision making in Celtic cultures, and an examination of their role can illuminate the difficulties of using Greek and Roman ethnographic sources.

Jane Webster has drawn attention to the fact that Druids were at the heart of political and military resistance to Rome among the Celtic tribes. She tabulated references to Druids, noting that "[b]etween the fourth

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[6] Daphne Nash, "Reconstructing Poseidonios' Celtic Ethnography: Some Considerations," *Britannia* 7 (1976): 112.
[7] Plutarch, "Life of Marcellus," in Plutarch *Lives*, Vol. 5, ed. Bernardotte Perrin (Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1919), 442.
[8] Stephen L. Dyson, "Caesar and the Natives," *The Classical Journal* 63/8 (May 1968): 342.

century BC and the fourth century AD, twenty Classical authors referred to the Druids of Gaul and Britain," from Aristotle to Ausonius.[9] However, because certain later sources, like Pliny, stress the magico-religious aspects of Druidic functions, it has often been argued that Julius Caesar's attribution of extensive powers to the Druids in Book 6 of the *Gallic Wars* was merely exaggeration which made his conquest of the Gaulish tribes appear more impressive.[10] Pliny's famous account describes a ritual in which mistletoe is cut with a golden sickle from an oak tree that a Druid has ascended. The mistletoe is then wrapped in a white cloak, and two bulls are sacrificed.[11]

By contrast, Caesar assessed the Druids as one of two important classes in Gaulish society (along with the *equites*, "Knights," or warriors) and stated that:

> [t]he Druids officiate at the worship of the gods, regulate public and private sacrifices, and give rulings on all religious questions. Large numbers of young men flock to them for instruction, and they are held in great honour by the people. They act as judges in practically all disputes, whether between tribes or between individuals; when any crimes is committed, or a murder takes place, or a dispute arises about an inheritance or a boundary, it is they who adjudicate the matter and appoint the compensation to be paid and received by the parties concerned. Any individual or tribe failing to accept their award is banned from taking part in sacrifice – the heaviest punishment that can be inflicted upon a Gaul. Those who are laid under such a ban are regarded as impious criminals. Everyone shuns them and avoids going near or speaking to them, for fear of taking some harm by contact with what is unclean; if they appear as plaintiffs, justice is denied them, and they are excluded from a share in any honour. [12]

Further, Caesar states that Druids are exempted from taxation and military service, hold annual assemblies in Gaul, have a single leader to whom all owe obedience, preside over human sacrifices at crucial times, and, while

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[9] Jane Webster, "At the End of the World: Druidic and Other Revitalization Movements in Post-Conquest Gaul and Britain," *Britannia* 30 (1999): 2-4 and Daphne Nash, "Reconstructing Poseidonios' Celtic Ethnography: Some Considerations," 111-126.

[10] Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius," 213-215.

[11] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (Gloucester and Totowa, NJ: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 27.

[12] Julius Caesar, *The Conquest of Gaul*, ed. and trans. S. A. Handford, Chapter 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976 [1951]), 31-32.

the Druidic order engages in transmitting the oral learning of the Gauls, some Druids can and do produce written texts.[13] This last statement is supported by the archaeological discovery of brief Gaulish and Celtiberian inscriptions, and of the Coligny Calendar, a five-yearly ritual calendar on bronze plates dating from the second century CE, indicating auspicious and inauspicious days.[14]

Accepting this picture of the Druids as the result of Caesar's own observation and knowledge (he did not speak Gaulish but "had cultivated friendships… among Romanised Gauls"),[15] Webster argues that later texts show Druids only in a ceremonial and ritual light because the conquest of Gaul resulted in the removal of their more extensive political and legal powers. She emphasises the fact that even Poseidonios' earlier account (c. 90 BCE) was written after the first Transalpine War (of the Romans against the Gauls), and evidences a desire to "place" for literate audiences an exotic people that had been recently conquered.[16] Caesar's account, written approximately forty years after Poseidonios', was more concerned with the socio-political aspects of the Druids, because he was planning a more comprehensive assimilation of Gaul into Roman administration and culture. In this context, Caesar's failure to distinguish between the Druids and the bards and seers (*vates*) is simply a homogenising of the three learned classes into one. Webster is concerned to elucidate the power relations inherent in written traditions like Classical ethnography. The Celts, save for a few Druids mentioned above, were illiterate, possessing an oral rather than a written culture. Outsiders such as Poseidonios and Caesar were, by virtue of their literate status, able to "place" the Celts of the ancient world for posterity.[17] Moreover, these writers are members of a conquering, colonizing culture (and in Caesar's case he was the conqueror) and thus the Gauls become in certain important ways analogous to the conquered indigenous peoples of modern colonialism.

In many ways Rome was very tolerant toward the religious beliefs and practices of its conquered provincials. It has often been noted that this

[13] Caesar, *The Conquest of Gaul*, 32-33.
[14] Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994 [1961]), 84-89.
[15] Dyson, "Caesar and the Natives," 343.
[16] Webster, "At the End of the World: Druidic and Other Revitalization Movements in Post-Conquest Gaul and Britain," 8.
[17] Dyson, "Caesar and the Natives," views Caesar as a "shrewd and realistic observer of Gallic and Germanic culture," 344.

tolerance was not extended to the Druids, and Webster's retrieval of Caesar's description of a politically powerful institution goes some way to explain why this was the case. Roman political domination of Celtic populations required the nullification of the Druids' public role, confining them to the more harmless "religious" activities. Webster has elsewhere argued that the alleged Roman tolerance of foreign gods was not as extensive as has previously been imagined; her post-colonial stance draws attention to *interpretatio Romana*, the technique of pairing the name of a Celtic deity with a Roman deity (for example, Sulis Minerva or Apollo Grannos), as "a post-Conquest discourse, generated in a context of unequal power relationships."[18]

The Druids became leaders in the resistance against the Romans, and Tacitus' *Annals* records the destruction of the sacred grove at the centre of Druidic activity on Mona, the island of Anglesey in north Wales, in 61 CE. Webster draws interesting parallels between the Druids after the conquest of Gaul and the state proscriptions against them issued by Augustus and subsequent Julio-Claudian emperors, and modern millenarian reactions of indigenous peoples such as the Amerindian Ghost Dance, cargo cults in Melanesia, and the Australian Aboriginal anti-colonial movements mentioned in Chapter 1. Druids prophesied the downfall of the Roman Empire during the revolt led by Julius Civilis in 70-71 CE, after the burning of the Capitol in Rome in 69 CE. Tacitus comments that people were convinced "that the Empire's days were numbered. They reflected that Rome had been captured by the Gauls in the past, but as the house of Jupiter remained inviolate, the Empire had survived. Now, however, fate had ordained this fire as a sign of the gods' anger, and of the passing of world dominion to the nations north of the Alps. Such at any rate was the message proclaimed by the idle superstition of Druidism."[19]

This study is particularly aware of the difficult power relations encoded in the texts that are examined by modern scholars in order to understand the significance of the sacred tree. Barbarians in the ancient world, and medieval cultures such as the Irish, Welsh, continental Germans and Scandinavians had their religious beliefs and practices recorded by conquerors (both political and religious) who often had vested

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[18] Jane Webster, "*Interpretatio*: Roman Word Power and the Celtic Gods," *Britannia* 26 (1995): 153.

[19] Tacitus, *Histories*, Book 4.54, quoted in Webster, "At the End of the World: Druidic and Other Revitalization Movements in Post-Conquest Gaul and Britain," 14.

interests in minimising or altering the content and meaning of certain events, motifs and practices. Revolts and millenarian agitations are also known from the Middle Ages (for example the Saxon *Stellinga* uprising in 841 CE examined in Chapter 4), and they indicate the desire of conquered peoples experiencing rapid change and great socio-political strain to retain their identity, regain their freedom, and determine their own cultural norms.

The Sacred Grove of the Celts in Tacitus and Lucan

Publius Cornelius Tacitus' account of the defeat of the Druids and their forces on Mona in 61 CE by the Roman provincial governor of Britain, Suetonius Paulinus, is one of the most important sources for Druidic activity in the first century CE. He describes the battle as follows:

> [o]n the opposite shore stood the Britons, close embodied, and prepared for action. Women were seen running through the ranks in wild disorder; their apparel funereal; their hair loose to the wind, in their hands flaming torches, and their whole appearance resembling the frantic rage of the Furies. The Druids were ranged in order, with hands uplifted, invoking the gods, and pouring forth horrible imprecations. The novelty of the fight struck the Romans with awe and terror. They stood in stupid amazement, as if their limbs were benumbed, riveted to one spot, a mark for the enemy. The exhortations of the general diffused new vigour through the ranks, and the men, by mutual reproaches, inflamed each other to deeds of valour. They felt the disgrace of yielding to a troop of women, and a band of fanatic priests; they advanced their standards, and rushed on to the attack with impetuous fury.
>
> The Britons perished in the flames, which they themselves had kindled. The island fell, and a garrison was established to retain it in subjection. The religious groves, dedicated to superstition and barbarous rites, were levelled to the ground. In those recesses, the natives [stained] their altars with the blood of their prisoners, and in the entrails of men explored the will of the gods. While Suetonius was employed in making his arrangements to secure the island, he received intelligence that Britain had revolted, and that the whole province was up in arms.[20]

This account clearly exhibits pro-Roman and anti-British prejudice. The "exotic" characteristics that were earlier referred to as a key element of

[20] Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 13.40, quoted in Webster, "At the End of the World: Druidic and Other Revitalization Movements in Post-Conquest Gaul and Britain," 11-12.

classical ethnographic accounts are evident: women demonstrate unfeminine and unrestrained passion, indicated by their loose hair and the fact that they are on the field of battle at all; the Druids are "fanatics" and their prayers (which presumably would be virtuous if they were offered by Roman *flaminiae* in support of the Roman army) are "horrible imprecations."

Most important is the reference to "barbarous rites" and human sacrifice associated with the groves that the Roman army destroyed. Human sacrifice was one of the chief "exotic" and "barbaric" practices of Celtic peoples for Greek and Roman authors, along with head-hunting during and after battle. Chapter 1 has explained the importance of the original cosmic sacrifice of the primordial human to Indo-European religion, and it is important to note that Caesar's reference to the seriousness of the punishment among the Gauls for defying Druidic rulings (being banned from the sacrifices) suggests that the Gauls preserved the meaning of renewing the world through human sacrifice in notorious rituals such as that of the Wicker Man, mentioned by both Strabo and Caesar, in which people encased in a huge, human-shaped wicker colossus were consumed by fire.[21] The resemblance of the colossus' size and shape to the primordial being, from whom the world is created, is unmistakable. This suggests that the ancient Celts retained the meaning of the human form (and thus, possibly, the tree, although there is no direct evidence), as *imago mundi* to some extent. Although both Greece and Rome had officially outlawed human sacrifices by senatorial decree in 97 BCE, such sacrifices still were occasionally offered up at times of great crisis until the transition to Christianity in the fourth century CE.

Classical ethnographic accounts rarely refer to the content of any mythology or religious narrative that was significant to the Celts or Germans or any barbarian groups being discussed, but rather present practices or sacred objects in isolation, necessitating oblique methods of comparison to build the meaning that these must have possessed. Lucan's *Pharsalia*, discussed below, bears a resemblance to Tacitus' account, in that Dyson argues Lucan began to write his epic poem while at the court of Nero around 60 CE, at the time Suetonius Paulinus despoiled the groves of Mona. Tacitus' account was written later, but it is likely that a court

[21] Miranda Green, "Humans as Ritual Victims in the Later Prehistory of Western Europe," *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 17/2 (1988): 175-176.

official like Lucan would be aware of events in Britain.[22] For the purposes of this study it is important to note that the groves were regarded as holy and were used as ritual spaces, both for education and for sacrifices. They were presided over by the Druids, the formal priesthood of the British Celts, and the Romans considered these groves important enough to destroy them in order to conquer a rebellious population more effectively.

Lucan, in the *Pharsalia*, celebrates the conquest of Gaul by Julius Caesar, in the war that extended from 58 BCE to 49 BCE. The poet eloquently describes a sacred grove near Marseilles (the ancient Greek colony, Massilia) in southern Gaul, which Caesar's soldiers felled, needing the timber for siege-works:

> [h]e [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 spouted 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 against gales and lightning, and would shudder to themselves though no wind stirred. Their 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, groans arose 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 then even he kept out at midday, and between dawn and dusk – for fear that the gods might be abroad at such hours.[23]

It is apparent that Lucan, too, is strongly pro-Roman and entertains prejudices against the Gauls. Yet he nevertheless provides much valuable information in this account: the sacred grove could be entered by only the Druidic priest; it featured crude unformed wood images of the gods; and it was a ritual space where sacrifices (human and animal) were performed. Lucan names two very common types of Indo-European sacred trees, oaks

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[22] Stephen L. Dyson, "Caepio, Tacitus, and Lucan's Sacred Grove," *Classical Philology* 65/1 (January 1970): 37.

[23] Lucan, *Pharsalia*, ed. and trans. Robert Graves (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1956), Book III, lines 399-453, 78-79.

and yews, and connects the oaks with snakes, which is in accordance with the discussion of symbols and motifs found in Indo-European mythology in Chapter 1.

The unformed wooden images of the Gaulish gods found within the grove recall the "plank" effigy of Hera described in Chapter 2, which suggested the early derivation of anthropomorphic sculpture from tree trunks. This development, which is clear in ancient Greek iconography, is strengthened by evidence from research into Gallo-Roman iconography. Celtic art is basically "decorative and abstract" whereas Greek and Roman "art favoured naturalism and anthropomorphism,"[24] and contacts between Gauls and Romans resulted in the abandonment of the featureless wooden deities and the development of a "realistic" sculptural mode.[25] Other Celtic archaeological sites have yielded further evidence of Celtic rudimentary wooden sculpture. The study of the sacred tree rarely requires detailed investigation of ritual sites in water courses, though Chapter 1 noted the importance of the primeval waters in both the Vedic Indian and the Mesopotamian sources. The shrine of the goddess Sequana at the source of the Seine has yielded over two hundred figures that had been offered to the goddess prior to the end of the first century CE.[26] These are all rudimentarily carved, and are intended to inform the goddess of physical ailments requiring healing and to petition her mercy.[27]

The function of the grove as a point of origin in Lucan's account is underlined by the description of the water source within, recalling the microcosmic depictions of the universe through ritual sites that combine tree, water and stone. Moreover, the grove was the abode of the gods and their fearsome presence was at its strongest during the daylight hours, possibly reinforcing the Indo-European notion that the benevolent deities were the gods of the diurnal sky, and the king god is a sky-deity. Commentators on Lucan, including Dyson and Phillips, have drawn attention to the fact that the Roman general is, in the eyes of the local

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[24] A. N. Newell, "Gallo-Roman Religious Sculpture," *Greece & Rome* 3/8 (February 1934): 74-84.

[25] Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), notes that in medieval Scandinavia there were rough-hewn "gods" made from tree trunks, which were often kept in churches.

[26] Russell Meiggs, *Trees and Timber in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 323.

[27] Roland Martin, "Wooden Figures from the Source of the Seine," *Antiquity* 39 (1965): 247-252.

Gauls, committing an act of sacrilege, though no divine retribution is visited upon Caesar or his troops.[28] Strabo adds to our knowledge of the function of the Druidic grove, in his description of the meeting-place of the Celtic tribes of Galatia, a grove called Drunemeton ("oak sanctuary"). Here the grove has legal and communal significance apart from sacrificial rites.[29] Archaeologists have also suggested that sites such as "the great open-air Hallstatt Iron Age enclosures at Goldberg and Goloring in Germany, dating to the sixth century BC, contain[ing] huge timber uprights" may have been erected as an intermediate stage between natural groves and more explicitly architectural temples.[30]

It is worth asking which deities were most likely to be worshipped in the sacred groves of Mona and Marseilles. In Chapter 2 it was argued that Zeus, the sky-father and god of thunder and lightning, was peculiarly associated with the oak and the oak grove as a sacred space. The Celts of the ancient world worshipped many gods, and evidence of divine names is found in brief inscriptions on statuary and other monuments.[31] Caesar, in the *The Conquest of Gaul*, states that the Gauls worshipped Mercury, Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva, and assert their descent from the god Dis.[32] This is a clear example of *interpretatio Romana*, as Caesar attributes to the Gaulish deities the same functions as the Roman gods named. Webster, analysing the image of the Celtic "Mercury" and his non-syncretistic consort Rosmerta, raises interesting questions as to the extent that the acceptance of realistic iconography and Roman names might have facilitated the continuation of indigenous Celtic religion.[33]

What is of interest for this chapter is the identification of an indigenous Zeus-Jupiter figure within the Celtic pantheon. In iconography the only two deities of Caesar's six that have distinctively "Celtic" forms are Mercury and Jupiter. The Celtic Jupiter has two types, the first exemplified

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[28] Dyson, "Caepio, Tacitus, and Lucan's Sacred Grove," 37-38. See also O. C. Phillips, "Lucan's Grove," *Classical Philology* 63/4 (October 1968): 296-300.
[29] Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Seeing the Wood for the Trees: The Symbolism of Trees and Wood in Ancient Gaul and Britain* (Aberystwyth: University of ales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, 2000), 7.
[30] Aldhouse-Green, *Seeing the Wood for the Trees: The Symbolism of Trees and Wood in Ancient Gaul and Britain*, 15.
[31] Webster, "*Interpretatio*: Roman Word Power and the Celtic Gods," 154-156.
[32] Caesar, *The Conquest of Gaul*, Chapter 1, 33-34.
[33] Webster, "Necessary Comparisons: A Post-Colonial Approach to Religious Syncretism in the Roman Provinces," 327.

by the bronze statuette in the museum at St Germain-en-Laye, which was "found in 1774 at Le Chatelet (Haute Marne)."[34] Here he holds a thunderbolt in his right hand and a spoked wheel in his left, and he can be identified with the Gaulish Taranis, the god of thunder. Lucan mentions this deity's name, and it is given elsewhere as Tanarus, which is identical etymologically to the Germanic Thunor.[35] In Chapter 4 of this book Tacitus' account of the grove of the Semnones, which was believed to be the place of origin of the tribe and the abode of the "god who rules over all,"[36] is examined. This passage is an important parallel to the Celtic groves discussed here, as images of the Celtic Taran or Tanarus occasionally have the letters IOM engraved upon them (an abbreviation of *Iuppiter Optimus Maximus*). Lucan's mention of local belief that the ground frequently shook also calls to mind the thunderstorm activity which manifested so spectacularly at Dodona and was regarded as a sign of Zeus' presence.

The destruction of the sacred groves in Gaul and Britain, separated by over a century, helped to create the conditions for resistance against Rome, in which Druids played an important part. Religion is one of the core components of identity, and the importance of this fact cannot be underestimated in the pre-modern era when it was much less concerned with internal states and belief in dogma, but had more to do with shared cultural practices and public expression through ritual. Webster and Dyson have both argued that conquest of the Celts of the ancient world sparked revitalization movements. With regard to religion Hans Mol has defined it as "the sacralization of identity,"[37] and he elaborates that in times of change: "the sacralization of one identity may contribute to the weakening of another and (b) that the mechanisms of sacralization (transcendentalization, commitment, ritual, myth) have developed the wherewithal to sacralise in order to ensure both function and survival."[38] This fits neatly with

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[34] Newell, "Gallo-Roman Religious Sculpture," 78.

[35] H. Munro Chadwick, "The Oak and the Thunder God," *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 30 (1900): 26.

[36] Tacitus, "Germania," in Tacitus, *Dialogus, Agricola, Germania*, Chapter 39, ed. and trans. William Peterson (London and Cambridge, Mass: William Heinemann Ltd and Harvard University Press, 1946), 319.

[37] Hans Mol, "Religion and Identity: A Dialectical Interpretation of Religious Phenomena," in *Identity Issues and World Religions*, ed. Victor C. Hayes (Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1986), 71.

[38] Mol, "Religion and Identity: A Dialectical Interpretation of Religious Phenomena," 71

Webster's claim that revitalization movements happen when there is "accelerated change" in a community (such as conquest and loss of independence), which results in "feelings of displacement and disorientation."[39] These themes are further explored in later chapters of this book with regard to the rapid change brought about by conversion to Christianity.

Christianity and the Sacred Tree in Late Antiquity: Martin of Tours

Christianity spread throughout the Greco-Roman world from the late first century CE and after centuries of uncertainty and persecution became gradually dominant in the fourth century, after the victorious emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, which decriminalised the new faith. Theodosius I, who became emperor in 379 CE, banned all Pagan religions and made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire through a series of decrees issued between 389 and 393 CE. Christianity was an exclusive religion worshipping one god, and as it began to gain momentum Christians felt empowered to move against Pagan cults, destroying "idols" and converting Pagan temples into churches for use in the growing Christian community. Christian missionaries were acting as agents both of Christianity and of *Romanitas*, aiming to "civilize" the barbarians and integrate them into the emergent Roman-derived Christian society.[40]

Around 390 CE Martin, Bishop of Tours (c. 317-397 CE), a charismatic churchman who had been a soldier in the Roman army before his religious conversion, cut down a sacred pine tree after demolishing a nearby temple in a village in the Touraine. His hagiographer, Sulpicius Severus, whose *Life of Saint Martin* is an important source, in that Sulpicius and Martin were acquainted and the *Life* was written before Martin died, described the incident:

> [a]gain, in a certain village he had demolished a very ancient temple and was proceeding to cut down a pine tree that was close to the shrine, when the priest of the place and all his pagan following came up to stop him. These same people had been quiet enough, at Our Lord's command, while

[39] Webster, "At the End of the World: Druidic and Other Revitalization Movements in Post-Conquest Gaul and Britain," 15.

[40] Carole M. Cusack, *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples* (London: Cassell, 1998), 33-34.

> the temple was being thrown down but they were not prepared to see the tree felled. He painstakingly explained to them that there was nothing sacred about a tree trunk and that they had much better be followers of the God he himself served. As for the tree, it had much better be cut down because it was dedicated to a demon.
>
> Then one of them, more audacious than the rest, said to him: "If you have confidence in the God you say you worship, stand where the tree will fall, and we will cut it down ourselves; and if your Lord, as you call him, is with you, you shall not be harmed."
>
> Martin, with dauntless trust in God, undertook to do this. Thereupon all the assembled pagans agreed to the bargain, reckoning the loss of their tree a small matter if, in its downfall, it crushed the enemy of their religion. And as the pine tree leaned to one side, so that there was no doubt on which side it would fall when cut through, Martin was bound and made to stand on the spot chosen by the rustics, where they were all quite sure that the tree would come down. Then they began to cut down the tree themselves with great joy and delight. A wondering crowd stood at a distance.
>
> Gradually the pine began nodding and a disastrous fall seemed imminent. Standing at a distance the monks grew pale; and, so frightened were they as the danger drew near, that they lost all hope and courage, and could only await the death of Martin. He, however, waited undaunted, relying on the Lord. The tottering pine had already given a crack, it was actually falling, it was just coming down on him, when he lifted his hand and met it with the sign of salvation.
>
> And that – and you would have thought it had been whipped like a top – the tree plunged in another direction, almost crushing some rustics who had ensconced themselves in a safe place. 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.[41]

Sulpicius Severus' classic dramatisation of the confrontation between Christian saint and Pagans over a holy tree would become the textual basis for many later encounters in medieval saints' lives. Christians were intolerant of the "Pagan superstitions" that persisted after Theodosius'

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[41] Sulpicius Severus, "The Life of Saint Martin," trans. F. H. Hoare, in Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head (eds), *Soldiers of Christ* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 15-16.

edicts, and Pagans were often impressed by missionaries' destruction of temples and sacred objects, because they expected their gods to punish the sacrilege, and when this did not happen they generally concluded that the Christian god was more powerful than their local deities. This is similar to the situation discussed above, where the audiences that witnessed the destruction of the Druidic groves of Marseilles and Mona expected that their gods would punish the Roman generals for sacrilege, but this did not eventuate.

When this religious destruction is accompanied by political and social conquest, the failure of the local gods to punish sacrilege has far-reaching consequences. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the conquered peoples experienced their own weakness and loss of political independence in the face of the conquering culture as mirrored in the weakness and loss of power of their gods *vis-à-vis* the conquerors' gods or god. Indeed, some scholars have explicitly drawn parallels between the conquest and conversion of modern peoples with those of late antique and medieval Europe. Clare Macrae's comparative study of the conversion of the Irish and the conversion of the Akan of Ghana lists many instructive parallels, though she is uncritically favourable to Christianity and the conversion process, seemingly interpreting the destruction of the local microcosm as more than compensated for by the integration of the new converts into the Christian world (macrocosm).[42] With regard to medieval missionaries, Richard Sullivan has suggested that Pagans were more positively influenced in their response to Christian preachers like Martin of Tours by factors such as the character and conduct of missionaries and the offer of greater material prosperity through conversion to Christianity.[43] If, when interrogating the evidence, a "level playing field" is assumed, these more "positive" factors may be important.

However, when conversion to Christianity is equated with conquest and the loss of independence and indigenous traditions, it is surely realistic to explore the likelihood that the conquering, colonising culture systematically undermined the conquered people and that Christianity was ultimately accepted because the traditional Pagan religion was rendered inoperable and impossible as a means of preserving identity and providing

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[42] Clare Macrae, *The Sacred Tree: Divinities and Ancestors in the Encounter With Christianity* (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 2001), 92-94, 209-225.

[43] Richard E. Sullivan, "The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan," in Richard E. Sullivan, *Christian Missionary Activity in the Early Middle Ages* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), 705-740.

hope for the future. In Chapter 4 these issues are explored in greater detail with reference to the conversion of the Pagan Saxons in the eighth and ninth centuries CE.

Paganism in Medieval Irish Texts

In determining the role of the sacred tree in Irish Paganism and Christianity it is vital to investigate a wide variety of texts dating from the Middle Ages. The pre-Christian Irish possessed an indigenous form of writing, *ogham* (dating from the late second or early third century CE and apparently designed to be carved, as it consisted of straight lines), and important work by Jane Stevenson has suggested that when conversion to Christianity occurred in the fifth century Irish society was not exclusively an oral culture, which made it able to reach levels of high textual sophistication by the sixth and seventh centuries.[44] This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that Ireland was never conquered by the Romans, although there were trade contacts from the first century which are attested by Tacitus' *Agricola*.

Irish society prior to the conversion exhibited continuities with the ancient world, with the Druids, bards (*filid*) and seers all playing prominent roles. Proinsias MacCana has argued that the Irish Druids resisted Christian encroachments in much the same way that the Gaulish Druids resisted the Romans, and that after the conversion was completed the poets carried on the majority of the functions of the Druids, who vanished from the textual record.[45] Thus, *Uraicecht Becc* and *Bretha Nemed*, legal texts from the seventh and eighth centuries, reflect the views of the Christian establishment in that the *filid* (including historians and poets) and the *brithemain* (judges) are accorded status, but the Druids "are treated as mere sorcerers" with their traditional role having shifted to the *filid*.[46] The law tracts themselves are especially interesting, in that there are many that can be dated to the seventh century, and Stevenson says of them:

> these law-tracts are prose and quite clearly composed as written documents. But they quote from potentially earlier material, which they

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[44] Jane Stevenson, "The Beginnings of Literacy in Ireland," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 89/C/6 (1989): 129-130.

[45] Proinsis MacCana, "*Regnum* and *Sacerdotium*: Notes on Irish Tradition," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 65 (1979): 444-446, 455-457.

[46] Stevenson, "The Beginnings of Literacy in Ireland," 150-151.

> refer to as *fenechus*, which is either in verse or in very formal prose: gnomic poetic statements couched in archaic and extremely difficult language. *Fenechus* compositions show many symptoms of being survivals from the pre-literate stage of Irish legal practice, in which the *brithemain* kept the secrets of their trade to themselves by depending on oral composition and transmission of texts which were so difficult and allusive in content as to require expert exegesis in fitting them to the context in hand.[47]

Since the 1950s the scholarly controversy between "nativists" and "anti-nativists" has affected Irish studies, with a compromise position only beginning to emerge in the twenty-first century. This particular trend began in the 1950s with James Carney's attack on scholars he dubbed nativists, proposing instead what has become the anti-nativist position.[48] In a nutshell, this position depends on the fact that the pre-Christian Celts were non-literate and all written texts date from after the conversion period, and are in the main traceable to Christian authors. Where once "nativist" scholars studied such sources for evidence of the traditional religion that had been preserved, intentionally or unintentionally, "anti-nativists" claim that these texts actually contain no such evidence. They are Christian products; and any discussion of so-called "Pagan" practices or beliefs is merely a literary construct, as likely to be derived from Biblical models (for example the Pagan Canaanites) as from any posited inherited native tradition. The anti-nativists show a particular disdain for the use of evidence from comparative Indo-European studies, particularly those referencing Georges Dumézil, who postulated a social system of three classes or castes as a basic characteristic of Indo-European cultures.[49]

The anti-nativist approach impacted on Irish studies and medieval studies from the 1980s onwards, although more recently a compromise

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[47] Stevenson, "The Beginnings of Literacy in Ireland," 162.

[48] Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1991), chronicles this dispute in Irish studies and treads a very fine line methodologically. This is because the book's stance is avowedly anti-nativist, but in certain chapters (e.g. Chapter 5, "Kingship and Society," and Chapter 9, "Druids and Outlaws") nativist arguments and conclusions are accepted and built upon, particularly comparative Indo-European evidence.

[49] For example, Georges Dumézil, *Camillus: a Study of Indo-European Religion as Roman History*, ed. and trans. Udo Strutynski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). See also C. Scott Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973 [1966]) for a survey of Dumézil's *corpus*.

position, a "middle way," has been developed, chiefly by John Carey. Stevenson's argument about early Irish literacy, mentioned above, is important here: her identification of *ogham* as only a stage in the Irish acquisition of literacy which is contemporary with the use of other scripts; her use of Damien McManus' work on British loanwords into Irish to demonstrate that the impact of the fifth-century Patrician mission on the Irish language has been greatly exaggerated; and her clarification of the continued role of the learned classes post the conversion, discussed above, lead inevitably to the conclusion that the sophistication of sixth century Irish literate culture was due to the fact that literacy had a long history in Ireland, and the learned classes of early medieval Ireland "used the craft of literacy. They did not permit literacy to overwhelm them."[50]

In light of these criticisms, Kim McCone's assertion that the Patrician mission is the beginning of Christianity in Ireland and before that Ireland was "to all intents and purposes a non-literate society,"[51] and his insistence that the Irish clergy were hostile to traditional learning, seem both naïve and crudely motivated by ideology rather than concern for the texts. Stevenson's practical and technical assessment of language and literacy points logically to the exploration of the content of early medieval Irish texts that John Carey has been engaged with over the last two decades. Carey's principal concern is to establish that the Irish were concerned to "find not just any niche, but an exalted one, for the deities of their forefathers."[52] In order to establish this, Carey has traced existing texts back to now lost manuscript collections, such as the *Cinn Dromma Snechtai*, a collection that existed in oral form from the late seventh, and in written form from the early eighth, century.[53] Moreover, Carey has established that the Irish Druids "managed to survive into the eighth century and were still preaching a doctrine of transmigration in the seventh; and that rituals explicitly honouring the old gods continued to be performed for centuries after."[54]

Jonathan Wooding's recent contribution to the debate argues that anti-nativism is philosophically indefensible, and that such a text-based

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[50] Stevenson, "The Beginnings of Literacy in Ireland," 165.
[51] McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, 13, 5.
[52] John Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun: Religious Speculation in Early Ireland* (Andover and Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 1999), 26.
[53] John Carey, "On the Interrelationship of Some *Cinn Dromma Snechtai* Texts," *Eriu* 46 (1995): 71-92.
[54] Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun: Religious Speculation in Early Ireland*, 21.

interpretative paradigm has political consequences. He suggested that archaeology offers a corrective to history, in that it "champion[s] the majority culture of ordinary people, as against the aristocratic, Christian, and/or militarist preoccupations of a historicist approach."[55] It could certainly be claimed that this constitutes a more ethical scholarly position, and has the potential to produce a richer, more comprehensive picture of the societies of the past that can be achieved through restriction to texts. Interestingly, it is not just archaeology that can produce this richer, more nuanced picture; many texts contain often-overlooked information about the lives of ordinary people. Thus, seeking evidence for Irish Paganism by examining Irish texts produced by Christians can be defended as a valid and useful scholarly practice. The sacred tree in Irish texts is the focus of the next section.

The Sacred Tree in Medieval Ireland

The archaeology and literature provide extensive evidence for the significance of trees in Irish tradition. While direct archaeological evidence for a tree cult is slight, one of the most compelling sites is the Fort of Navan in Armagh (*Emain Macha*), one of the great royal sites of Ireland and the setting for the Ulster Cycle. In the centre of a first century BCE circular structure stood an apparently freestanding, non-structural oak trunk, which was surrounded by four concentric rings of oak posts. This massive trunk, which may have originally stood as high as thirteen metres, appears to have been the focus of ritual activities that took place at the site. After this site was built it was covered by an enormous cairn.[56] This archaeological evidence is supported by the reference in the "Story of Mac Da Tho's Pig" from the *Book of Leinster*. In this tale, the hero Fergus "took the great oak that was in the middle of the enclosure to the men of Connacht, after having torn it from its roots."[57] Enclosures or houses with great trees as supports (such as that in the hall of King Volsung in the

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[55] Jonathan Wooding, "Reapproaching the Pagan Celtic Past: Anti-Nativism, Asterisk Reality and the Late-Antiquity Paradigm," *Studia Celtica Fennica* 6 (2009): 67.

[56] Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 78.

[57] R. I. Best and M. A. O'Brien (eds), *The Book of Leinster*, Vol. II (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1956), lines 13,224-13,225. The English translation is found in John Koch and John Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland* (Malden; Mass.: Celtic Studies Publications, 1995), 63.

Volsunga Saga) or growing nearby will be further examined in Chapter 6 when Scandinavian evidence for the sacred tree is considered.[58]

The presence of trees in royal sites indicates the importance of the tree for royal inaugurations and the demarcation of royal territory. The main term for a sacred tree is *bile* (plural *biledha*). In Ireland several types of trees were frequently regarded as sacred, including oak, yew, ash, hazel and hawthorn and *bile* is an important place-name element in "more than twenty place-names from all over Ireland, including Billy, Billa, Aghavilla, Ballinvilla, Corravilla, Knockvilla, Drumavilla, Gortavella, Lissavilla, and Moville."[59] These holy trees were traditionally the site of the sacred marriage between the regional king and the goddess of sovereignty, who represented both the land and the quality of rulership, both of which the man who would be king required. One of the most famous instantiations of the sovereignty goddess is Medb of Connacht, euhemerised as a mortal queen in the *Tain bo Cuilnge* ("The Cattle Raid of Cooley"). The *Tain* says that sacred trees (*bile Medba*) "sprang up wherever she planted her horsewhip."[60]

The *ogham* script discussed above has letters that bear the names of trees,[61] as does the runic script of the Anglo-Saxons and medieval Scandinavians. With reference to *ogham*, Ronald Hutton notes that only "five of the twenty-five *ogham* characters have definite equivalents with tree names," and that any overall schema that attempts to explain the script in terms of tree-lore is fanciful and unsupported by the texts.[62] There is dispute as to whether *ogham* (like runes) was used for magical purposes as well as for practical inscriptions. Certain texts suggest that literacy and the carving of inscriptions had magical properties; in one law-tract a poet denied a legitimate fee is advised to seek restitution in the following fashion:

> [l]et an Ogam alphabet be cut [on a four-square wand], and a *Ua* alphabet; *i.e.* let the writing begin in the name of God. And the efficacy of this is to

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[58] Clare Russell, "The Tree as a Kinship Symbol," *Folklore* 90/2 (1979): 227.
[59] Mary Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 81.
[60] Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature*, 88.
[61] Damian McManus, "Irish Letter Names and Their Kennings," *Eriu* 39 (1988): 127-168.
[62] Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 44.

> inscribe a Cross in the first edge for a notice; the name of the offence in the second edge; the name of the offender in the third edge; and encomium in the fourth edge. And let the wand be set up at the end of ten days by the poet of the *trefocul* [a poem, two words of praise and one of satire]. Or, [it is necessary] that the notice should be at the end of ten days. If he [the poet] has neglected [to set up] his wand, and has made a satire, he is liable for the *Eraic* for the satire. If he has made a seizure, he must pay the fine of an illegal seizure.[63]

Later in this chapter it will be seen that poets have a particular relationship with sacred trees and that their poems (and satires) may have profound consequences and bring about the fall of kings and of sacred trees.

Legal texts, mentioned above, make a distinction between trees that are regarded as *nemed* (sacred) and those that are not. Fergus Kelly notes that "[t]he penalty for damage to a sacred tree (*fidnemed*) is much higher than for an ordinary tree (*fid comaithchesa*). For example, the penalty-fine (*dire*) for an apple-tree classed as *nemed* is given as twenty *sets*, four times greater than that for an ordinary apple-tree."[64] There is a tree-list in the eighth century Old Irish legal text *Bretha Comaithchesa*, which may have originated in the now-lost *Fidbretha* ("Tree Judgements"). The surviving list comprises twenty-eight trees and shrubs and divides them into four classes: "seven *airig fedo* ('nobles of the wood'), seven *aithig fedo* ('commoners of the wood'), seven *fodla fedo* ('lower divisions of the wood') and seven *losa fedo* ('bushes of the wood')."[65] There is also a tree-list surviving in the medieval Welsh text, the fourteenth century *Cad Goddau* ("Battle of the Trees"), from the *Book of Taliesin*. Despite invoking the poet Taliesin in order to demonstrate traditional learning, this text does not appear to illuminate any of the themes found in the Irish material, and may in fact have been composed as a parody.[66]

There was a number of sacred trees in Ireland, and the names of the five most significant are: the Oak of Moone (*Eo Mugna* in County Kildare);

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[63] Caitlin and John Matthews, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Wisdom: The Celtic Shaman's Sourcebook* (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element, 1994), 27.
[64] Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1998), 387.
[65] Fergus Kelly, "The Old Irish Tree-List," *Celtica* 11 (1976): 107.
[66] Marged Haycock, "The Significance of the *Cad Goddau* Tree List in the *Book of Taliesin*," in *Celtic Linguistics Ieithyddiaeth Geltaidd: Readings in the Brythonic Languages*, eds Martin J. Ball, James Fife, Erich Poppe and Jenny Rowland (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1990), 297-331.

the Yew of Ross (*Eo Rossa*); *Craeb Uisnig* on the hill of Uisnech, a place reputed to be the navel (*omphalos*) of Ireland; *Bile Dathi*, an ash;[67] and *Bile Tortan*, an ash, "under which all the men of Tortan could shelter from 'the pelting of the storms.'"[68] These trees are places of inauguration for kings, and in the rituals of inauguration poets played a significant part. This continued into the high medieval period, even when the bishops were involved. The poet traditionally handed over the rod of kingship and after the ceremony had as his responsibility "preserving through his poetry the sovereign he has created."[69] These inauguration trees, as will be seen, function as *axes mundi* for the kingdoms whose territory they define, and, insofar as the felling of a tree may bring down a king, as representations of the king himself.

Missionaries, Kings, Druids, Poets and Trees

The lives of early medieval Irish saints provide ample evidence that missionaries and saints were concerned both to combat the power of the sacred tree, and to co-opt it for the new religion of Christianity. The British Patrick, engaged with mission in the fifth century, left two writings (the *Confessio* and the *Letter to Coroticus)*.[70] In the former he writes of the wood of Fochloth, where he built a church. Patrick's writings are brief and difficult to interpret; but Patrick's seventh-century hagiographer Tirechan suggests that it was a Druidical grove. When Patrick went to Fochloth the first time, his companion Ende said he would go with Patrick because their lives were in danger, and on his second visit he was met by a large number of Druids.[71] This suggests that it was a pre-Christian religious centre of significance, which makes Patrick's erection of a church there both a conversion of its power from Paganism to Christianity, and an appropriation of its power for the new religion.

The see of Armagh, which is most deeply associated with Patrick, may also have been surrounded by a sacred grove. In 996 CE the Annals of

[67] Alden Watson, "The King, the Poet and the Sacred Tree," *Etudes Celtiques* 18 (1981): 165.
[68] Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature*, 90-92.
[69] Watson, "The King, the Poet and the Sacred Tree," 176-177.
[70] John B. Bury, *The Life of St Patrick and His Place in History* (London and Toronto: Dover Publications Inc., 1998 [1905]), 225-227.
[71] Richard Hayman, *Trees: Woodlands and Western Civilization* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2003), 16.

Ulster record that the *fidnemed* near the abbey was struck by lightning.[72] Similarly, the site associated with Saint Brigit, Kildare, has a name meaning "church of the oak." Its altar was described in later hagiography as incorporating a miraculous wooden beam with curative powers.[73] One of the greatest of the sacred trees of Ireland, the Yew of Ross (*Eo Rossa*), was felled in the early seventh century. A twelfth-century litany from the *Book of Leinster* lists thirty-three titles of the Yew of Ross. Low, in an abridged version, distils the Pagan and Christian meanings of the tree:

1. Tree of Ross
a king's wheel
a prince's right…
best of creatures…
5. a firm strong god
door[?] of heaven
strength of a building
good of a crew
a word-pure man
10. full of great bounty
11. The Trinity's mighty one…
Mary's son
a fruitful sea…
diadem of angels…
15. mighty of victory
judicial doom…
glory of Leinster
vigour of life
spell of knowledge
20. Tree of Ross.[74]

The Yew of Ross is believed to have stood on the banks of the river Barrow near Leighlin, the monastery of Saint Molaise (also known as Saint Laserian). The *Life of Saint Moling* states that Molaise distributed the wood of the tree to Irish clerics, and that Moling received the material for the roof of his oratory. The one interesting distinction is that Saint Molaise did not physically cut down the tree. The saint's *vitae* say that it fell as a result of the fasting and prayers of a group of clergy; when Molaise/Laserian joined in his piety was so great that the tree fell.[75] Its power was appropriated by the new religion when the wood was employed to build Christian chapels and churches.[76] The same fate befell *Eo Mugne*, which was felled by a group of poets "fasting and chanting their incantations," led by Ninine.[77] However, in that case, Ninine acted because the king, Domnall, refused a request he made. *Caith Mag Tured* ("The

[72] Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature*, 84.
[73] Carole M. Cusack, "Brigit: Goddess, Saint, 'Holy Woman,' and Bone of Contention," in *On a Panegyrical Note: Studies in Honour of Garry W. Trompf*, eds Victoria Barker and Frances di Lauro (Sydney: Sydney Studies in Religion, 2007), 90.
[74] Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature*, 89.
[75] Watson, "The King, the Poet and the Sacred Tree," 168.
[76] Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature*, 90.
[77] Watson, "The King, the Poet and the Sacred Tree," 168.

Second Battle of Moytura") sources to the poet Cairbre the original satire that brings down a king. After being treated ungenerously by the king of the Tuatha de Danann, Bres, Cairbre declares him stingy and unfit to rule, bringing to an end his reign.[78]

Saint Columba, Colum Cille of the Ui Neill dynasty of Ulster, possibly completed his monastic training at the monastery of Moville, one of the places named for a sacred tree. Later in his career he founded two monasteries in oak groves, at Derry and Durrow. Both these groves were presumably holy places of the Druids. Like the oaks of Armagh, the grove at Derry survived the conversion period and in 1146 CE the *Annals of Ulster* recorded that sixty of the oaks were destroyed by gale-force winds. However, the tensions discussed earlier between nativist and anti-nativist scholarship manifest in an account in the Old Irish *Liber Hymnorum* and Columba and the oaks of Derry:

> Colum Cille made this hymn … at the door of the hermitage of Daire Calcraig in the time of Aed mac Ainmerech; because Colum Cille came once to speak with the king at Derry and the place was offered to him … Then the place is burnt and all that was in it.
>
> "That is wasteful," said the king, "for if it had not been burnt there would be no want of garment or food in it till Doom."
>
> "But people shall be there from now on," said he, "and the person who stays in it will have no night of fasting."
>
> Now the fire from its size threatened to burn the whole oakwood and to protect it, this hymn was composed.[79]

It is difficult to determine from this allusive text whether Columba had intended to burn down the wood, and it is possibly relevant that several of the sacred groves of Ireland, including those of Derry, the woods of Saint Coemgen in Glendalough and the woods of Saint Forannan, were believed to be protected by curses. In the case of Derry, there were special rules for trees that fell rather than were cut. They were to lie for nine days and then be collected and distributed among the community, both lay and religious. A Christian poem indicates the seriousness of cutting down the trees of Derry: "Though I am affrighted truly/ By death and by hell/ I am more affrighted frankly/ By the sound of the axe in Derry in the West."[80]

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[78] Whitley Stokes (trans.), "The Second Battle of Moytura," *Revue Celtique* 12 (1891): 71-72.

[79] Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature*, 92.

[80] Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature*, 93.

The five great sacred trees of Ireland are all linked with particular kings. This is logical in light of the trees' connections with poets and saints. Poets served kings in medieval Ireland as chroniclers of their noble deeds and important functionaries at ceremonies such as inaugurations (and the tree often defined the inauguration site). Saints had similar functions in that they could bring power or ruin to kings who violated Christian principles. Watson notes that in one text four of the five trees remained hidden and manifested at the birth of Conn Cetchathach; he also observes that *bile* has another meaning, "scion," and that in some bardic verse the king and the tree are explicitly identified. Watson also draws attention to the fact that Irish sources (notably the *dindshenchas*, aetiological tales pertaining to places) retain a fragmentary notion of the tree as central to creation. Regarding Tara (the central royal site of Ireland), it is said that Fintain mac Bochra, the sole survivor of the Great Flood, "was summoned to define the limits of the royal domain of Tara." When he was asked about the sources of his knowledge he spoke of an assembly visited by a supernatural being, Trefuilngid Tre-oechair, who carried "a branch on which three fruits grew simultaneously: nuts, apples and acorns."[81]

Of the five great sacred trees, only one, the Oak of Moone (*Eo Mugna*) was alleged to bear these three fruits. The most interesting aspect of scholarship regarding the five sacred trees is their locations and relationship with *Craeb Uisnig*, the tree at the navel of Ireland, or the *axis mundi*. The boundaries of the five provinces of Ireland (Ulster, Leinster, Munster, Connacht and Meath) met at the Hill of Uisnech and the four sacred trees must therefore range around *Craeb Uisnig* as the four larger provinces range around Meath (which means "middle").[82] In the *dindshenchas* of the Yew of Ross, there is considerable information about how the five sacred trees fell, and the direction of their landing.

Paralleling the interest in the first appearance of the five sacred trees in Ireland is a fascination with their collective demise. We have already seen the account of Saint Molaise/Laserian's role in the fall of *Eo Rossa*. Watson notes that *Eo Mugna*, *Craeb Uisnig* and *Bile Tortan* were said to have collectively fallen "at the time of the sons of Aed Slane. His two sons, Diarmait and Blathmac, died in 665."[83] This is significant as the seventh century was the era in which still-extant Christian texts began to

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[81] Watson, "The King, the Poet and the Sacred Tree," 172.
[82] Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 146-172.
[83] Watson, "The King, the Poet and the Sacred Tree," 169.

appear (for example, Muirchu's and Tirechan's *Lives* of Patrick and Cogitosus' *Life* of Brigit of Kildare) and the church was asserting its authority in Ireland. *Bile Dathi* fell on the poet Dathen and killed him, which Watson sees as a judgement that Dathen was unworthy of the title "poet."[84]

With regard to the location of each of the sacred trees and the manner of their fall, Watson notes that the geographical detail found in the *dindshenchas* regarding the Yew of Ross:

> is rather rare in medieval Irish literature and may have been significant, although that significance is now lost due to our inability to identify all place-names found in connection with the trees. *Eo Mugna* stood in ancient Leinster at a place now identified as Ballaghmoon, co. Kildare. It fell south to what is now Garryhundon, co. Carlow. *Eo Rossa*, which also grew in Leinster, stood at what is now Old Leighlin, co. Carlow. It fell north-east as far as Druimm Bairr, which is possibly Drum Barry, co. Fermanagh. *Craeb Uisnig* grew within Meath at present-day Ushnagh, co. Westmeath. It fell north to what is now Granard, co. Longford. *Bile Tortan* grew in Meath at what is now Ardbraccan, co. Westmeath. It fell south-east to Cell Ichtair Thirem, an unidentified location which Hogan suggests lay between Ardbraccan and Tara. *Bile Daithi* grew in Meath somewhere within the barony of Farbill, co. Westmeath. It fell in an unspecified direction to Carn Uachtair Bile, a name which is as yet identified.[85]

Watson notes that with these identifications it is possible to determine that *Craeb Uisnig* fell twenty miles, and *Eo Mugna* eight miles; this suggests they were *axes mundi* as eight- and twenty-mile high trees do not exist (but if they did they would certainly be viewed as linking the earth with the heavens). Texts speaking of these trees also draw attention to the fact that they can shelter thousands of men. It is not difficult to view each sacred tree as the embodiment of the territory of the tribe of the king inaugurated beneath it, and thus providing shelter for the whole population.[86]

Poets and satirists have the power to curse and to bring about the downfall of kings; the Middle Irish text, the *Book of Ballymote*, records a ritual called the "Satire From the Hilltops" in which the "aggrieved poet (*ollave*) and six other professional poets… place their backs against a

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[84] Watson, "The King, the Poet and the Sacred Tree," 168.
[85] Watson, "The King, the Poet and the Sacred Tree," 175-176.
[86] Watson, "The King, the Poet and the Sacred Tree," 176.

hawthorn through which a north or black wind blows."[87] This takes place at dawn on a hilltop and:

> [e]ach of the satirists holds in the one hand a thorn from the hawthorn bush or tree and in the other a perforated round stone into which he intones his curse… each of the seven satirists faces toward one of the seven lands and pronounces a maleficent stave, most likely a quatrain, which falls as a burden from the height of the hilltop on some possession of the king: his lands, his arms, his hounds, his battle-dress, his sons, or his wife, while the chief poet or *ollave* curses the king himself.[88]

Another text, "The Yew of the Disputing Sons" from the *Book of Leinster*, tells of a fateful battle that results from a yew that was set up by two supernatural beings, Fer Fi and his brother Aeblean. The yew stood at Ess Mage, and was desired by three mortal men. Mac Con "honestly claimed the tree; both the old wood and the green," Cian "claimed it from the seed," and Eogan claimed "all that was above ground and all that was below."[89] As all three claimed the whole tree, Ailell father of Eogan was asked for judgement. When he awarded the tree to his son, Mac Con disputed the judgement and two battles, Cenn Febrat and Mag Macruma, resulted. Many chiefs died in these battles and the poem concluded with the suggestion that the desirable yew was "not a tree but a fairy vision," usually hidden but occasionally "one unfortunate in a hundred finds it, it is a lasting injury, a misfortune forever."[90] This is a rare example of a text in which a sacred or supernatural tree is cast in a negative light.

Some Further Meanings of the Irish Sacred Tree

Irish tales of voyages or journeys to the Otherworld often feature trees with magical properties. The *Immram Brain* (Voyage of Bran)[91] tells how a mortal man Bran, is lured to the Otherworld by a beautiful woman carrying a supernatural branch:

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[87] Mary Claire Randolph, "Early Irish Satire and the White-Thorn Tree," *Folklore* 54/3 (September 1943): 362.
[88] Randolph, "Early Irish Satire and the White-Thorn Tree," 362.
[89] Myles Dillon, "The Yew of the Disputing Sons," *Eriu* 14 (1946): 163.
[90] Dillon, "The Yew of the Disputing Sons," 165.
[91] See Frances di Lauro for a discussion of anti-nativist and nativist assessments of the contents of this text. Frances di Lauro, "Through Christian Hands: evidence for elements of pre-Christian tradition in the Mongan myths," *Australian Celtic Journal* 7 (2000-2001): 38-47.

A branch of the apple tree from Emain
I bring, like those one knows;
Twigs of white silver are on it
Crystal browns with blossoms.[92]

Otherworld tales raise the question of whether the Otherworld is the place of the dead or the land of eternal life. The woman who lures away Conlae in the *Echtrae Conlae* gives him a marvellous apple, which he feasts on in her absence, and when she returns she takes him with her to the "Delightful Plain" (*Mag Mell*), suggesting that eating the apple confers immortality, as was probably the case with the apples of the Hesperides in Greek mythology.[93] It is possible to connect this account of the Otherworld with more practical, this-worldly concerns of kingship and authority discussed above. Low has suggested that the branches presented by the Otherworldly women are possibly counterparts of the sceptres or rods of kingship like that mentioned as part of the Ulster king Conchobor mac Ness's regalia in the eighth century text "Bricriu's Feast" (*Fled Bricrenn*).[94] *Mesca Ulad* ("The Intoxication of the Ulstermen") indicates that branches or rods are symbols of authority that can bring peace in times of strife: "[a]nd it was such barbarity in the upsurge that there were nine men wounded, and nine men bloody, and nine killed outright amongst the men on each side. Sencha son of Ailill rose up and brandished his peace-making branch, so that the Ulstermen were mute and silent."[95]

Further, there is the notion that the nuts from certain trees confer supernatural enlightenment (*imbas*)[96] on those who eat them. Cu Chulainn captured Senbecc, a man from the *sid* (fairy mound); "[h]e explained that he had come looking for the fruit of the nuts of the a fair-bearing hazel. There are nine fair-bearing hazels from whose nuts he got *imbas*: it used to

[92] Anon, *The Voyage of Bran*, trans. Kuno Meyer (Cambridge, Ont: In Parentheses Publications, 2000), 1.
[93] Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature*, 95.
[94] Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature*, 99.
[95] Koch and Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age*, 98. The Irish text is in J. Carmichael Watson, ed. and trans., *Mesca Ulad* (Dublin: Medieval and Modern Irish Series, Vol. XIII, 1941), 6.
[96] Nora Chadwick, "Imbas Forosnai," *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 4/2 (1935), at http://www.reocities.com/athens/delphi/4715/imbasforosnai.html, accessed 21 December 2010.

drop into the wells, so that the stream bears the *imbas* into the Boyne."[97] Fintan mac Bochra, mentioned above, is alleged to have survived the Great Flood by changing into a salmon, and several sources (*Echtra Cormaic* and the *dindshenchas* of the River Shannon, among others) suggest that hazelnuts are found in wells which are repositories of wisdom (which perhaps echoes the connection of the grove and the water source in classical Greek and Roman ethnographic accounts of the Celts. Salmon then eat the hazelnuts and distribute wisdom throughout the rivers.[98]

There is also the image of the "man in the tree," possibly one source of the popular Green Man found in medieval iconography.[99] Irish texts contain several examples of tree-men, most prominently Derg Corra and Suibne. Suibne is a king who is driven mad after being cursed by Saint Ronan and retreats to the treetops, developing avian qualities. Derg Corra climbs a tree to escape Finn, the leader of the warrior-band the *Fiana*, and more resembles the "lord of the animals" from the Gundestrup Cauldron.[100] The tale of Suibne is further evidence for intimate relationship between kings and trees, in that the tree that Suibne ascends when he panics on the battlefield of Magh Rath offers sanctuary for the tormented king.[101]

Finally, there are Christian medieval texts that appropriate the image of the sacred tree. Low cites a text in which the apple that tempted Eve in Eden parallels the apples proffered by Otherworldly women in *echtrae* and *immrama*, and the passage in the *Yellow Book of Lecan* in which the crucifixion image of Jesus is combined with the Tree of Life:

> a wonderful tree, with its upper part above the firmament, its lower part in the earth … Another of its marvellous features was that it grew downward from above, while every other tree grows upwards. It grew downward from a single root, with innumerable roots coming from it below. There were nine branches, every branch more beautiful than that above … The tree is

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[97] Koch and Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age*, 55. The Irish text is quoted in E. J. Gwynn, "An Old Irish tract on the privileges and responsibilities of poets," *Eriu* 13 (1942): 26.
[98] Macrae, *The Sacred Tree*, 134-135.
[99] Kathleen H. Basford, "Quest for the Green Man," in *Symbols of Power*, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer Ltd., 1977), 101-20.
[100] Kuno Meyer, "Finn and the Man in the Tree," *Revue Celtique* 25 (1904): 344-349.
[101] Bridgette Slavin, "The Irish Birdman: Kingship and Liminality in *Buile Suibhne*," in *Text and Transmission in Medieval Europe*, ed. Chris Bishop (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 17-45.

> Jesus Christ, the acme of God's creatures, above them by reason of his divinity, who came forth from the earth, assuming humanity from the Virgin Mary. All the melody in the tree's midst represents the perfection of bliss in the mystic depths of the divinity. It grew from the above, that is, from the Heavenly Father. Its single root from above is the one Godhead of his divinity. The roots below are the twelve apostles, the disciples, and the saints. The nine branches are the nine heavenly orders, with each order more noble than that before it. The white birds among the branches are the shining souls of the just among the heavenly orders.[102]

This eloquent description is thoroughly Christian, yet it preserves elements of the ancient tree symbolism of *imago mundi* and *axis mundi*. The tree links the earth to the heavens and the underworld (where Satan, often portrayed as a serpent, dwells). The mention of nine branches is intriguing in view of the great tree of Scandinavian mythology, Yggdrasil, which has roots and branches extending into nine worlds, though mention of the "nine heavenly orders" keeps the interpretation of this remarkable tree within Christian theology. The tree is Jesus Christ, which is the homology tree=human, and it may not be speculating too far to suggest that there is an implicit understanding that Jesus and the tree encompass the whole of creation, preserving the homology tree=human=world.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that several of the early Indo-European meanings of the sacred tree were known to the Celts of the ancient world and to the medieval Irish. These include the tree as *axis mundi*, and the individual tree or grove as the location of origins, both of the physical world and of particular peoples. The tree as *imago mundi*, and the three-way homology tree=human=world, features to a much lesser extent. It could be posited as underlying the relationship detailed between the king and his territory (which are coeval, as the failure of the realm signifies that the king has lost the favour of the sovereignty goddess, and conversely the weakness and decline of the king is accompanied by the decline of his kingdom's prestige and natural bounty, signified by failed harvests and so on). This is further evidenced by the identification of the great inauguration trees of the five kingdoms of Ireland with both the whole territory of each kingdom, and with the specific kings that were inaugurated at the tree by the poets and Druids. Finally, a Christian example of the image of the sacred tree from the *Yellow Book of Lecan*

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[102] Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature*, 102-103.

was noted, to indicate that the sacred tree survived the transition from Paganism to Christianity, albeit in a greatly spiritualised and changed form.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONTINENTAL GERMAN SACRED TREES: THE OAK OF JUPITER AND THE IRMINSUL

> When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them? *Deuteronomy* Chapter 20, Verse 19[1]

Introduction

This chapter shifts attention to the Germanic peoples in the ancient and medieval eras. The Germanic tribes were, like the Celts, regarded as barbarians by the ancient Greeks and Romans, and as they too were gradually converted to Christianity in late antiquity, the same problems of method apply. The key text concerning the Germans in the Roman world is Tacitus' *Germania*, written in 98 CE, which presents the Germans as "noble savages," not soft and corrupt like the Romans, of whom Tacitus was severely critical. Scholars still dispute the value of the *Germania*, as it is known that Tacitus never visited the German provinces and could not speak a Germanic language.[2] Moreover, the complex political and social

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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.

[2] To provide only a few examples, see W. Beare, "Tacitus on the Germans," *Greece & Rome* Second Series 11/1 (1964): 64-76 for an uncritical acceptance of Tacitus' veracity; Ronald Syme, "Tacitus: Some Sources of His Information," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 72 (1982): 68-82 for a more cautious assessment; David Braund, "Observations on Cartimandua," *Britannia* 15 (1984): 1-6 for a discussion of problems in dating Cartimandua of the Brigantes due to contradictions between the *Annals* and the *Histories*; and Victoria E. Pagan, "Beyond Teutoberg: Transgression and Transformation in Tacitus' *Annals* 1.61-62," *Classical Philology* 94/3 (July 1999): 302-320 for a rhetorical analysis of the campaign of Varus and its aftermath.

motivations underlying his writings, and the historical and rhetorical skill in their execution, require careful analysis.

Tacitus provides, however, a detailed description of aspects of the religion of the German tribes, which enables a reconstruction of the significance of the sacred tree to be undertaken. Elements of this religion hearken back to the Indo-European themes of Chapter 1 and look ahead to the mythological and ritual sources for medieval Scandinavia. However, the bulk of this chapter is concerned with an analysis of the eighth century destruction of a sacred tree, the oak of Jupiter (Donar), and a sacred pillar, the Irminsul, which were of religious significance to the Hessian and Saxon peoples respectively. Both of these *axes mundi* were felled by Christians, who were intent on the destruction of Paganism, and the events were recorded by Christian chroniclers.

The interplay between Christianity and Paganism in the early Middle Ages is problematic. The scholarly analyses offered of events such as Boniface's cutting down of the Donar oak or Charlemagne's destruction of the Irminsul or, more cautiously, the texts *representing* the events, are often curiously unsatisfying or incomplete. As has already been argued, this book favours an interdisciplinary endeavour, and the broadest and deepest range of material drawn upon to interpret phenomena. Medieval historical studies of the "conversion period" in Europe over the past two decades have tended to be narrow and to exclude material, as has been demonstrated in Chapter 1 referring to Irish texts. There are historians who would query the very existence of Paganism or Paganisms, preferring the view that all texts come from the Christian era and thus are Christian sources, containing no authentic information about "Paganism."

The insights of post-colonial theory, which have so far been only briefly alluded to, become very important here, as the expansion of Christianity through the combined means of military conquest and religious conversion involved the encounter of an indigenous, local culture with a global power.[3] As in the modern era, when Europeans colonised the Americas, Australia, and Africa among other nations, the non-literate aboriginal cultures were largely obliterated by the much more technologically powerful and literate colonisers. The destruction of sacred trees such as the Oak of Jupiter and pillar monuments such as the Irminsul

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[3] Bruce W. Holsinger, "Medieval Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and the Genealogies of Critique," *Speculum* 77 (2002): 1195-1227.

was a symbolic destruction of the worldview (*imago mundi*) and the real destruction of the core institutions of the society of the Saxons and Hessians. The centre (*axis mundi*) could not hold, and these peoples found themselves, after long and futile struggles to regain their independence, absorbed into the Frankish Empire, and even grateful for their conversion to Christianity.

Interpretatio Romana: The Sacred Grove in Tacitus

At the end of the first century CE, the Roman official Publius Cornelius Tacitus wrote an ethnography of the Germanic tribes. Prior to this Caesar had included material on the Germans in his *Gallic War*. Caesar's assessment of the Germans was not positive, and he particularly noted that the Germans did not have Druids.[4] According to Caesar, the Germans were very much less sophisticated than the Celts. Tacitus, however, was concerned to contrast the "noble" Germans with the luxury-loving and degenerate Romans, and this purpose colours his presentation of material.[5] Among the Germans, Tacitus noted a concern with origins, the use of trees to provide oracles, and the belief that the grove is the residence of the gods. Later in this chapter the Saxon tree-monument called the Irminsul will be analysed in detail. The nature of the posited deity "Irmin" is obscure, but Tacitus recorded the Germans' oral traditions ("ancient hymns") naming Tuisto and his son Mannus as primordial deities. Mannus has three sons who give their names to the three subdivisions of the tribes, "[t]he tribes of the sea-shore are to be known as Ingaevones, the central tribe as Herminones, and the rest as Istaevones."[6] Later, Scandinavians worshipped Frey, who was also known as *Ingvi*, and *Ingui* was a personal name in Anglo-Saxon England.[7] It has been argued

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[4] H. Munro Chadwick, "The Ancient Teutonic Priesthood," *Folklore* 11/3 (September 1900): 268. See Julius Caesar, *The Conquest of Gaul*, ed. and trans. S. A. Handford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976 [1951], 35-38.

[5] M. A. Fitzsimons, "The Mind of Tacitus," *The Review of Politics* 38/4 (October 1976): 473-493. See also Andrew Wallace Hadrill, "Pliny the Elder and Man's Unnatural History," *Greece & Rome* Second Series 37/1 (April 1990): 80-96 for a discussion of Pliny the Elder's similar underlying position, a rejection of luxury among the Romans.

[6] Tacitus, "Germania," in Tacitus, *Dialogus, Agricola, Germania*, ed. and trans. William Peterson (London and Cambridge, Mass: William Heinemann Ltd and Harvard University Press, 1946 [1914]), 267.

[7] Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 273.

that Irmin was one of the names of a sky god (possibly meaning “great”), and that the “Irminones” or Herminones (“great people”) were a people explicitly tracing its ancestry to him.[8] The personal name Ermanaric (“great king”) contains the same element.

Tacitus provided evidence that the Germanic tribes in the first century of the Common Era were interested in divination and communication with the gods. In Chapter 10 of the *Germania* he detailed divination rituals regarding horses, the flight of birds, and most intriguingly through the interpretation of runes carved onto pieces of wood cut from a nut-bearing tree.[9] The runic script is known most completely from medieval Anglo-Saxon (*Futhorc*) and Scandinavian (*Younger Futhark*) forms, but the oldest form, the *Elder Futhark*, was developed in the second century CE, though it was used for only short inscriptions.[10] There is academic disagreement as to whether runes were for practical purposes alone or had magical significance. This dispute parallels the discussion of the *ogham* script in Irish culture featured in Chapter 3.

The most extensive description relevant to the sacred tree is of the grove of the Semnones. In Chapter 39 Tacitus stated:

> [t]he oldest and noblest of the Suebi, so it is said, are the Semnones, and the justice of this claim is confirmed by religious rites. At a set time all the peoples of this blood gather, in their embassies, in a wood hallowed by the auguries of their ancestors and the awe of ages. The sacrifice in public of a human victim marks the grisly opening of their savage ritual. In another way, too, 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. Weight is lent to this belief by the prosperity of the Semnones.[11]

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[8] Peter Gelling and Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Chariot of the Sun* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1969), 160.
[9] Tacitus, “Germania,” 277-279.
[10] Ralph W. V. Elliott, “Runes, Yews, and Magic,” *Speculum* 32/2 (April 1957): 250-261.
[11] Tacitus, “Germania,” in *On Britain and Germany*, ed. and trans, H. Mattingly (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1948), 132-133.

This text is filled with fascinating detail: the grove is the home of the god who rules over all and the place of the Semnones' origin. This would suggest that the sky-god who is the equivalent of Zeus/Jupiter is intended by this designation. The account resembles Lucan's description of the oak grove of Marseilles, in that human sacrifices are offered there; although the whole of the tribe may enter, whereas the Marseilles grove may be entered by only the Druids.

The issue of entering the grove only when bound and having to roll out if one accidentally falls is particularly intriguing. Ursula Dronke has noted that many gods are represented as bound or chained, especially the Scandinavian god Óðinn and certain of the Greek gods; and she believes that this fettering is related to the tree-like or pillar-like aspects of archaic deities:

> [m]any early representations of Greek deities show them as physically fettered: chains reach from the outstretched wrists to be riveted in the ground, or spiral down the body like an inescapable snake. The fettered figures are often tree-like and pillar-like in their tall, restricted immobility. The worshippers [may] have wished to keep them as a fixed presence in their midst, upholding their universe and guarding their society, never leaving them, never stolen away ...[12]

Tacitus' description also reminds the reader of the possible origin of the term "religion" in the Latin term *religio* (from *religare*), which implies ties that bind people to each other and to the gods, and to inherited tradition, which was discussed in Chapter 1.

In Tacitus a further reference to a sacred grove is in Chapter 43, which refers to the Nahanarvali, a people thought to have lived in the east, possibly in Silesia (modern Poland), and to be affiliated in some way to the Vandals. Tacitus wrote; "[a]mong the Nahanarvali is shown a grove, the seat of a prehistoric ritual, a priest presides in female dress; but according to the Roman interpretation the gods recorded in this fashion are Castor and Pollux: that at least is the spirit of the godhead here recognized, whose name is the Alci. No images are in use; there is no sign of foreign superstition; nevertheless they worship these gods as brothers and as

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[12] Ursula Dronke, "Eddic poetry as a source for the history of Germanic religion," in *Myth and Fiction in Early Norse Lands*, Ursula Dronke (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 666.

youths."[13] This very complex passage has been analysed in terms of the transvestite priest, the twin gods (referencing Indo-European twin deities such as the Vedic Indian Asvins, Nasatya and Dasra, who are joint husbands of the sun goddess, Surya), and the name "Alcis" which may be related to Lithuanian *elkas*, meaning "sacred grove."[14]

Because this identification is not certain, and there are words meaning "protect" that might also be relevant (for example, Old Saxon *ealgian*), scholars have fallen into two camps regarding the Alcis, one group stressing the protection aspect and the other the tree and grove connection. Grimm thought Tacitus might have confused the name of the tree or grove with the name of the god, and Meringer "has speculated that *Alcis* meant the wooden idols that might have occupied the center of the grove."[15] As Tacitus stated there were no idols in the Nahanarvali grove (and in Chapter 9 he reported that the Germans did not represent the gods by moulding them "into any likeness of the human face"),[16] Ward argues that these were aniconic pillars. This would be a neat parallel with the idols of the Marseilles grove referred to in Lucan's text. In Chapter 6 of this book the "tree men" of medieval Scandinavian texts are considered; it is possible that Tacitus has recorded an early instance of these pillars.

The Felling of the "Donar Oak" by Boniface

After the Roman Empire faded and the medieval world emerged in its wake in the fifth and sixth centuries the Germanic tribes solidified into the post-Roman Germanic kingdoms, including the Franks in what is now France and Germany, the Anglo-Saxons in Britain, the Ostrogoths in Italy, the Vandals in North Africa, and the Visigoths in southern France and Spain. Texts concerning these kingdoms stem principally from ecclesiastical sources, and by the end of the seventh century all these kingdoms had converted to Christianity. The advance of Christianity in the early Middle Ages boded ill for those peoples still adhering to traditional Pagan beliefs on the edge of the Christianised world. In the eighth century these were the Germanic peoples on the edges of the Frankish territories (near-neighbours the Frisians and Saxons, and the Scandinavians to the north) and the Slavs to the east.

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[13] Tacitus, "Germania," 325.
[14] Donald Ward, *The Divine Twins: An Indo-European Myth in Germanic Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 42-43.
[15] Ward, *The Divine Twins: An Indo-European Myth in Germanic Tradition*, 43.
[16] Tacitus, "Germania," 277.

The task of recovering the meaning of the sacred tree from missionary and ecclesiological sources is very difficult, and the meanings that were detailed in Chapter 1 are at best vestigial and at worst scarcely discernible. The nativist/anti-nativist scholarly dispute that was discussed in Chapter 3 has some bearing on the study of Germanic Paganism through the examination of texts concerning Germanic Christianity. However, there is support for the fact that such texts do yield authentic Pagan material, bearing in mind Walter Pohl's caution that medieval Pagan religion operated in ways that are resistant to modern academic categories, and that these categories may actually be irrelevant or inappropriate. He stated that "it is often doubtful whether our definition of religion as a social field that incorporates religious practices and beliefs into supernatural phenomena, moral codes, and priestly institutions corresponds to past realities. Doubtless, the Church strove to establish, and control, such a field, but pagan religion was organized, and perceived, in a very different way."[17] In 724 CE the Anglo-Saxon missionary Wynfrith of Crediton, better known as Saint Boniface, the "Apostle of Germany," felled an oak tree dedicated to the continental German god Donar or Thunor, at Geismar in the region of Hesse. This incident was recorded in the *Vita Bonifatii* (*Life of Boniface*) by the monk Willibald, which was written in approximately 768 CE, some fourteen years after the aged Boniface was martyred at Dokkum in the Netherlands. Willibald's *Life* lionizes Boniface, and seeks to render him uniquely influential in the conversion of the Germans, a position that is consolidated by his dramatic death. However, there were significant earlier missionaries in the late seventh and early eighth centuries working in and around Frankish territories apart from Boniface. These include Kilian and Rupert at Worms; Wulfram at the abbey of Fontenelle; and Pirmin, whose origins are somewhat obscure. The case of Pirmin is especially instructive, as he died in 753 CE, shortly before Boniface, and he was also a protégé of the Frankish ruler Charles Martel.[18] If doubt may be cast on the unique missionary position of Boniface, what of the dramatic felling of the Oak of Jupiter?

Willibald's account prefaces the incident with remarks concerning the imperfect conversion of the Hessians, which suggests that the audience contained "proper" Christians, partly Christianised people, and Pagans.

[17] Walter Pohl, "Deliberate Ambiguity: The Lombards and Christianity," in *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, eds Guyda Armstrong and Ian N. Wood (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 49.

[18] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 148.

There are immense problems with such classifications. The incident is described as follows:

> [n]ow many of the Hessians who at that time had acknowledged the Catholic faith were confirmed by the grace of the Holy Spirit and received the laying-on of hands. But others, not yet strong in the spirit, refused to accept the pure teachings of the Church in their entirety. Moreover, some continued secretly, others openly, to offer sacrifices to trees and springs, to inspect the entrails of victims; some practised divination, legerdemain and incantations; some turned their attention to auguries, auspices and other sacrificial rites; whilst others, of a more reasonable character forsook all the profane practices of heathenism and committed none of these crimes. With the counsel and advice of the latter persons, Boniface in their presence attempted to cut down, at a place called Gaesmere, a certain oak of extraordinary size called by the pagans of olden times the Oak of Jupiter. Taking his courage in his hands (for a great crowd of pagans stood by watching and bitterly cursing in their hearts the enemy of the gods), he cut the first notch. But when he had made a superficial cut, suddenly the oak's vast bulk, shaken by a mighty blast of wind from above, crashed to the ground shivering its topmost branches into fragments in its fall. As if by the express will of God (for the brethren present had done nothing to cause it) the oak burst asunder into four parts, each having a trunk of equal length. 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. Thereupon the holy bishop took counsel with the brethren, built an oratory from the timber of the oak and dedicated it to St Peter the Apostle.[19]

Criticisms of this account focus on a number of problematic issues, including on its possible derivation from the tree-felling scene in Sulpicius Severus' *Vita Martini*, discussed in Chapter 3, and on the intrinsic unlikeliness of the Pagans' rapturous acceptance of Christianity.[20] More recently, scepticism among certain scholars has extended to the entire area of pre-Christian Germanic religion, with "battle lines" being drawn between those who accept that critical reading of Christian texts may result in authentic information about Paganism, and those more thoroughgoing

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[19] Willibald, "Life of Boniface," in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, ed. and trans. C. H. Talbot (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954), 45-46.
[20] Sulpicius Severus, "The Life of Saint Martin," trans. F. H. Hoare, in *Soldiers of Christ*, eds Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 15-16. See Chapter 3 for an analysis of this account. There is a brief discussion in Richard Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 45.

sceptics. This is already familiar to the reader from medieval Irish studies, discussed in Chapter 3.

When analysing Willibald's account certain "classic" religious studies motifs should be noted. The description by Willibald connects tree veneration with the Roman deity Jupiter, long associated through comparative Indo-European studies with the Greek Zeus, Vedic Indian Dyaus Pitar, and the Germanic sky and thunder deity Donar/Thunor/Thor. The connection between this deity and trees is attested in the Germanic case from Tacitus onward, and Hilda Ellis Davidson noted that Donar, like Zeus, was associated with the great oaks of the forest that once "covered much of western Europe."[21] As discussed in Chapter 2, the shrine of Zeus at Dodona was an oak sanctuary where oracles were received through the rustling of the wind in the trees.[22] The Prussian shrine to the thunder god Perkuno at Romowe, which was still functioning in the sixteenth century, was a similar ritual space, containing a sacred oak whose trunk contained images of the gods. Ellis Davidson stated that before the image: "of the thunder god, Perkuno, was a fire which was never allowed to go out. The fire was surrounded by curtains forming a shrine, which only the high priest might enter to commune with Perkuno. The name of this god is linked with the Latin word for oak, *quercus*, and it is probable that Donar too was worshipped in sanctuaries of this type..."[23]

Rational, scientific suggestions regarding the association of the thunder-god with the oak have been made throughout the twentieth century. Warde Fowler stressed that the probability of oaks being struck by lightning outweighed that of comparable trees such as the beech and various conifers;[24] and Ellis Davidson drew attention to the spectacular quality of

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[21] Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1964), 86.

[22] See Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch's Mythology* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, no date), 296-97 for a general account. More specific information is available in B. C. Dietrich, *The Origins of Greek Religion* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 227; James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Abridged Edition (London: Macmillan and Co., 1949), 159; and James P. Mallory and Douglas Q. Adams, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture* (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), 273.

[23] Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 87.

[24] W. Warde Fowler used a work on German forestry by Schlich (in a volume by Hess, 1907) recording a survey of sixteen years' observations by the foresters of Lippe-Detmold. The forest in question was 11% oak, 70% beech, 13% spruce, and 6% Scotch fir. He comments: "Thus the beech is far the most abundant tree in the

an oak struck by lightning, indicating for pre-modern peoples the tangible power of the gods.[25] Did the early medieval continental Germans share this complex of beliefs? The evidence for pre-Christian beliefs in Saxony (and most of Germany) is quite scanty. One text, the brief and tantalising *Indiculus Superstitionem et Paganorum*, offers a variety of practices as representative of the religion of the Saxons, including: "6. Of the sacred rites of the woods which they call *nimidas* ... 18. Of the undetermined places which they celebrate as holy."[26] Suggestions as to the purpose of the *Indiculus* have included the notion that it was a set of chapter headings for a much longer document, which was compiled by or for Boniface for the church Synod of Leftines in 743 CE; or that it was compiled later for the Archbishop of Mainz in the 790s.

Boniface's correspondence with Bishop Daniel of Winchester demonstrates that he had some interest in Pagan beliefs, and many scholars accept that Boniface was in some way connected to the compilation of the *Indiculus*.[27] Thus, there is some evidence that trees were associated with Pagan religious beliefs, rendering it likely that a Christian missionary would consider a tree suitable for destruction. The account of Boniface's action certainly captured Christian imaginations, being depicted in sundry manuscript illustrations and on one distinctive alabaster now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as being constantly invoked in later texts.[28]

In analysing Boniface's actions it does not matter whether the events described are taken to have "really happened." Richard Sullivan has noted that attacks by Christians on Pagan objects of worship are logical. For Pagan audiences the failure of their gods to respond might be taken as evidence of the Christian God's superior power. Sullivan suggests that

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forest, the oak comparatively rare. Yet 310 oaks were struck in the course of sixteen years, and of beeches only 33; spruces 34, and Scotch firs 108," W. Warde Fowler, "The Oak and the Thunder God," *Archiv fur Religionswissenschaft* 16 (1913): 318.

[25] Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 86.

[26] Paul Edward Dutton (ed.), *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996), 3.

[27] Ruth Mazo Karras, "Pagan Survivals and Syncretism in the Conversion of Saxony," *The Catholic Historical Review* 72 (October 1986): 553-572.

[28] The alabaster is discussed in Francis Cheetham, *English Medieval Alabasters with a catalogue of the collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (Oxford: Phaidon Christie's, 1984), 83 and W. L. Hildburgh, "Representations of the Saints in Medieval English Alabaster Carvings," *Folk-Lore* 61/ 2 (1950): 80.

Pagans were thus influenced in their response to Christian preachers like Boniface by factors such as the superior power of the Christian God and/or the Frankish forces that were engaged in the military conquest of outlying regions such as Hesse, Saxony and Frisia; the character and conduct of the missionaries; and the offer of greater material prosperity through conversion to Christianity.[29] This is the case if the scholar assumes a level playing field between the Pagans and the Christian missionaries and rulers.

However, Talbot has observed that, "in regions, for instance, which had been conquered by the Franks, Christianity and alien rule were synonymous. Whereas Paganism was equated with freedom and independence, Christianity was linked with subservience and oppression."[30] This is supported by primary source evidence, such as the chronicler Nithard's comment about the 841-842 CE *Stellinga* revolt "that Norsemen and Slavs might unite with the Saxons who called themselves *Stellinga* [restorers] because they are neighbours, and that they might invade the kingdom to avenge themselves and root out the Christian religion in the area."[31] The mention of "avenging" suggests that the Franks knew that those who had been violently forced into Christianity by Frankish rulers held legitimate grudges about this fact. Missionaries were backed by Frankish military might; Boniface travelled with armed bodyguards. Geismar was barely inside Hessian territory and the presence of Christians in the Hessian audience no doubt alerted the Pagans to the coming of change, as much as did the demolition of their sacred tree.

At the time of Boniface's oak-felling the Pagan peoples of Hesse and Thuringia, Frisia and Saxony, the hinterlands of the Frankish kingdom, were becoming aware of Christianity. The fall of the Donar oak symbolically prefigured the collapse of their worldview, which became unviable as their microcosm encountered the Frankish macrocosm, the eighth century equivalent of a global culture. Frankish politics in the eighth and ninth centuries were complex, and the case of Saxony was complicated by the

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[29] Richard E. Sullivan, "The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan," in *Christian Missionary Activity in the Early Middle Ages*, Richard E. Sullivan (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), 705-740.

[30] C. H. Talbot, "St Boniface and the German Mission," in G. J. Cuming (ed.), *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 46-47.

[31] Nithard, *Historiarum libri IIII*, 4.2, quoted in Eric J. Goldberg, "Popular Revolt, Dynastic Politics, and Aristocratic Factionalism in the Early Middle Ages: The Saxon *Stellinga* Reconsidered," *Speculum* 70 (1995): 495.

appearance of raiders from Scandinavia from 793 CE (the sack of Lindisfarne) onwards. The encounter of the Scandinavians with Christianity is further examined in Chapter 6, and here it is necessary only to note that the factors which united the Saxons and the Scandinavians were a hatred of the Franks and fierce adherence to traditional Germanic Pagan religion. It has been perceptively observed that scholars underestimate "the devastating effect which invaders with a different belief system and a different world view could have on a Christian society where 'church' and 'state' were almost one."[32]

In a discussion of mission in the early medieval era, Ludo Milis admitted that Christendom functioned as a "society built upon an ideology of inequality," where "greater force is used by the dominant group or where the discrimination is mentally accepted by the dominated one."[33] Milis intelligently noted that all Christian authorities first forced changes in peoples' external behaviours by destroying their sacred places and banning their rituals. It was only after this public, social phase had been effected that any change in the beliefs and feelings of individuals could occur. Thus, scholars actually accepted that the transition to Christianity could not happen cleanly and quickly, but a residue of older beliefs and practices would persist alongside the new faith.[34] For those who wished to retain their Pagan religion, there were three possible reactions to Christianity: "baptism and open continuation of traditional religion; baptism and secret continuation of traditional religion; and the '[i]ntegration of heathen figures and concepts into the Christian cult, mostly by substitution in the existing … system."[35]All of these possibilities manifested in the conversion of the Germanic peoples, but it is important to realize that the retention of the Pagan religion also represented a

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[32] Alfred P. Smyth, "The effect of Scandinavian raiders on the English and Irish churches: a preliminary reassessment," in *Britain and Ireland 900-1300: Insular Responses to Medieval European Change*, ed. Brendan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34.
[33] Ludo J. R. Milis, "Monks, Mission, Culture and Society in Willibrord's Time," in *Willibrord, Zijn Wereld en Zijn Werk*, eds P. Bange and A. G. Weiler (Nijmegen: Centrum voor Middleeuwse Studies, Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1990), 86-87.
[34] Wolfert van Egmond, "Converting Monks: Missionary Activity in Early Medieval Frisia and Saxony," in *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals,* 38-39.
[35] J. A. Huisman, "Christianity and Germanic Religion," in *Official and Popular Religion: Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies*, eds P. H. Vrijhof and J. Waardenburg (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 60.

collective political reaction against Christianity, and invasion, war and dominance by Christian kings and political entities. Sullivan has noted that Charlemagne's attempt to convert the Saxons by force appears naïve and was manifestly unsuccessful, and that those who desired to retain Paganism were unmoved by efforts to legislate "their religion out of existence" in the two Saxon Capitularies.[36]

Further, Boniface used the timber from the Oak of Jupiter to build a church, which became the core of his second monastic foundation at Fritzlar. This was an appropriation by Christianity of the power of the sacred tree, which has already been seen in Chapter 3, with Patrick's erection of a wooden church within the Druidic grove of Fochloth, thus re-dedicating the sanctuary.[37] Destroying churches was a popular Pagan response to the encroachment of Christianity. The church erected on the Saxon side of the River Yssel at Deventer was burned, and "likewise the first [Christian] sanctuaries in Norway were set on fire."[38] Later in this chapter it will be seen that Saxon rebels destroyed churches that had been built from the wood of sacred trees. It is impossible to know why they did this; perhaps, they merely destroyed churches. But it is tempting to consider that they may have destroyed that particular church because it represented a Christian profanation of traditional Pagan sacredness and power.

Saxony 772 CE: Charlemagne and the Destruction of the Irminsul

Charlemagne, king of the Franks from 768 CE and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire from 800 to his death in 814 CE, developed a vision in which territorial conquest was married to religious expansion and the Christianization of the Pagan hinterland to the north and east of his territory. It is important to realize that the Franks had a history of hostilities against the Saxons; there were invasions prior to Charlemagne's campaigns, in 744, 747 and 753 CE. From 772 CE Charlemagne waged a furious war against the Pagan Saxons, in which the monument known as

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[36] Richard E. Sullivan, "Early Medieval Missionary Activity: A Comparative Study of Eastern and Western Methods," in *Christian Missionary Activity in the Early Middle Ages*, 23.
[37] Mary Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 83-84.
[38] Huisman, "Christianity and Germanic Religion," 65.

the Irminsul (a term glossed by Rudolf of Fulda as "universal column, as if upholding all things")[39] was felled during the first campaign. This felling is recorded in the *Royal Frankish Annals* as follows:

> 772. The most gracious Lord King Charles then held an assembly at Worms. From Worms he marched first into Saxony. Capturing the castle of Eresburg, he proceeded as far as the Irminsul, destroyed this idol and carried away the gold and silver which he found. A great drought occurred so that there was no water in the place where the Irminsul stood. The glorious king wished to remain there two or three days in order to destroy the temple completely, but they had no water. Suddenly at noon, through the grace of God, while the army rested and nobody knew what was happening, so much water poured forth in a stream that the whole army had enough.[40]

Rudolf of Fulda's description of the Irminsul, cited above, recalls the *axis mundi*, analysed in Chapter 1. The *axis mundi* is a motif found in many cultures, both in mythological and ritual contexts. The Norse world-tree Yggdrasil, supporting the nine worlds, is one example; the pillar and altar ritual spaces of the Vedic Indians another. This motif does not, however, seem restricted to the Indo-European peoples; Finno-Ugrian and Altaic cultures employ it as well.[41] The particular symbol is often associated with the theories of Mircea Eliade, which were discussed briefly in Chapter 1. His work has been increasingly under attack for the past two decades; his approach has been found wanting, particularly with regard to its essentialist, ahistorical, position and because of its insistence that religion be treated "on its own terms" and not contextualised within other human activities and meaning systems.[42] These criticisms do not mean that the *axis mundi* does not exist, or that it has no bearing on the beliefs of the Pagan Saxons. It merely means that Eliade's conclusions have to be firmly anchored in the particular historical context, and that the closest and most culturally relevant comparative material is used, rather than material from historically, temporally or geographically unrelated cultures.

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[39] Quoted Karras, "Pagan Survivals and Syncretism in the Conversion of Saxony," 563.

[40] Bernhard Walter Scholz, (trans. w. Barbara Rogers), *Carolingian Chronicles* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 48-49.

[41] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard Trask (Harmondsworth: Penguin Arkana, 1989 [1964]), *passim*.

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

The name "Irmin" constitutes something of a puzzle in the study of Germanic traditional religion. As noted earlier, Tacitus wrote of a tribe called the Herminones, and Ellis Davidson has stated that "Irmin is thought to be the name or title of a god who could be identified with Tiwaz, an early Germanic deity associated with the sky."[43] We have seen that the earliest textually-attested Indo-European sky-god was the Vedic Dyaus Pitar, known as Zeus Pater in Greece and Jupiter in Rome. The Jupiter-deity of the Germanic Pagans was the Scandinavian Thor (the Anglo-Saxon Thunor and continental Donar), but the Germanic pantheon has become blurred over time. The god that fits the sky-father etymologically is Tiwaz Fader (Scandinavian Tyr, a minor figure in the surviving mythology), but his role has been usurped in part by Thor (as will be seen in Chapter 6 he has a close relation to the world tree) and in part by Óðinn (Anglo-Saxon Woden and continental Wotan), a deity who may have originated as a storm or wind-god.

The relation of the Scandinavian peoples, politically and religiously, to the Saxon resistance is intriguing. During the eighth and ninth centuries the Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians were themselves experiencing rapid change and political turmoil. Harald Klak, a petty king in Denmark, introduced himself to Charlemagne's son and successor Louis the Pious in 814 CE, as he needed help against enemies in Denmark. He was still in Saxony in 822 CE and when the situation in Denmark worsened in 826 CE he was baptised that year in Mainz, accompanied by a large entourage, with Louis as his godfather, an event celebrated by the poet Ermoldus Nigellus in a poem of over three hundred lines.[44] The mission of Anskar of Corbie and the founding of the see of Hamburg-Bremen followed this baptism, but little came of it in terms of real conversion of Danes or Swedes. This is largely because it was nearly impossible for the missionaries to influence recently baptised rulers, who were almost entirely ignorant of Christianity, once they were removed from the dominant Christian environment of the Frankish Empire. A pattern developed, in which conversion of the Scandinavians was largely effected by natives who had sought adventure as far abroad as Russia, Byzantium, Frankia and the British Isles, and had been converted in these Christian countries (the kings Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf Haraldsson of Norway being the clearest example of this process). They were influenced by the

[43] Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 22.
[44] Simon Coupland, "From poachers to gamekeepers: Scandinavian warlords and Carolingian kings," *Early Medieval Europe* 7/8 (1998): 89-90.

wealth and power possessed by the Christian rulers and when they returned to Scandinavia they were concerned to draw their peoples into the "modern" world of Christian Europe, something which could not happen without the abandonment of traditional Pagan religion.

Throughout the ninth century, however, the general attitude of the Danes in particular to the Franks and Christianity was hostile, and the Frankish rulers were cultivated only when financial and military assistance was needed. Conversion usually meant merely the acceptance of the ceremony of baptism and no more; they were not above plundering vulnerable ecclesiastical sites such as that of the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. Moreover, during the conflict between the sons of Louis the Pious for control of his empire, Charles the Bald, Lothar, and Louis the German all hired bands of Scandinavian raiders to protect themselves from other bands. The stakes were high, and Simon Coupland notes that:

> another contemporary text, the *Miracles of St Riquier*, offers a rare and fascinating insight into the contacts which had taken place between Charles the Bald and Weland's fleet [in 856] during the Vikings' absences. The passage in question describes a man named Aslak (*Ansleicus*), who, though "born of the Danish race, adopted the marks of Christianity and became a companion of the palace, through the generosity of our most holy lord, King Charles." According to the *Miracles*, Aslak was responsible for mediating between King Charles and a group of Vikings who were forced to remain in England by rough seas. It is this detail which links the passage with the events of 860-1, since it is the only occasion when Charles the Bald is known to have negotiated with Vikings based in England.[45]

At this stage, none of these Viking bands sought to claim land within the Frankish territories, after the fashion of the later Hrolf, who became Duke Rollo of Normandy in 911 CE. However, the use of Pagan Scandinavian mercenaries is interesting in the context of later Carolingian history. The mercenary Aslak had been baptised, and that possibly made him acceptable to Charles the Bald, the youngest son of Louis the Pious.

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[45] Coupland, "From poachers to gamekeepers: Scandinavian warlords and Carolingian kings," 105.

When the Tree Falls: The Consequences of the Destruction of the Continental Germanic Sacred Tree

Compelling evidence can be mustered to support the contention that most pre-modern cultures recognised no division between the "secular" and the "sacred." In this context, Hans Mol argues that identity and religion are inextricable, that religion is the sacralization of identity:

> [t]he advantage of the definition ... is ... 1) it draws attention to a process (sacralisation) rather than a fixity (religion) ... 2) it links religion to survival in that the ubiquity of religion appears to have something to do with the way it increases the viability of systems and their relations in a field of cooperating, but also contending units of social organisation ... Therefore we have to add this to the definition a) that sacralisation of one identity may contribute to the weakening of another and b) that the mechanisms of sacralisation (transcendentalisation, commitment, ritual, myth) have developed the wherewithal to desacralise in order to ensure both function and survival.[46]

It is not clear from the sources what Boniface's audience thought of the oak of Jupiter, and their world-view remains shadowy. More can be said about Charlemagne's destruction of the Irminsul at Eresburg near Paderborn. This ushered in a new era of rapid change and of observable shifts in the sacralisation of identity for the Saxons.

Christian missions had acknowledged the potential of the state to enforce religious "conversion" since the Church had become intimately bound up with the later Roman Empire through the conversion of Emperor Constantine. Monotheism is in essence universalising and intolerant, whereas polytheism is local and pluralistically legitimate. When monotheism encounters relativist beliefs, its instinctual tendency is to deem them "wrong" and to eradicate them.[47] Lawrence Duggan, discussing the *Royal Frankish Annals*, accuses earlier scholars such as Sullivan of ignoring the implications of the entry for 775 CE which reads "while the king spent the winter at the villa of Quierzy, he decided to attack the treacherous and treaty-breaking tribe of the Saxons and to persist in this war until they were either defeated and forced to accept the Christian religion or entirely

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[46] Hans Mol, "Religion and Identity: A Dialectical Interpretation of Religious Phenomena," in *Identity Issues and World Religions*, ed. Victor C. Hayes (Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1986), 71-72.

[47] Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 27.

exterminated."[48] This, for Duggan, would indicate that Charlemagne was able to entertain the notion that if he could not convert the Saxons he was willing to kill them all.

At the time of this entry, the Irminsul had already been felled. Charlemagne's war of conversion and conquest commenced in 772 CE and ended over thirty years later. So what was the Irminsul and why was its destruction important? Rudolf of Fulda's gloss on "Irminsul" has already been mentioned, as has its felling, described in the *Royal Frankish Annals*. Traditionally Germanic people conducted Pagan worship in groves,[49] and temples are virtually unknown and what is known is from texts treated, justifiably, with caution. However, the texts suggest that the Irminsul was the focal point of a ritual complex. Sceptical scholars frequently insist that Germanic Pagans only ever built temples in imitation of Christian churches, or indeed that they never built temples, but later Christian authors, such as Adam of Bremen, refer to temples because they (being Christians) are modelling (on Christianity) Paganism, about which they know nothing. [50]

However, Eresburg is close to Paderborn, where Charlemagne established an administrative centre when Saxony was absorbed into the Frankish Empire, and, a few years after the fall of the Irminsul, mass baptisms took place there. These facts highlight the significance of both the site and the water source, and indicate for Sullivan and other scholars that it had been an important Pagan cult centre.[51] Moreover, it has been argued that Charlemagne's imperial coronation was motivated by the need to overwhelm the Saxons fully.[52] Mayr-Harting, reviewing the evidence, concludes that control of the Rhine and the Weser, and the prevention of Saxon movement between the two rivers, mandated a total conquest and

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[48] Lawrence G. Duggan, "'For Force is Not of God'? Compulsion and Conversion from Yahweh to Charlemagne," in *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. James Muldoon (Gainesville, Fl: University Press of Florida, 1997), 49.
[49] Tacitus, "Germania," Chs 39 and 40, in *Dialogus, Agricola, Germania*, 277-79, 318-321.
[50] For example, Ian N. Wood, "Some Historical Re-identifications and the Christianization of Kent," in *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, 27-35, and Henrik Janson, "Adam of Bremen and the Conversion of Scandinavia," in *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, 83-88.
[51] R. E. Sullivan, '"The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan," 709.
[52] Henry Mayr-Harting, "Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800," *The English Historical Review* 111/444 (November 1996): 1113-1133.

conversion of them. This was because as late as 784 CE they were disposed to aid their Pagan neighbours the East Frisians, who had martyred Boniface in 754 CE.[53]

The war against the Saxons also features in Einhard the Frank's *Vita Karoli* (*Life of Charlemagne*) in a justifiably famous passage:

> [n]ow that the war in Italy was over, the one against the Saxons, which had been interrupted for the time being, was taken up once more. No war ever undertaken by the Frankish people was more prolonged, more full of atrocities or more demanding of effort. The Saxons, like almost all of the peoples living in Germany, are ferocious by nature. They are given much to devil worship and they are hostile to our religion. They think it no dishonour to violate and transgress the laws of God and man. Hardly a day passed without some incident or other which was well-calculated to break the peace. Our borders and theirs were contiguous and nearly everywhere in flat, open country, except, indeed for a few places where great forests or mountain ranges interposed to separate the territories of the two peoples by a clear demarcation line. Murder, robbery and arson were of constant occurrence on both sides. In the end, the Franks were so irritated by these incidents that they decided that the time had come to abandon retaliatory measures and to undertake a full-scale war against these Saxons.[54]

This passage reveals that the Saxons resisted the Franks in all possible ways. They actively were hostile to and resisted Christianity, to the extent of military resistance and what might be termed guerrilla warfare or even terrorism, and remained stubbornly attached to their traditional Pagan gods, rituals and laws. They deeply resented Frankish incursions into their lands and retaliated with violence, scorning the notion that the Franks had established a "peace."

It must be understood that the reaction of the Saxons and their desire to retain their traditional religion was not unique. Frisians and Scandinavians also resisted Frankish Christian pressure. Frisian resistance to the religious expansion of Charlemagne's grandfather Charles Martel featured in the *Life of Boniface*. Radbod (d. 719), the Frisian king, authorised incursions into Frankish territory and particularly targeted churches and the clergy. Willibald stated that, "through the dispersion of the priests and the

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[53] Mayr-Harting, "Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800," 1115-1116.

[54] Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, ed. and trans. Lewis Thorpe, *Two Lives of Charlemagne* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969, 61-62).

persecution of Radbod the greater part of the Christian churches, which had previously been subject to the Frankish empire, were laid waste and brought to ruin. Moreover, the pagan shrines were rebuilt and, what is worse, the worship of idols was restored."[55] The Frisians and the Saxons, Pagan peoples living on the borders of the Frankish territories, sought to defend their identities through holding firm to their Pagan religion, and attempted to reduce the influence of Christianity in their lands by burning churches and expelling ecclesiastics, and defending their traditional political systems (kingship in the case of the Frisians, elected war leaders in the case of the Saxons).

So what was the significance of the Irminsul and what were the consequences of its destruction? Recent important contributions to the discussion of pre-Christian Germanic religion include those of Richard North and Clive Tolley, discussed in Chapter 5. Both scholars employ methodology that is more speculative and risk-taking than the traditional approach within medieval history. Yet their tentative conclusions are linked to common Germanic ideas and to the wider Indo-European religious heritage. With regard to the Irminsul, North covers the centrality of the cosmic ash tree Yggdrasil in Scandinavian mythology (which will be discussed in Chapter Six), and its association with judgement and fate. Tolley connects to this matrix of meaning the syncretic gesture by the Anglo-Saxon King Oswald of Northumbria, who erected a cross before his battle against Cadwalla, king of the Britons at Hexham in 634 CE. The site at which this took place was called *Hefenfelth* (heaven-field), a name which Bede notes is ancient: that is, pre-Christian.[56]

The Scandinavian tree Yggdrasil is associated with judgement and fate. The Irminsul as *axis mundi* sustained the Saxon universe, but as Eliade has noted, it need not be the *only* centre:[57] Karras suggested there may have been more, noting the place-name Ermenseul in Lower Saxony, near Hildesheim. This may have inspired the fact that there was a column in Hildesheim Cathedral which was "known as the Ermensaule (though its claim to the name is disputed), which was dug up under Louis le Debonnaire [Louis the Pious, 814-840 CE], and transformed into a

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[55] Willibald, "Life of Boniface," in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, 35-36.
[56] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book III, Ch. 2, trans. Leo Sherley-Price, revised R. E. Latham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 144-45.
[57] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1996 [1958]), 373.

candelabrum surmounted by an image of the Virgin."[58] Other world-supporting or territory-defining trees are known from Finnish (Suomi), Lappish (Saami) and Altaic cultures; and from medieval Irish texts also (for example, the Yew of Ross and also the ash-tree of Uisnech, discussed in Chapter 3).[59] Trees therefore signified the upholding of the cosmos in the Germanic world (*axes mundi*), and were *foci* for ritual centres where legal and religious upholding also took place. To fell such a world support is to destroy the sacralized identity resting in it.

Earlier it was suggested that Boniface's blow heralded the collapse of the residual traditional worldview. Scholars know that Charlemagne wilfully pursued a policy of military subjugation of the Saxons and Frisians. The felling of the Irminsul shows him striking at the heart of Saxony, at an important ritual centre. The neatest form of Germanic conversion took place in centralised regions where a king could decide (after consultation) to bring about the transition peacefully. Saxony and Frisia lacked centralised monarchies. Bede, writing in the 720s, stated that "[t]hese Old Saxons have no king, but several lords who are set over the nation. Whenever war is imminent, these cast lots impartially, and the one on whom the lot falls is followed and obeyed by all for the duration of the war; but as soon as the war ends, the lords revert to equality of status."[60] Charlemagne followed up his ritual destruction of the Saxon world by concentrated and intentional actual destruction of that world through warfare. He was following a family tradition, as Charles Martel, his grandfather, had abolished the Frisian kingship after defeating the Frisian King Radbod. It is interesting that the sources suggest that the Saxons clung to their traditional political structure, demonstrating what Mayr-Harting calls "ethnic awareness," but resisted kingship as the imposition of tyranny. The tale told by the *Royal Frankish Annals*, compiled between 787 CE and 793 CE and revised possibly by Einhard, one of Charlemagne's intimates, makes grim reading.

After the 772 campaign the Saxons revolted promptly in 773 CE. This revolt included an attempt to burn the aforementioned church erected at Fritzlar by Boniface from the wood of the Donar oak. The Saxons had

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[58] J. H. Philpot, *The Sacred Tree: or The Tree in Religion and Myth* (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1994 [1897]), 120.
[59] Mary Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 89-91.
[60] Quoted in Mayr-Harting, "Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800," 1124.

previously burned the church erected by Lebuin (Liafwin), a missionary from Ripon who had preached in Saxony at some time between 745 and 770 CE. As noted, it could be argued that Boniface had sought to appropriate the power of the oak for his new deity, as frequently occurred when Christians appropriated Pagan sites.[61] The *Annals* report the pious legend that the Pagans were unable to burn Boniface's church; what this entry does not answer is the question why the Saxons wished to destroy *that* particular church? Perhaps not only because it was Christian, but because it was the product of Boniface's impious appropriation of a Hessian sacred tree? The passage stated, "the pagans could not set the church on fire, either inside or outside. Terror-stricken by the intervention of divine might, they turned to flight, although nobody pursued them. Afterwards one of these Saxons was found dead beside the church. He was squatting on the ground and holding tinder and wood in his hands as if he had meant to blow on his fuel and set the church on fire."[62] The Saxons showed themselves willing to die in order to resist the encroachment of Frankish political power and the alien religion of Christianity.

775 CE saw Charlemagne inflicting defeat and forcing baptisms. Campaigns and assemblies were held in 777, 779, 780, 782, 783, 785, 794, 795, 796, 797, 799, 804 and 810 CE; fifteen separate military actions, some of which were extremely savage. For example, in 783 CE, four and a half thousand Saxon rebels were massacred at Verden on the Weser for resisting baptism. But, despite these concentrated efforts to destroy them, the Saxons rebelled in 773 (mentioned above), 776, 778, 782, 784 (aided by the Frisians), 798 and 809 (aided by the Obrodites), seven times in Charlemagne's lifetime. In the light of earlier remarks concerning the process of conversion and the link between religion and identity, religion is a vital part of the Saxon struggle. This is acknowledged by Karras, Sullivan, Carroll and Wallace-Hadrill, and a small number of other scholars. In 785 CE, Widukind, the rebel duke who provided a rallying point for the Saxons, was persuaded to be baptised by means of bribes, at the palace of Attigny, with Charlemagne as his godfather.[63] This, however, did not deter him in his struggle against Frankish colonial oppression.

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[61] Goldberg, "Popular Revolt, Dynastic Politics, and Aristocratic Factionalism in the Early Middle Ages: The Saxon *Stellinga* Reconsidered," 473-74.
[62] Scholz, *Carolingian Chronicles*, 50.
[63] Mayr-Harting, "Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800," 1116.

The *Royal Frankish Annals* and other texts reveal the extent of Charlemagne's earnestness in the destruction of remaining independent "traditional" Germanic peoples. Identity is nurtured by and within the community, where illiterate people pass on traditional oral learning. Charlemagne forcibly expelled Saxons from their lands and re-settled them in remote parts of the Frankish empire from 794 through 804 CE. The *Annales Laurissense Minores*, in the entry for 794 CE, states that one-third of the Saxons were thus uprooted.[64] Added to the terrible casualties of the war, Saxony was radically depopulated. Mayr-Harting argued that it was necessary to remove Saxons from Nordalbingia to the Rhineland because it was feared that "they would escape into the lands of… enemies, the Slavs and Danes, or be stirred into rebellion by them."[65] These fears motivated Charlemagne to bequeath Saxony to his son Charles the Bald, whose lands constituted the traditional territory of Frankia.

The Saxon *Capitularies* of 775-790 and 797 CE prescribe the severest penalties for continued traditional Pagan religious observance, including provisions referring to sacred trees and other religious practices. These documents are of particular interest, in that even scholars like James Palmer, who is cautious about the topic of Germanic Paganism and approaches the texts as primarily literary constructs in the business of promoting ideal Christianity through images of Pagan "otherness," tend to regard the Capitularies as real examples of the Carolingian administration attempting to bring new territories, where Paganism still was a real force in the lives of the people, under its control.[66] The *Capitulary* of 775-790 stated:

> 21. if someone at springs or trees or groves should make a vow or sacrifice something in the pagan manner and eat in honor of demons, is a noble [let him pay] 60 *solidi*, if a free man 30, if a *litus* 15. If they do not have the wherewithal to pay at once, let them give service to the church until the *solidi* are paid.[67]

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[64] Quoted in Karras, "Pagan Survivals and Syncretism in the Conversion of Saxony," 554.
[65] Mayr-Harting, "Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800," 1131-1132.
[66] James Palmer, "Defining Paganism in the Carolingian World," *Early Medieval Europe* 15/4 (2007): 414.
[67] Quoted in Karras, "Pagan Survivals and Syncretism in the Conversion of Saxony," 562.

Further, the *First Capitulary* levied heavy penalties on any Saxon whose child remained unbaptised after a year, and death for any person who refused baptism entirely, "[i]f anyone among the race of the Saxons hereafter concealed among them shall have wished to hide himself unbaptised, and shall have scorned to come to baptism and shall have wished to remain a pagan, let him be punished by death."[68] Charlemagne's contemporaries seem to have admired his hardline stance on the Christianisation of the Saxons. There were, however, criticisms, chiefly from Alcuin of York, who urged that "*fides – ies est voluntaria, non necessaria*" (faith is a voluntary matter, not one of coercion).[69] Alcuin similarly argued that forcing tithes on a newly conquered people was unhelpful. Mayr-Harting suggests that it was Alcuin's criticisms that saw the provisions about tithing in the *First Capitulary* (782-785 CE) were dropped in the *Second Capitulary* of 797 CE.[70]

Postcolonial Themes in the Conversion of the Saxons

To a modern observer, Charlemagne's techniques are only too familiar. The indigenous peoples of many colonised countries were killed in combat, had people relocated, families torn apart and traditional learning denigrated and suppressed. Knowledge of the condition of the Australian Aborigines, more than two hundred years after their land was seized and their worldview dealt a vicious blow, makes a mockery of Sullivan's pusillanimous insistence that "one must conclude that the missionaries working in Saxony won converts by means other than political compulsion."[71] Apart from the *Capitularies*, Charlemagne exerted pressure on the Saxons through the practices of taking hostages. In the sources for Frankish administration from 714-840 CE there are nearly

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[68] Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 59.
[69] Luitpold Wallach, *Alcuin and Charlemagne* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1959), 27.
[70] Mayr-Harting, "Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800," 1128. Alcuin writes: "Therefore you should consider in your wisdom whether it is right to impose the yoke of tithes upon a simple people who are beginners in the faith, making a full levy from every house. We should ask if the apostles, who were taught by the Lord himself and sent out to preach to the world, required the payment of tithes in any place. We know it is good for our property to be tithed, but it is better to lose the tithe than destroy the faith," in Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 111.
[71] Sullivan, "Early Medieval Missionary Activity," 23.

seventy "distinct hostage episodes" recorded.[72] The sources are problematic but Adam Kosto argues that the role of the hostage (*obses*) can be defined as a surety, "a person deprived of liberty by a second person in order to guarantee an undertaking by a third person."[73] Saxon hostages featured at important times, such as the baptism of Duke Widukind at Attigny in 785 CE, and in 798 CE when Charlemagne received from the Saxons "the most treacherous individuals," that is, those most likely to rebel again. The texts (including an intriguing list of hostages, the *Indiculus obsidum Saxonum Moguntiam deducendorum*) indicate that the hostages were a marker of submission on the part of certain of the Saxons.[74]

The holding of hostages by the Frankish administration is relevant to the spread of Christianity as well as to the ongoing political struggles of the Saxons against the Franks. Hostages were often housed in ecclesiastical households and subjected to an intense education in Christianity, which sometimes resulted in conversion. Parallel to this social engineering was the creation of a Christian infrastructure within Saxony itself. Resistance south of the Elbe River ceased in 798 and north of the Elbe by 804 CE after the forced resettlements referred to above.[75] By the 830s there were bishoprics at "Hildesheim, Halberstadt, Paderborn, Verden, Minden, Munster, Osnabruck and Hamburg-Bremen."[76] Apart from the bishoprics there were monastic houses at Herford, Fulda, Werden and Corvey. These institutions furthered knowledge of Christianity and assisted Charlemagne's imported Christian Frankish nobility, who had received the estates confiscated from the exiled Saxons, in keeping the remaining Saxons submissive, so much so that they were kept from influence or high office until the tenth century. Of the Saxons held as hostages, several returned to Saxony as rulers and even bishops. These include Cacatius and Cheitmar, who had considerable success in persuading their people to convert, and "Hauthamar, the first bishop of the diocese of Paderborn."[77] He had been a child hostage and became a monk at Wurzburg. Charlemagne utilised hostages as a method of conversion among the Saxons when he had

[72] Adam J. Kosto, "Hostages in the Carolingian World (714-840)," *Early Medieval Europe* 2/ 2 (2002): 126.
[73] Kosto, "Hostages in the Carolingian World (714-840)," 128.
[74] Kosto, "Hostages in the Carolingian World (714-840)," 134-135, 137 and 143.
[75] Christopher Carroll, "The bishoprics of Saxony in the first century after Christianization," *Early Medieval Europe* 8/1 (1999): 221-222.
[76] Carroll, "The bishoprics of Saxony in the first century after Christianization," 222.
[77] Kosto, "Hostages in the Carolingian World (714-840)," 145.

realized that the application of force alone would not bring about lasting conversion to Christianity.

A significant postscript to the Saxon conquest occurred in 841-842 CE during the civil war between Charlemagne's grandsons Louis the German and Lothar for control of Saxony. Recorded in the *Royal Frankish Annals* and the *Annales Bertiniani* and two other primary sources is the tale of a revolt by a group calling themselves *Stellinga* (possibly meaning "restorers" or "companions," in a military sense) who supported Lothar because he promised that "if they should side with him, that he would let them have the same law in the future which their ancestors had observed when they were still worshipping idols."[78] The writer of the *Royal Frankish Annals* notes that traditionally the Saxons had three classes (which fits quite neatly with the Indo-European schema of Dumezil): the aristocrats (*edhilingui*), the free peasants (*frilingi*) and the unfree peasants (*lazzi*).

It has already been noted that the Saxons had no king, and evidence can be mustered to suggest that their political system was designed to prevent anyone attempting to become king. There were approximately one hundred small districts, amalgamated into three large areas, Westphalia, Angria and Eastphalia. Each province had an overlord and there was an annual gathering at Marklo on the Weser, to which each district sent representatives.[79] The *Vita* of the Anglo-Saxon evangelist Lebuin (Liafwin) of Ripon, the Apostle of the Frisians who died at Deventer in Holland in approximately 773 CE, records one of these annual assemblies. This visit was clearly prior to the commencement of Charlemagne's campaign against the Saxons (the first *Saxon Capitulary* outlawed such gatherings). The Saxons opened the meeting with prayers to their Pagan gods, made laws and planned military strategies. The *Vita*, written between 840 and 865 CE, says:

> [s]uddenly Lebuin appeared in the middle of the circle, clothed in his priestly garments, bearing a cross in his hands and a copy of the Gospels in the crook of his arm. Raising his voice, he cried: "Listen to me, listen. I am the messenger of Almighty God and to you Saxons I bring his command." Astonished at his words and at his unusual appearance, a hush fell upon the assembly. The man of God then followed up his announcement with these

[78] Scholz, *Carolingian Chronicles*, 167.
[79] Goldberg, "Popular Revolt, Dynastic Politics, and Aristocratic Factionalism in the Early Middle Ages: The Saxon *Stellinga* Reconsidered," 473.

> words: "The God of heaven and Ruler of the world and his Son, Jesus Christ, command me to tell you that if you are willing to be and do what His servants tell you He will confer benefits upon you such as you have never heard of before." Then he added: "As you have never had a king over you before this time, so no king will prevail upon you and subject you to his domination. But if you are unwilling to accept God's commands, a king has been prepared nearby who will invade your lands, spoil and lay them waste and sap away your strength in war; he will lead you into exile, deprive you of your inheritance, slay you with the sword, and hand over your possessions to whom he has a mind: and afterwards you will be slaves both to him and his successors."[80]

Since the forced evacuations make the population of Saxony difficult to ascertain, and Charlemagne had given the emptied lands to loyal Frankish nobles and some Saxon nobles who had jumped ship in the manner of anthropologist Robin Horton's third postulate of conversion, it is unsurprising that Lothar's blandishments were made to *frilingi* and *lazzi*, with no mention of the *edhilingui* and his offer to many of them was their "freedom."[81] Eric Goldberg argued that as the only known popular uprising in Europe from the sixth to the tenth centuries, the Stellinga uprising is much more important than generally recognized, and needs to be comprehensively analysed and explained. Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the *Vita Lebuini* both suggest that missionaries in Saxony were in danger of losing their lives. Lebuin visited some time between 745 and 773 CE, and "found a sympathetic audience among some of the Saxon *edhilingui*," but the ordinary people attacked Lebuin's church and drove out the missionaries.[82]

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[80] *Vita Lebuini*, quoted in Mayr-Harting, "Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800," 1125.

[81] Horton isolated three main elements in cultures that facilitated conversion to Christianity and Islam. First, there was the intellectual background; those concepts current in any given society that may be harmonised with, or said to anticipate, Christian concepts. Second, he drew attention that the requirements of the microcosm differ from those of the macrocosm. Here he focused on the differences between local spirits and the supreme being, which he linked to the encounter of tribal societies with colonizing powers. The final element of which facilitated conversion was, for Horton, the specialised roles of secular and religious leaders within tribal society, and whether they decide that keeping their prestigious roles though changing sides is preferable to the total loss of power. Robin Horton, "African Conversion," *Africa* 41/2 (1971): 85-108.

[82] Goldberg, "Popular Revolt, Dynastic Politics, and Aristocratic Factionalism in the Early Middle Ages: The Saxon *Stellinga* Reconsidered," 474.

Lothar's offer seems to have been made to the Saxon *frilingi* and *lazzi* because the *edhilingui* were either not there to be persuaded, having been killed or exiled in the struggle against Charlemagne, or because they had been won over to Christianity by bribes and high positions. The *Vita Sturmi*, written by Egil after 822 CE, stated that "[t]he king… converted the greater part of that people to the faith of Christ partly through wars, partly through persuasions, and also partly through bribes."[83] Goldburg argues that the *frilingi* and *lazzi* lost political power entirely through this process. They could no longer attend the Marklo council and had to submit to the aristocracy, who were chiefly imported Franks, totally. The four contemporary authors writing about the *Stellinga* (Nithard and Prudentius, author of the *Annales Bertiniani*, who supported Charles the Bald; Rudolf of Fulda, who supported Louis the German; and the Frisian Gerward, author of the *Annals of Xanten*, who supported Lothar) are in agreement that the uprising was geographically and numerically extensive. Prudentius and Nithard both stated that the Stellinga had three objectives:

> [f]irst, they wanted to avenge themselves upon the nobles (*nobiles, domini*) by killing them or driving them out of Saxony. Second, they desired to rid themselves of the written laws (*leges*) – the codified *Lex Saxonum* and Charlemagne's two Saxon capitularies – and reinstate the custom of the Old Saxons (*antiquorum Saxonum consuetude*). Third, the *Stellinga* broke their Christian vows and reverted to paganism ("*ritum paganorum imitari*"). In sum, their main objective was to live as their ancestors before the Frankish conquest and Christianization of Saxony ("*more antiquo… vivere*").[84]

The proximate cause of the uprising was the raising of armies among the Saxon *edhilingui* when open conflict between the sons of Louis the Pious became inevitable in early 841 CE. When the *frilingi* and *lazzi* perceived the fragmented loyalties of the *edhilingui*, they mustered their own revolt. Goldburg argued that Lothar's offer to the Stellinga could have resulted in a widespread Pagan coalition of Saxons, Danes and Slavs, representing a significant threat to Christian Frankia. However, Charles the Bald and Louis the German joined forces and thus Lothar failed. By September of 841 CE, Louis had put down the *Stellinga* "not without rightful bloodshed."[85]

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[83] Quoted in Goldburg, "Popular Revolt, Dynastic Politics, and Aristocratic Factionalism in the Early Middle Ages: The Saxon *Stellinga* Reconsidered," 476.
[84] Goldberg, "Popular Revolt, Dynastic Politics, and Aristocratic Factionalism in the Early Middle Ages: The Saxon *Stellinga* Reconsidered," 482.
[85] Scholz, *Carolingian Chronicles*, 168.

The Emergence of Indigenised Saxon Christianity

Indigenous people in the contemporary world have been regrouping since the mid-twentieth century, and in the more liberal cultures of the First World, land rights claims have succeeded (for example, the Australian Aborigines, the Inuit in Canada, the Amerindians, the Lapps or Saami in Norway, and even the Ainu in Japan). Indigenous religion and spirituality are reviving, and while some carp that these religious forms are re-creations and thus "inauthentic," this ignores the fact that religions grow and change, and that change is not necessarily reprehensible. The Saxons were gradually absorbed into a completely Christian world, where the maintenance of their traditions did not result in their rebirth into a more liberal, inclusive climate some centuries later. Syncretic Christian forms manifested in Saxony, which could be seen, in Hans Mol's terms, as a process whereby sacralized forms de-sacralized to ensure survival, "in that the ubiquity of religion appears to have something to do with the way it increases the viability of systems and their relations in a field of cooperating, but also contending, units of social organization."[86]

Of course, some Saxons did embrace Christianity, and Karras attributed the motivation of the one hundred and seventy-seven young noble Saxons who became monks at Corvey to the desire "to be assimilated into the Frankish upper classes and to gain the favour of the king."[87] Wallace-Hadrill noted that it was "astonishing" that the Saxons eventually decided that their conversion to Christianity was for the best. He noted that, "their Poeta Saxo, writing at the end of the ninth century, could represent the Saxon nobles as deeply loyal to the Carolingians and grateful for their conversion."[88] Mayr-Harting observed that the Poeta Saxo regarded the Franks and the Saxons as one people, a merging "of two *gentes* into one."[89] Scholars of modern colonialism and conversion are familiar with this process; indigenous people around the world, dispossessed through colonialism, have embraced Christianity fervently as the answer to the problems of societal upheaval, displacement of peoples, and destruction of

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[86] Mol, "Religion and Identity: A Dialectical Interpretation of Religious Phenomena," 72.
[87] Karras, "Pagan Survivals and Syncretism in the Conversion of Saxony," 556.
[88] Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 184.
[89] Mayr-Harting, "Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800," 1127.

traditional learning; problems which in fact were caused by the colonialist Christian invaders.[90]

Ninth-century Saxon writers were grateful for their conversion to Christianity and cast Charlemagne in the role of the ideal king and apostle of Christianity (for example, in the 887-909 CE *Translatio S. Liborii*, written "for Bishop Biso of Paderborn, says that he [Charlemagne] preached to the Saxons with an iron tongue"),[91] but interestingly they also preserved the honourable memory of their ancestors. The Saxon solution can be seen in literary texts such as the anonymous *Heliand* and Otfrid's *Evangelienbuch*, and is a suitable solution to the problem of identity: unable to preserve their traditional *weltanschauung* entire, they filtered Christianity through their Saxonness and profoundly changed it in the process, as James Russell suggested.[92] These texts were "composed in order to acquaint the Germanic tribes with Christendom in their own language and in their own traditional literary form."[93]

Writing in the German language had begun before Charlemagne, but it was always subordinated to writing in Latin. The likely date of the *Heliand* is between 820 and 860 CE, and of the *Evangelienbuch* between 863 and 871 CE.[94] The *Heliand* tells the story of the gospels in the manner of a Germanic heroic poem, and it demonstrates clearly how the Saxons indigenised Christianity. Jesus is a warrior and the apostles are his warband; the towns of Palestine are fortified burghs and the fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee are Scandinavian longships. G. Ronald Murphy has

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[90] The case of the Australian Aboriginal acceptance of Christianity is discussed in Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose (eds), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions* (Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1988).

[91] Mayr-Harting, "Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800," 1129.

[92] James G. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), *passim*.

[93] Norbert Voorwinden, "Latin Words, Germanic Thoughts – Germanic Words, Latin Thoughts: The Merging of Two Traditions," in *Latin Culture and Medieval Germanic Europe*, eds Richard North and Tette Hofstra (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1992), 114.

[94] Heinz Rupp, "The Adoption of Christian Ideas into German, with reference to the 'Heliand' and Otfrid's 'Evangelienbuch'," *Parergon* 21 (1978): 35-36.

argued that the *Heliand* presents key aspects of Christianity as magical spells, such as the Lord's Prayer and the Eucharist.[95]

The Saxons' world affirming, local and relativist faith had little need of the alien Christian message. In order to create that need, it was necessary to shatter their religious and social world and leave them clutching the offered Christian certainty in a profoundly uncertain world. The felling of the Irminsul shattered the Saxon worldview, and the campaigns of Charlemagne created the ongoing crisis through which generations of Saxons struggled to retain and reshape their identity, eventually to emerge in the tenth century as Christians, but of a distinctive kind.

Conclusion

Returning to the sacred tree and pillar, modern scholars and reconstructionist Pagans have attempted to determine the precise location of the Irminsul. One possible site is that of the Externsteine, a group of four monumental pillar stones near Horn, Kriese Lippe, by the Teutoberg Forest. This forest is famous for the exploits of the great German military commander, Arminius (later Germanized as Hermann) of the Cherusci, whose name indicates a dedication to Irmin. In 9 CE, commanding an army of Cherusci, Chatti, Bructeri and Marsi, he defeated Publius Quinctilius Varus and captured the eagles of the three Roman legions (the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth) that Varus commanded.[96] He became a byword for Germanic courage and innovation, and the Teutoberg Forest a place associated with Germanic independence and identity (if not actually a sacred grove). Recent archaeological investigation has confirmed that the site of the battle is Kalkriese Hill, approximately twenty kilometres north of Osnabrück.[97]

The Externsteine or Extern Stones are a remarkable site of prehistoric significance. It has been argued that the site is about four thousand years old, thus contemporary with other megalithic monuments that contribute significantly to national mythologies, Stonehenge in Britain and Carnac in

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[95] G. Ronald Murphy, *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[96] Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 2, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (London: Macmillan and Co., 1921), 33-59.

[97] Peter S. Wells, *The Battle That Stopped Rome: Emperor Augustus, Arminius, and the Slaughter of the Legions in the Teutoberg Forest* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co. Inc., 2003).

Brittany. The site was also re-used by medieval Christians. Column One of the four stones has a hermitage hewn from the rock high up from the ground, and a famous carving of Jesus being taken down from the cross. The connection of the cross with the cosmic pillar or tree is analysed further in Chapter 5; suffice to say that the pattern of Christian appropriation of Pagan sacred sites, particularly those with a water source which could be used for baptisms, predominates throughout Europe. The form of the cross in the Externsteine sculpture has been taken by some commentators to be derived from the Irminsul and to indicate Christian triumphalism in a formerly Pagan sacred place; Martin Schmidt and Ute Halle have noted that some "see one part of the carving as a picture of the Irminsul."[98] Column Two contains an open room that is oriented to the sunrise and sunset at the Summer solstice. Column Three has a seventeenth-century staircase cut into the rock, and is connected by an iron bridge to Column Two. The Externsteine site was of interest to the Nazis during the Third Reich, and the Externsteine Foundation of Julius Andree had Heinrich Himmler as patron.[99] In the early twenty-first century, the Externsteine is part of a complex of tourist attractions (which includes the enormous monument to Arminius erected in 1875) that are visited by hundreds of thousands of tourists each year. For modern Pagans, the stones have become, like Stonehenge, a site of ritual, with the Summer solstice being the most important date for gatherings. These Pagans recall the lost "universal column upholding the world," in a place that may or may not have been the site of Charlemagne's fatal blow to the Pagan Saxon world, more than twelve hundred years ago.

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[98] Martin Schmidt and Ute Halle, "On the Folklore of the Externsteine: Or a Centre for Germanomaniacs," in *Archaeology and Folklore*, eds. Amy Gazin-Schwartz and Cornelius Holtorf (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 160.

[99] Bettina Arnold, "Pseudoarchaeology and Nationalism: Essentializing Difference," in *Archaeological Fantasies: How Pseudoarchaeology Misrepresents the Past and Misleads the Public*, ed. Garrett G. Fagan (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 161.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANGLO-SAXON SACRED TREES: CHRISTIANIZING A PAGAN SYMBOL

> May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. *Galatians* Chapter 6, Verse 14[1]

Introduction

The Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain from the early to mid-fifth century in the wake of the Roman administrative withdrawal in 406 CE. There are British (Welsh) sources for the fifth century, but more extensive sources become available at the time of the papally-authorised mission, led by the Italian monk Augustine, to the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Kent in 597 CE. The Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity was a relatively peaceful transition, which was deemed to be complete by 667 CE, when the Northumbrian bishop Wilfrid of York (or of Hexham) effected the conversion of the kingdom of the South Saxons (Sussex). Evidence for the pre-Christian beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons is scanty and the sacred tree appears only in vestigial forms. Two distinct forms are discernible: the Pagan sacred tree, whose existence can be reconstructed from Anglo-Saxon writings produced within Christian monasteries and from continental German and Scandinavian texts; and the Christian sacred tree, which focused on the redemptive cross of Christ, and is exemplified in the famous poem *The Dream of the Rood*.

Anglo-Saxon Christianity preserved the holy tree in a number of forms: the Venerable Bede (c. 672-735) recorded that the British Christians met by Augustine in the late sixth century assembled at an oak later known as "Augustine's Oak"; for the Anglo-Saxons the erection of monumental

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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.

crosses marked localities and meeting places, and is a possible Pagan survival particularly because the early crosses such as that erected by King Oswald of Northumbria at Heavenfield to commemorate his victory over the British King Cadwalla were wooden, and the connotations surrounding the Heavenfield cross connect it to the Irminsul and the tree as *axis mundi*;[2] folk Christianity venerated the Glastonbury Thorn which according to legend was the staff of Joseph of Arimathea which took root and flowered; and the image of Jesus Christ on the cross was in later medieval times often combined with the image of the tree of life from the Garden of Eden, to produce a Christian version of the tree as *imago mundi*. The tree clearly retained the meaning of *axis mundi*, the centre of a specific territory, but the ancient meaning of the sacred tree as *imago mundi* appears only rarely in the surviving sources (interestingly, most of these are fully Christianised and identify Jesus Christ with the tree of life and the world).

The Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons and Anglo-Saxon Paganism

The mission of Augustine of Canterbury was organised by Pope Gregory the Great, who was pope from 590 to 604 CE. Early in 597 Augustine and approximately forty companions (including Frankish interpreters) arrived at Thanet, an island off the coast of Kent, a kingdom ruled by King Aethelberht. The mission was probably sent to Kent because Aethelberht's queen was Bertha, a Christian princess of the Franks, who at the time of her marriage had travelled to Kent in the company of her chaplain, Bishop Luidhard. The exact date of Aethelberht and Bertha's marriage is uncertain, and at the time of Augustine's arrival Luidhard was no longer active. It is reasonable to assume that he had died; the church that Aethelberht offered to Augustine and his companions, a Romano-British structure in the capital, Canterbury, which was dedicated to Saint Martin of Tours, was the same church that Luidhard had used. Aethelberht received Augustine hospitably, and gave permission to the missionaries to preach and make converts. Augustine prepared carefully for his meeting with the king; Bede described an impressive spectacle, in which the monks sang a hymn and carried a cross and a "likeness" of Christ in procession.[3]

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[2] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Leo Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 144-145.

[3] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 76. Ian Wood, "The Mission of Augustine of Canterbury to the English," *Speculum* 69/1 (1994): 3, cast doubt

On Christmas Day of that year more than ten thousand Anglo-Saxons were baptised, according to a letter from Pope Gregory the Great to Bishop Eulogius of Alexandria.[4] This is a remarkable success for an abbot who had to preach using interpreters, and who lacked confidence as leader of the mission. The Anglo-Saxons converted *en masse* because of the social bonds that held society together. The missionaries concentrated their efforts on the royal families, and when kings accepted baptism, their retainers were baptised with them, as a sign of their loyalty and commitment to their lords.[5]

Indeed, when confronted by the indigenous Anglo-Saxon Pagan traditions, Augustine asked the pope for advice as to how to effect the religious transition to Christianity. Pope Gregory wrote at length to Augustine and his fellow missionaries, and in 601 CE sent the following letter to Mellitus, who was a missionary amongst the East Saxons:

> [h]owever, 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 will be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognizing 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 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

on Bede's account, noting that the monks were unlikely to have known the Rogation hymn they supposedly sang. It is, however, likely that the missionaries made an impression by use of a spectacle, which may well have been alive in memory and tradition in Bede's lifetime.

[4] Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule and Selected Epistles*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Rev. James Barmby, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 240.

[5] Carole M. Cusack, *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples* (London: Cassell, 1998), 88-118.

> 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.[6]

It is clear that Pope Gregory did not intend that the doctrines of Paganism and Christianity should become intermingled, but only that the externals of the two religions be utilised to facilitate a smooth transition. If constructed temples already existed, then the missionaries could re-consecrate them to the worship of the true God. People would continue to frequent familiar holy places, and Christian meanings would gradually overwhelm older meanings. The feasts of the Christian year could be grafted onto Pagan sacred times, to ensure continuity of worship. Form and content are not so easily separable, however, and form could, on occasion, influence content. It is demonstrable that Anglo-Saxon Christianity was distinctively Germanic in character; Christianity was indigenised and Saxonised, in a parallel process to the Anglo-Saxons' becoming converted.

Anglo-Saxon Paganism lacks a corpus of mythological texts equivalent to the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson from medieval Iceland. The field of study is built up from fragmentary references to deities, beliefs and practices in Christian sources. Significantly, works by para-scholarly writers who are Pagan sympathisers or themselves Pagans (often called Heathens in the Anglo-Saxon context) have rendered the issue of what can be known of Pagan Anglo-Saxon religion very controversial.[7] For example, it is often asserted that the Anglo-Saxons worshipped two families of gods, the Ése and the Wen; yet these terms never appear in any text, but were formed from the names of the two families of gods in Scandinavia, the Æsir and the Vanir. This is typical of uncritical uses of the Norse texts to fill in the otherwise shadowy lineaments of Anglo-Saxon Paganism. The texts that are most often mined

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[6] Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 107-109.
[7] See Tony Linsell, *Anglo-Saxon Mythology, Migration and Magic* (Pinner: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1994) and Kathleen Herbert, *Looking for the Lost Gods Of England* (Pinner: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1994). Herbert was a student of J. R. R. Tolkien and is a best-selling novelist of historical novels set in the Early Middle Ages. She is the godmother of Caitlin Matthews, a leading contemporary Pagan practitioner and author. Herbert aims to raise popular awareness of Anglo-Saxon and British Celtic culture, but despite her knowledge and love of the subject fails to meet academic standards of probity. Linsell's orientation is that of a practicing Pagan and his book packages charms and magic in an attractive non-academic fashion.

for information about Anglo-Saxon religion include prose accounts like Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and *De Temporum Ratione* ("On the Reckoning of Time"), heroic poems including *Beowulf*, the Finnsburgh fragment, and other Christian poems, riddles and charms, with supplementary information being gleaned from place-names and archaeological evidence.

Consequently a version of the nativist versus anti-nativist controversy discussed in Chapter 3 also obtains in the field of Anglo-Saxon studies. There are scholars who argue that nothing is known of the Pagan period, using similar techniques to that of the Irish anti-nativists. In 1975 Eric G. Stanley's *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, a volume containing articles first published in the mid-1960s, appeared. Stanley argued that to date scholarship on Anglo-Saxon religion had been seriously distorted by pro-Pagan romanticism. He dismissed the idea that Old English poetry produced in the Christian era preserved Pagan traditions and argued that, rather, "Anglo-Saxon poets could … fully embrace the foreign and reject the indigenous values,"[8] and that the texts were "a profoundly Christian literature … the Christian writings of a Christian people."[9] The second part of the collection investigated the concept of *wyrd* (fate) in eleven linked essays, and concluded that '[i]t is no longer as fashionable as it was to look upon the occurrence of the word *wyrd* in Old English literature as survivals of Germanic paganism or even to claim that we know anything about Germanic, that is pre-Christian, fatalism."[10] Stanley stated uncompromisingly that all the Old English texts were written after the conversion by Christians; thus they could not contain any authentic Pagan traditions.

Since Stanley issued this challenge, scholarship on Anglo-Saxon Paganism has developed in a number of interesting directions. The study of place-names has flourished, providing solid evidence for deity names in the landscape. Woden, Thunor and Tiw (the equivalents of the Scandinavian Óðinn, Thor and Tyr) are well-attested, and are often joined with terms for places of worship, burial and so on. David Wilson has noted that Thunreslau and Wodenslawe, which contain the element *hlaew* (tumulus), were Saxon administrative districts "and no doubt the mound was the meeting place for the half-hundred. It is possible that [these are] two examples of pagan cult sites continuing as meeting places in the Christian

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[8] E. G. Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1975), 82.
[9] Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, 85.
[10] Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, 116.

period."[11] Sarah Semple's recent investigation of *hearg* (variously interpreted as temple, idol, and hilltop sanctuary) place names, while cautious regarding the existence of roofed temple buildings, affirmed the presence of "ephemeral structures such as enclosures enhancing natural locations."[12] She considered three sites: Harrow Hill, Sussex, a site of ritual activity since the Neolithic, which in a thirteenth century charter has a *stanherie* (stone temple/shrine) nearby; Harrow Fields, Cheshire, which has Mesolithic, Neolithic, Roman and Anglo-Saxon occupation and cult activity; and Wood Eaton, Oxfordshire, which has a field name, Harowdonehull, the first element of which is associated with *hearg*. Semple concluded that the three sites "present a convincing, if surprising, argument for the *hearg* constituting something that can be described as native, long-lived and prehistoric in origin, with a biography extending into the Roman period but apparently not surviving the sixth to the seventh centuries,"[13] that is, the period of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. Chaney had much earlier made a similar point about burial mounds falling into disuse when the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy began to bury their dead in churches rather than tumuli (although in many cases the churches were located close to the older inhumation mounds).[14]

Recent text-based studies of Anglo-Saxon Paganism have also yielded new, surprising and mostly convincing interpretations of pantheon and cult. In the early 1990s, Wilson began his survey of textual sources with Tacitus' *Germania*, and he situated his discussion of Anglo-Saxon examples of Paganism in the context of that earlier source. For example, he connected the banning of "fortune-telling from birds' actions" at the Synod of Clofeshoh in 747 with the Tacitean association of birds with omens, and sacrilege committed by the Northumbrian Pagan High Priest Coifi, when he took up arms and rode a stallion into the sanctuary, signalling his allegiance to the new religion of Christianity, with the Tacitean goddess Nerthus, because "when she rode among her people in

[11] David Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (London: Routledge, 1992), 35.
[12] Sarah Semple, "Defining the OE *hearg*: a preliminary archaeological and topographic examination of *hearg* place names and their hinterlands," *Early Medieval Europe* 15/4 (2007): 368.
[13] Semple, "Defining the OE *hearg*: a preliminary archaeological and topographic examination of *hearg* place names and their hinterlands," 373.
[14] William A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition From Paganism to Christianity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), 102-103.

her car, the taking up of arms was forbidden."[15] In the mid-1990s Karen Louise Jolly's study of elf charms introduced the model of "popular religion" as an interpretive framework through which to view those Christian texts that appeared to contain Pagan elements. Jolly's vision of popular religion was similar to Jonathan Wooding's understanding of the corrective role that archaeology plays vis-à-vis history, which was mentioned in Chapter 3. Both these scholars drew attention to the elitism of the anti-nativist Christian interpretation of the early medieval period. The majority of the people were not literate, and did not participate in the culture of theological orthodoxy and aristocratic concerns. Rather, Jolly argued that popular religion referred to "those beliefs and practices common to the majority of believers … rituals making the cycles of life (birth, marriage, and death) or combating the mysterious (illness and danger) or assuring spiritual security (the afterlife)."[16]

This model assisted the revival of research on religious syncretism, in which texts were examined for evidence of religious beliefs and practices that combined Pagan and Christian elements in unorthodox ways. Some research of this type had already appeared; for example, Eric J. Sharpe had analysed the "Old English Runic Paternoster," a prayer found in the ninth or tenth century Anglo-Saxon text, *The Dialogue of Salomon and Saturn*, in which the Old Testament King Solomon and the Roman deity Saturn engage each other in a contest of riddles on Biblical, Classical and other topics. Salomon explains the power of the Pater Noster to Saturn, in a lengthy section of the text, in which "the letters forming the words PATER NOSTER and individual letters from the later parts of the prayer are expounded, in the order in which they occur, a letter at a time … [S]till more remarkable is the fact that each letter is reproduced both as a Roman letter and as an Anglo-Saxon rune."[17] Every letter of the Lord's Prayer is thus a charm that combats the powers of evil, and Satan himself. Further, the individual letters are allegorised as warriors, the weapons they bear being related to the shape of each individual letter.[18] The Lord's Prayer is not, in this case, a pious communication from the believer to God, but an

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[15] Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, 31.
[16] Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 9.
[17] Eric J. Sharpe, "The Old English Runic Paternoster," in *Symbols of Power*, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson (Cambridge and Lanham, MD: D. S. Brewer and Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 46.
[18] Frederick B. Jonassen, "The Pater Noster Letters in the Poetic *Solomon and Saturn*," *The Modern Language Review* 83/1 (1988): 1.

incantation like the *galdrar* (singular *galdr*) pronounced by Pagans in Old Norse texts, and raises the question of whether the runes were a magical as well as a practical script. There are two runic alphabets of twenty-eight letters in Old English; one in a manuscript source and one on a *scramasax* (sword) found in the Thames. Four letters have the names of trees; the oak, ash, birch and yew.[19] The Anglo-Saxon world was filled with dangers, behind which lurked the devil and his minions; many Christian symbols, prayers and rites were used apotropaically to ward off evil. Making the sign of the cross, like the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, was one of the Christian's most powerful weapons.[20] In an interesting comparison, the eighth or ninth century Old English *Rune Poem* (two later Scandinavian *Rune Poems* also exist, in Norwegian from the twelfth or thirteenth century, and in Icelandic from the fifteenth century) has been substantially Christianised (in contrast to the Paganisation of the Lord's Prayer). Marijane Osborn noted that the poem minimised Pagan references, "giving *os* (Icelandic *oss* 'god') the meaning 'mouth,' giving *Þorn* (Scandinavian *Þurs* 'giant') the meaning 'thorn' - but with the possible hint of an underlying story about giants, and describing *Tir* (Scandinavian Tyr, a martial god) as an innocuous constellation."[21] Nevertheless, the text presents as a way to perform divination through the casting of lots (*hleotan*). The runes, even in a Christian context, retain their capacity to "bring to light secret things."[22]

Jolly furthered this type of research through the interpretation of texts such as the *Acerbot* (Field Remedy) ritual that invokes both the Christian Father God and the Pagan Mother Earth, and the poems *Guthlac* and *The Dream of the Rood*, which utilise Germanic heroic tropes to present a Christian message. Guthlac, a fenland saint of the late seventh to the early eighth century, was presented as a warrior against spiritual forces, and the tenth century *The Dream of the Rood* is a monologue spoken by the cross on which Jesus was crucified to the dreamer who experiences this vision as he sleeps:

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[19] Gale R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons* (Dorchester: Dorset Press, 1985), 52-58.
[20] David F. Johnson, "The *Crux Usualis* as Apotropaic Weapon in Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England*, eds Catherine E. Karkov, Sarah Larratt Keefer and Karen Louise Jolly (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), 81-83.
[21] Marijane Osborn, "*Hleotan* and the Purpose of the Old English *Rune Poem*," *Folklore* 92/2 (1981): 168.
[22] Osborn, "*Hleotan* and the Purpose of the Old English *Rune Poem*," 172.

> I dared not bow or break there
> against my Lord's wish, when I saw the surface
> of the earth tremble. I could have felled
> all my foes, yet I stood firm.
> Then the young warrior, God Almighty,
> stripped Himself, firm and unflinching. He climbed
> upon the cross brave before many, to redeem mankind.
> I quivered when the hero clasped me,
> yet I dared not bow to the ground,
> fall to the earth. I had to stand firm.
> A rood was I raised up; I bore aloft the mighty King,
> the Lord of Heaven. I dared not stoop.
> They drove dark nails into me …
> They insulted us both together, I was drenched in the blood
> That streamed from the Man's side after He set His spirit free.[23]

The cross asserts that it was Jesus Christ's faithful man at arms, and did not abandon his lord in His final battle. The heroic military imagery may have deliberately been employed to render the death of Christ attractive to the warrior class. Interestingly, this religious poem contains many resemblances to the secular genre of riddles, the largest collection of which is in the *Exeter Book*. Michael D. Cherniss observed the correspondence "between the cross's description of its origin in a forest and subsequent transformation into an artifact (28-33a), and Riddles 53 ('Battering-Ram'), 71 ('Sword' or 'Dagger'), and 73 ('Lance' or 'Spear'), as well as 30 ('Tree-Cross')."[24]

The Dream of the Rood may possibly have had a Pagan prototype, perhaps concerning the death of a god of goodness and justice, such as the Scandinavian deity Balder. The cross is explicitly referred to as a tree, and the reference to the "gallows tree" recalls the sacrificial death of Óðinn, hanged and pierced by a spear on the world-tree, Yggdrasill:

> [i]t seemed I saw a wondrous tree
> soaring into the air…
> Wondrous in 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

[23] Kevin Crossley-Holland (ed. and trans), *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 201.
[24] Michael D. Cherniss, "The cross as Christ's weapon: the influence of heroic literary tradition on The Dream of the Rood," *Anglo-Saxon England* 2 (1973): 250.

here on earth on the gallows tree …[25]

Fascinatingly, over fifty years ago William Chaney had drawn attention to the centrality of Woden in Anglo-Saxon Paganism, and had remarked upon the somewhat contradictory fact that Woden was identified both with the Biblical Satan or the devil (for example, the name of the earthwork, the Wansdyke, being rendered in popular usage "the Devil's Ditch") yet also with Christ. This is most apparent in the "Nine Herbs Charm," which states that the nine protective herbs were devised by Jesus while on the cross; "They were created by the wise Lord, holy in heaven as He hung (on the cross)." This Christian perspective then shifts, and the charm goes on to state: "These nine have power against nine poisons. A worm came crawling, it killed nothing. For Woden took nine glory-twigs, he smote then the adder and it flew into nine parts."[26] Woden, like Óðinn, hung on a Cosmic Tree that connected the nine worlds of the Norse universe, and discovered the power of runes through the sacrifice of himself; Christ, too, hung on a Cosmic Tree, the cross, and during his ordeal he created the nine magical herbs.

Chaney rightly argued that there were many associations concentrated in the juxtaposition of these two deities and their world trees or *axes mundi*. Woden and Christ are equated, as are Yggdrasill and the cross, and also the sacrifice of Woden and of Christ (in which both gods are both victim and officiating priest). Chaney adduces further connections between: "the Germanic casting of lots with twigs marked by runes, reported by Tacitus … and the casting of lots associated with the Crucifixion; the creative act in suffering and death displayed in Woden's mastery of the runes of knowledge and Christ's creation of the herbs."[27] This charm is an excellent example of the survival of the Pagan *axis mundi*, the world-tree that connects the heavens, earth and the underworld, and the deity intimately connected with it, into the new Christian reality, due to the close matching of the set of referents surrounding the tree. Chaney detailed many such connections between the old Pagan religion and the new Christian religion, which in terms of Robin Horton's model of conversion (mentioned in Chapter 4) represented significant intellectual factors that enabled the transition from one to the other faith to be smoothed. He also drew attention to the role of royal figures, chiefly kings, who provided

[25] Crossley-Holland, *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology*, 200-204.
[26] William A. Chaney, "Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England," *Harvard Theological Review* 53/3 (1960): 202.
[27] Chaney, "Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England," 203.

heroic models for their subjects to follow into the new faith. Jolly, discussing the "Nine Herbs Charm" proper, and the second part, which she called "The Lay of the Nine Twigs of Woden," agreed that this text preserved the densest collection of Pagan references in Anglo-Saxon literature, but argued that the later Saxons who used it were not necessarily continuing the practice of Paganism, but rather had fossilised the Pagan lore into what she designated "highly conservative folklore."[28] This interpretation accorded well with the popular religion model she advocated.

Another obvious presence of the names of the Pagan gods in Anglo-Saxon culture is in the names of the days of the week, which are based on the planetary week of the classical world: "*solis dies* ('day of the sun'), *lunae dies* ('day of the moon'), *martis dies* ('day of Mars'), *mercurii dies* ('day of Mercury'), *jovis dies* ('day of Jove [= Jupiter]'), *veneris dies* ('day of Venus'), *saturni dies* ('day of Saturn')."[29] In the English week, Mars is equated with Tiw and Mercury with Woden, Jupiter is identified with Thunor and Friday takes its name from the goddess Frig. Sunday and Monday are named for the heavenly bodies, and only Saturday retained the association with the Roman god Saturn. The German version of the weekdays shows signs of being more ideologically Christian, in that Woden's day becomes Mittwoch, and Sunday Samstag, which is derived from "Sabbath day." There has been dispute as to when the Anglo-Saxon names for the days became fixed; at present Christine Fell's suggestion that it happened as part of the conversion process, with missionaries offering what they thought were the closest equivalents to the Classical gods, is widely accepted.[30] Philip Shaw suggests that the substitution of "Mittwoch" in southern Germany suggests that Woden was viewed as a particularly powerful deity that Christians needed to combat among the Lombards and Alemanni, whereas by contrast, in England "Woden was enthusiastically adopted by the Christian English as a royal ancestor figure."[31]

Richard North's *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, which was published in 1997, is the most ambitious study to date in terms of attempting to retrieve from the Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus a comprehensive pantheon and mythology, which formed the basis for the transition to

[28] Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context*, 128.
[29] Philip Shaw, "The origin of the theophoric week in the Germanic languages," *Early Medieval Europe* 15/4 (2007): 387.
[30] Shaw, "The origin of the theophoric week in the Germanic languages," 395.
[31] Shaw, "The origin of the theophoric week in the Germanic languages," 399.

Christianity. North made three radical propositions in this book: "that Nerthus was male, like Njordr; that Balder was derived from the same figure as Freyr; and that Njordr's wife Skadi was a Norse reflex of Terra Mater."[32] His re-shaping of Anglo-Saxon Paganism contains much that is relevant to the Anglo-Saxon cult of the tree. For example, North developed from fragments of sources the hypothesis that there was an Anglian seasonal myth featuring a figure called Ing- or Ingui (similar to Freyr in Norse mythology) who was a sacrificial king, married to a woman personating the goddess of the land in the spring and killed by the man who replaced him the next year. North argued that *The Dream of the Rood* described the crucifixion, but the Anglian myth of Ingui was the underlying structure: "Firstly … the description of the cross … is partly based on the image of an Anglian 'world-tree' analogous to the role of Yggdrasill … Secondly, on the basis of the mythology of Balder … the image of Christ's death was constructed in this poem with reference to an Anglian myth of Ingui's sacrifice on the world tree."[33] With regard to *The Dream of the Rood*, North concluded that the Northumbrian poet who composed it used the language of the Ingui myth to present a sophisticated argument to the Anglo-Saxons concerning the Christian story of salvation as pre-existing in their culture and religion. As with the "Nine Herbs Charm," the *Dream of the Rood* clearly presents the tree/cross as an *axis mundi*, uniting the three worlds, and participates in the homology tree=human, in that the deity (Jesus or a Pagan equivalent) is intimately associated with the tree. It may also be speculated that the events taking place on the tree/cross are of cosmic significance and may indicate a very faint survival of the symbol of the tree as *imago mundi*.

North also commented on the Ruthwell Cross, a monumental stone cross now in Dumfriesshire, Scotland, which has part of the poem, or a very similar text, carved in runes on it. The scholarly consensus used to be that the cross was eighth century in date and the runes were carved c. 750 CE. This is important as the manuscript preserving *The Dream of the Rood*, the Vercelli book, dates from 950-1000 CE.[34] Of late it has been argued that the Ruthwell Cross could have been erected as a pillar before 700 CE, and the cross-head added later. Thus, as North noted, the pillar may have signified a "continued Northumbrian presence in a British

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[32] Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xi-xii.
[33] North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 273.
[34] Brian Branston, *The Lost Gods of England* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984 [1957]), 165.

region after King Ecgfrith's defeat at Nechtansmere in 685 … [or] it is also plausible that the Ruthwell monument was erected … in the aftermath of the synod held near to Ruthwell by the river Nith in 705."[35] In modern editions of the *Dream of the Rood*, it is a poem in 156 lines; the section on the Ruthwell Cross falls between lines thirty-nine and sixty-four.[36] Particularly interesting for the homologies of the tree discussed in Chapter 1 is North's speculation that the poet may have included the meaning of "horse" in his portrayal of the cross-cum-world tree, which strengthens the connection of the Scandinavian Yggdrasill with the sacred trees of the Anglo-Saxons. North concludes that "the cross in *The Dream of the Rood* can be read as a horse both on which Christ rides to harrow hell and on which the Northumbrian Dreamer rides to Paradise, 'when,' as he says, 'the Lord's cross will fetch me and then bring me to where there is great bliss.'"[37] He connected this horse with the Norse myth of Hermod's ride to Hel on Óðinn's eight-legged horse Sleipnir, and speculated that Balder (and his parallel deity, the Anglian Ingui) was the original horseman in the story for whom Hermod later substituted. This would strengthen the connection between Christ and his Pagan parallel deity, be it Óðinn, Balder, or North's hypothesised Ingui; he also noted that "styling the cross as a horse was common in the fourteenth century and would be consistent with the doctrine of Christ doing mounted battle with Satan."[38] Another interesting parallel that this reveals is the connection of the Christ-bearing world tree with eschatology and the Last Judgment;[39] the Pagan tree Yggdrasil is linked also to judgment and fate. This is an image from popular religion, in Jolly's sense, rather than an "official" Christian doctrine, and indicates the syncretistic combination of Pagan symbols with Christian motifs continuing into the later Middle Ages.

The Tree in the Transition from Paganism to Christianity

When Augustine commenced his mission to the Anglo-Saxons he endeavoured to join forces with the British Christians who were influential in Wales and other territories that were not conquered by the Germanic tribes. This meeting, Bede wrote, took place at a site defined by a large

[35] North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 287-288.
[36] Calvin B. Kendall, "From Sign to Vision: The Ruthwell Cross and the Dream of the Rood," in *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England*, 141.
[37] North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 296.
[38] North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 293.
[39] Jean-Francois Poignet, "Visions Medievales de l'Axe du Monde," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 25/1 (1988): 47-55.

and imposing oak tree, "Augustine … summoned the bishops and teachers of the neighbouring British kingdoms to a conference at a place that is still called in English … Augustine's Oak … He proceeded to urge them with brotherly admonitions, that they should preserve catholic peace with him and undertake the joint labour of evangelizing the heathen for the Lord's sake."[40] This assembly was not, however, a success, in that the British Christian leaders declined to join forces with Augustine, or to recognise his authority. They had consulted a holy hermit as to whether they should give up their native Christian tradition and customs and be received into the Roman communion. The hermit had advised that they could know that Augustine was a true servant of Christ if he rose when they approached him. Augustine did not rise, and the British bishops concluded that he lacked respect for them and would despise them if they yielded their authority to him.[41] This particular example of a prominent tree that played a role in the conversion process is not a sacred tree *per se*. It is, however, evidence that imposing trees were used as markers in the landscape, and that people preserved the memory of significant events that took place at such sites, with the tree often being known by the name of a significant individual involved. The next example discussed, that of the cross erected by Oswald of Northumbria before going into battle, more accurately preserves the ancient meanings of the sacred tree.

With reference to the survival of the sacred tree and pillar after the conversion to Christianity of the Anglo-Saxons, Bede records an incident in which the Northumbrian King Oswald raised a cross on a site known as *Hefenfelth* (Heavenfield) prior to fighting the battle of Denisesburna (near Hexham) against the British army commanded by Cadwalla in 634 CE:

> [w]hen King Oswald was about to give battle to the heathen, he set up the sign of the holy cross and, kneeling down, asked God that He would grant His heavenly aid to those who trusted in Him in their dire need. The place is pointed out to this day and held in great veneration. It is told that, when the cross had been hurriedly made and a hole dug to receive it, the devout king with ardent faith took the cross and placed it in position until the soldiers had thrown in the earth and it stood firm. This done he summoned his army with a loud shout, crying, "Let us all kneel together, and ask the true and living God Almighty of His mercy to protect us from the arrogant savagery of our enemies, since He knows that we fight in a just cause to save our nation." The whole army did as he ordered and, advancing against the enemy at the first light of dawn, won the victory that their faith

[40] Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 135-137.
[41] Cusack, *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples*, 99-100.

deserved. At the spot where the king prayed, innumerable miracles of healing are known to have been performed, which serve as a reminder and proof of the King's faith. Even to this day many folk take splinters of wood from this holy cross, which they put into water, and when any sick men or beasts drink of it or are sprinkled with it, they are at once restored to health.

This place is called in English *Hefenfelth*, meaning "the heavenly field," which name, bestowed upon it long ago, was sure omen of events to come, portending that there the heavenly sign would be set up, a heavenly victory won, and heavenly wonders shown. It lies on the northern side of the wall which the Romans built from sea to sea, as I have related, to protect Britain from the attacks of the barbarous peoples. The brothers of the church of Hexham, which lies not far away, have long been accustomed to make a yearly pilgrimage here on the eve of the anniversary of Oswald's death in order to keep vigil for the welfare of his soul, to recite the psalter, and to offer the Holy Sacrifice for him at dawn. By a further development of this good custom, the brothers have recently built a church on the spot, which has made it honoured and hallowed above all others. This is very fitting, for we know that there was no other emblem of the Christian Faith, no church and no altar in the whole of Bernicia until the new Christian leader Oswald, moved by his devotion to the Faith, set up this standard of the holy cross before giving battle to his relentless enemies.[42]

The reign of Oswald and his afterlife as a saint have been the subject of analysis for decades. Chaney speculated on Oswald's connections to the Pagan religion in a myriad ways. He noted that Oswald died in battle against the Pagan King Penda of Mercia at Maserfelth on 5 August 642 CE, and that during his victory celebrations Penda dismembered and exhibited parts of the corpse of the Northumbrian king on poles, most likely as a sacrifice to Woden. When Oswald's remains were recovered by his brother Oswiu, he was buried in three places; his head at Lindisfarne, his hands at Bamburgh, and his body at Bardney (though it was later exhumed and re-interred at Gloucester).[43] Chaney concluded that the miracles claimed for Oswald after death were a continuation of the power of the sacral king, which had been assimilated into the Christian cult of the saints. North agreed, arguing that the "Os" preface of the names within Oswald's family indicated their long connection with Woden, who

[42] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 144-145.

[43] Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, "Anglo-Saxon Horizons: Places of the Mind in the Northumbrian Landscape," in *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, eds Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 21-22.

functioned as an ancestor in the Northumbrian royal family tree.[44] Archaeology has indicated that there was a wooden temple at the Northumbrian royal site of Yeavering, which was erected nearby to a Bernician Celtic ritual site. Hilda Ellis Davidson stated that this place, "was clearly a site of ancient sanctity, since a Bronze Age tumulus had stood there earlier, as well as a stone circle of early date. A tall wooden post was set up on the mound, and near the temple building there were indications that a huge shaft had been sunk into the ground."[45] This long inhabitation of the site recalls Semple's conclusions about the *hearg* sites, discussed earlier, and it is possible that Woden was the principal deity worshipped at this cult site.

Before Oswald's defeat and death at Maserfelth, there was his victory against Cadwalla at Denisesburna. The significance of that victory lived long in local memory; after Oswald's death the monks of Hexham celebrated mass at Hefenfelth annually on the date of his death. Clive Tolley published a detailed analysis of the cross-erecting incident in 1995, in which he argued that Bede's intentions in recording the incident were complex, and involved at least three layers of manipulation of the facts. These included placing the incident in a historical trajectory from Constantine's vision of the cross before the battle of Milvian Bridge in the early fourth century, the need to interpret Oswald's victory as a triumph of the true faith over Paganism (despite Cadwalla being a British Christian), and the propagandist purposes of the Hexham monks.[46] Tolley asserted that there was important Pagan material embedded in the story. The name of the site was "ancient" (that is, pre-Christian) and the army that Oswald commanded, consisting of Scots and Bernicians, may not have been particularly Christian. Oswald's setting up of the cross could therefore, in the spirit of Pope Gregory's letter to Mellitus, be an adaptation of a Pagan rite. Assembling evidence from Scandinavian and continental Germanic sources, Tolley built an argument based on the commonly held concept of a plain that renews itself (citing the Eddic *Himinvangar*, "heavenly meadows," and *Iðavöllr*, the "plain of industry" or "plain of eternal return"), which suggested that Hefenfelth was a Pagan sanctuary or sacred

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[44] North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 340.

[45] Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 22.

[46] Clive Tolley, "Oswald's Tree," in *Pagans and Christians: The Interplay Between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe*, eds Tette Hofstra, L. A. J. R. Houwen and Alasdair A. MacDonald (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1995), 151-152.

site. This heavenly plain was associated with one or more trees; Tolley then introduced Rudolf of Fulda's description of the Irminsul, and connected it with a passage in the *Res Gestae Saxonicae* of Widukind of Corvey (925- c. 973 CE), describing the Saxon commander Hathagat's actions after a victory over the Thuringians:

> [w]hen morning came they placed the eagle-standard at the eastern gate, and constructing an altar to victory they worshipped their own holy things with due veneration, following the error of their fathers: they imitate Mars by the name they give it, Hercules by the pillar form it has, and the sun, whom the Greeks call Apollo, by its location. From this it is clear that the supposition is likely of those who trace the origin of the Saxons to the Greeks, since Hirmin or Hermes is the name of Mars in Greek; in our ignorance we use this word to this day for praising or cursing.[47]

Tolley posited that this passage described the erection of an *ad hoc* Irminsul, which was raised after a victory in battle, and drew its significance from the Irminsul, the centre at the ritual complex at Eresburg.

This hypothesis was followed by a detailed examination of the elements of a sacred site in Germanic Paganism, which are determined to be a tree or pillar which functions as a world-support, a plain associated with judgement and rulership, and a water-source. The temple at Uppsala, described by Adam of Bremen, had a grove and water-source beside it. The most complete description of these elements is in the Old Norse literature, where the world ash tree Yggdrasill functions as the *vårdträd* (guardian tree) of the universe.[48] The gods assemble at the world tree because of its associations with judgement and fate. The Scandinavian world-view will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6. Suffice to say that Tolley interpreted the characteristics of Bede's account of Oswald's pre-battle preparations along the lines of the Saxon and Scandinavian evidence. He drew attention to the fact that Maserfelth, the battle site where Oswald died, is traditionally associated with Oswestry on the Welsh border (which is "Oswald's Tree"), a place that in Welsh is called Croes Oswallt ("Oswald's Cross"). Further, John Leland (c. 1503-1552 CE) the antiquarian recorded that "Oswald's victory at Heavenfield took place two miles from 'S. Oswald's Asche,' which probably commemorates the cross raised before battle and associates Oswald not only with the tree, but with

[47] Widukind of Corvey, *Res Gestae Saxonicae*, quoted in Tolley, "Oswald's Tree," 159.

[48] H. Munro Chadwick, *The Cult of Othin* (London: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1899), 78.

the same sort of tree as the Norse world ash tree Yggdrasill."[49] Thus the same type of concentration of relationships linking Paganism with Christianity that was a feature of the "Nine Herbs Charm" is also in evidence here. The Christian Oswald is in the same position as the Pagan Hathagat, but to encourage his warriors he uses a new tree, the Christian cross, rather than Hathagat's Irminsul, the pillar equivalent of the world tree.

This led Tolley to speculate whether the Pagan Penda's exposure of Oswald's corpse on a pole was not a mocking parody of the crucifixion, or a reminder to his Pagan followers of the primacy, in their world-view, of the sacrifice of Woden, which was anterior to that of Christ, of which they had only lately heard? Marilyn Dunn argued that the pole was most probably a *niðstong* (pole of shame, or enemy stave), which was the greatest insult possible in Scandinavia.[50] Interestingly, Bede recorded a miracle attributed to Oswald, which recalled the cult of the *vårdträd*, or the central pillar of the traditional Germanic house. Earth from the site of Oswald's death became an important relic for the faithful seeking the saint's intervention in their lives. Bede stated that this earth preserved a post (a tree and pillar equivalent): "when the house had been consumed with flames, only the post on which the wrapped up dust remained safe from the fore and untouched. They were much amazed when they observed this powerful effect, and upon more detailed enquiry discovered that the dust had been taken up from the very place where the blood of King Oswald had been poured out."[51] Customs similar to this are known from Scandinavian texts, for example the identity of the god Heimdall as the world tree (his name has been construed to mean World Tree), who is known as the "whitest of the Æsir," according to North, because his trunk is smeared with white mud, in the manner of Yggdrasil (see the Eddic poem "Völuspá," *strophe* 19).[52] Dunn perceptively commented that the post-mortem traditions about Oswald were a Christian saint-cult that was originally "popular, non-elite, even unofficial and based like Pagan cults on natural features along with healing and apotropaic practices" and that was later absorbed by the Church and altered to serve orthodox Christian

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[49] Tolley, "Oswald's Tree," 166.
[50] Marilyn Dunn, *The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons c. 597 – c. 700: Discourses of Life, Death and Afterlife* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 73.
[51] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 159.
[52] North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 286.

and dynastic aims.[53]

Tolley further links the Irminsul, the world tree, and Germanic domestic architecture, positing that the surviving post in Bede's miracle recalled the fact that wooden houses in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages generally had a central column (for example, this is referred to as the *firstsul* or roof column in the *Lex Baiuvariorum*, the collected laws of the Bavarii dating from the sixth to the eighth century CE, and Notker the German's late tenth century translation of Boethius referred to a *magansul*, or "powerful column").[54] This may also be connected with the "high seat pillars" found in Norse texts, which are discussed in Chapter 6. He has even asserted that the selection of an oak tree as a meeting place by Augustine of Canterbury (discussed above) revealed that Augustine, or more probably, the British clergy, were aware of the Pagan significance of the tree as a place of negotiation and judgement. Ronald Hutton has followed this up with the suggestion that the English place name "Gospel Oak," which appears quite frequently, recalls the oaks at which the Christian message was preached and the Gospels read, and that this practice "may represent a Christianization of the association between trees and sanctity."[55] This fascinating reconstruction of the significance of Oswald's cross is not, of course, accepted by those scholars who adopt the anti-nativist stance and, for example, who might argue that Oswald may or may not have erected a cross at Hefenfelth; however, the significance of Bede's account has more to do with the association of Emperor Constantine with the vision of the cross and his mother with the discovery of the True Cross in Palestine, from which Ian Wood concludes that "the Holy Places had a part to play in the imagination of the eighth-century Anglo-Saxons."[56] This study does not reject findings such as these, but argues that while they may, indeed, be true, for a comprehensive understanding of the sacred tree symbol and its parallels, the pillar and the cross, it is necessary to adduce evidence from Paganism, and not be restricted to Christian texts.

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[53] Dunn, *The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons c. 597 – c. 700: Discourses of Life, Death and Afterlife*, 151.
[54] Tolley, "Oswald's Tree," 170.
[55] Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 293.
[56] Ian Wood, "Constantinian Crosses in Northumbria," in *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England*, 13.

In view of Boniface's appropriation of the power of the Oak of Jupiter through using the wood to erect the church at Fritzlar, one significant architectural survival, the parish church of Saint Andrew at Greensted-Juxta-Ongar in Essex, possibly is evidence for the structure of Anglo-Saxon Pagan temples. This, the oldest wooden church in the world, is a structure consisting of vertical oak trunks that have been cut in half, the only split log church in England (though there are many in Scandinavia). This church "was said to have been one of the shrines at which St Edmund's body rested in 1013, on its ceremonial journey from London to Edmund's grave at Bury in Suffolk."[57] The logs have been dated by dendrochronology to 845 CE,[58] although this result has been disputed, and it is not possible to determine the precise age of the structure. This is the only wooden church to survive from the Anglo-Saxon era.[59] Yet what information it provides about Pagan temples is controversial; the development of Paganism in England is very complex, partly because Anglo-Saxon Paganism had begun to decline as a result of the Christian missions, but the Viking invasions and later settlements of Scandinavians in Britain in the ninth and tenth centuries created new Pagan traditions and reinforced or "re-Paganised" other traditions.[60] An example of this is that it is not possible to know whether the goddess Frig (who gave her name to Friday) is authentically present in Anglo-Saxon England, or is a Viking Age import.[61]

Christian reverence for holy trees is evidenced in Anglo-Saxon and later medieval England through the veneration of the Glastonbury Thorn, which was briefly discussed in the Introduction. This tree was a major part of the Christian pilgrimage site at Glastonbury during the Middle Ages. That the tree was significant is attested by the fact that Puritan soldiers chopped it down during the English Civil War (1642-1651).[62]

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[57] Simon Jenkins, *England's Thousand Best Churches* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1999]), 189.
[58] Nigel Pennick, "Heathen Holy Places in Northern Europe," *Tyr* 2 (2003-2004): 146.
[59] H. M. Taylor and Joan Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980 [1965]), 262.
[60] Audrey Meaney, "Woden in England: A Reconsideration of the Evidence," *Folklore* 77 (1966): 105-115.
[61] Dunn, *The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons c. 597 – c. 700: Discourses of Life, Death and Afterlife*, 58.
[62] Brian Haughton, *Haunted Spaces, Sacred Places: A Field Guide to Stone Circles, Crop Circles and Supernatural Landscapes* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: The Career Press Inc, 2008), 94-95.

However, the more elaborate folklore seems to have developed between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. According to these tales, Jesus came to England in the company of his mother Mary's uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, a tin merchant who traded with Cornwall. The young Jesus and Joseph erected a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary during their stay, and after Jesus' death and resurrection Joseph of Arimathea returned to the south of England. He thrust his staff into the ground and it burst into bloom, becoming the Glastonbury Thorn, a living tree. The tree is considered miraculous, in that it flowers twice per year, the second flowering occurring in winter, at Christmas. In the Middle Ages the main sources for the "Somerset tradition" were William of Malmesbury's *De antiquitate Glastoniensis ecclesie* (c. 1135 CE), and the fourteenth century chronicles of Adam of Damerham and John of Glastonbury. These texts mentioned miracles attributed to Joseph and the existence of the Glastonbury Thorn, but the tale of its flowering and the Holy Grail and Chalice Well are modern additions to the body of lore.[63] Adam of Damerham reported the monks' exhumation of the body of Arthur and the discovery of the tomb of Guinevere in 1191, and the leaden cross inscribed "Hic jacet sepultus inclitus rex Arturius in insula Avalonia."[64] In addition to the "original" thorn tree on Wearyall Hill, there are two others, grown from cuttings, in the town itself. These are in the churchyard of Saint John the Baptist, and in the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey.[65] The most important role played by the Glastonbury Thorn in terms of the meaning of the sacred tree, is that all occult Christian traditions that assert that Jesus walked on soil other than that of the Middle East are engaged in the sacralization of territory, the absorption of the periphery into the centre (symbolised in medieval maps as Jerusalem). So the sacred tree in this case marks the centre, although it is far removed from the *axis mundi* as described in Chapter 1. Reactions to the recent vandalizing of the Glastonbury Thorn have indicated that sacred trees are still newsworthy and are regarded with affection in modern, secular Britain.[66]

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[63] Aelred Watkin, "The Glastonbury Legends," in *Glastonbury Abbey and the Arthurian Tradition*, ed. James P. Carley (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 15.

[64] D. J. Hall, *English Medieval Pilgrimage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 53.

[65] Marion Bowman, "Drawn to Glastonbury," in *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, eds Ian Reader and Tony Walter (London: The Macmillan Press, 1993), 30, 35-36, 40.

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

In the early modern era a number of folk traditions concerning trees survived, many of which were collated in James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*; for example, the custom of cutting down a tree on May eve, and erecting it in the village square. Frazer assembled tales of May Day traditions from Northamptonshire for the setting up of cut trees by the front doors of houses, and decorating them with flowers, and from Cornwall regarding decorating the doors with branches of sycamore and hawthorn. He quotes Sir Henry Piers' *Description of Westmeath* (1682), "on May Eve, every family sets up before their door a green bush, strewed over with yellow flowers, which the meadows yield plentifully,"[67] and the Puritan writer Phillip Stubbes' *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), which described the custom of erecting May Poles (which Stubbes describes both as trees and as "stinking idols"), connecting this practice with Satan and sexual immorality. Frazer drew links between these tree customs with the appointment of a May Queen (or in some cases, May King) whom he interpreted as a vegetation spirit of Pagan origin.[68]

The Christian Tree Symbol

The tension between the Pagan and Christian tree symbols is also informed by the Biblical motif of the two trees in the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (of which Adam and Eve ate, though they were forbidden by Yahweh to do so) and the Tree of Life, which was connected to a water source in that it was located at the centre of Paradise in close proximity to the river (which divides into four rivers). Gerhart Ladner noted that the Tree of Knowledge "turns out to be an instrument of death" due to Adam and Eve's sin, but it was popularly believed to have provided the wood for the cross of Jesus. The Tree of Life was identified both with the Cross and with the Crucified Cross, the true life."[69] Yggdrasill, the tree of Óðinn's sacrifice, was also a tree of knowledge, in that Óðinn hanged himself in quest for the power of the runes. In the later Middle Ages holy trees were a familiar motif in the popular Christianity of Britain and the continent.

In Anglo-Saxon England the language used to express the new Christian concepts encouraged the envisaging of the cross as a tree. North

[67] Quoted in James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Abridged Edition (London: Macmillan and Co., 1949), 120.
[68] Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 131.
[69] Gerhart B. Ladner, "Medieval and Modern Understandings of Symbolism: A Comparison," *Speculum* 54/2 (1979): 236.

listed the terms *treow*, *rod* and *beam* as examples, and suggested that this image may have bee reinforced by Psalm 95, verses 12-13: "Then all the trees of the forests will rise to face the Lord."[70] This chapter concludes with a consideration of a medieval German hymn that was very popular during the Christmas season, "Der Traume des Baume" ("The Dream of the Tree"). This hymn is relevant because it is connected to the narrative of Constantine's vision of the cross, as narrated in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Elene*,[71] and also exhibits a resemblance to *The Dream of the Rood*. The lyrics in translation, contain the following verses:

A woman had a wondrous dream,
A wondrous, lovely dream.
Oh, there grew below her heart
A wondrous, lovely tree.

The tree grew up, high up –
Also in width and breadth.
It was covered in branches
The whole of Christendom.

The branches were bright red;
They glowed as if of gold.
Oh, that is because Jesus Christ
Was hanged on the wood [cross].

Whoever sang this song,
Be it woman or man,
To him Heaven stands open
And Hell is closed.[72]

The tree in the hymn is clearly Jesus Christ, as the image of it growing under the heart of Mary is analogous to pregnancy. Yet the tree can also represent the crucifix upon which salvation for all was won. Thus the imagery identifies the tree with the cosmic man, Christ, employing the tree=human homology. Josef Szoverffy indicated that the hymn was known in seventeenth century collections and that it was intimately related to a popular charm, the *Maria Traum*, which recalls the use of Christian

[70] North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 277.
[71] R. K. Gordon (ed. and trans.), *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London and New York: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd and E. P. Dutton and Co., 1942 [1926]), 235-238.
[72] Ben Gray Lumpkin, "Der Traume des Baume: A Religious Song from the Middle Ages," *Journal of American Folklore* 78/307 (1965): 67.

prayers, rituals and devotional objects as spells and incantations.[73] Ernst S. Dick confirmed that it is an *imago mundi*, in which Christ is identified with the tree and with the entire world.[74] In employing the three-part homology tree=human=world, this hymn is identical to the passage from the Irish *Yellow Book of Lecan* discussed in Chapter 3, and indicates the wide currency of these ideas throughout the later medieval Christian world.[75] This currency suggests that earlier Pagan concepts concerning the sacred tree and the god who is intimately associated with it were regarded as highly compatible with the Christian motif of Christ on the cross, and also with the image of the tree of life from *Genesis* in the Bible.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the Christian Anglo-Saxons retained the core meaning of the sacred tree as *axis mundi*. Close readings of early medieval texts reveal the persistence of a world-tree in Anglian religion, resembling Yggdrasill, the world ash of Scandinavian myth. Yggdrasill is an *axis mundi*, identifying the centre of the world, associated with judgement and fate, but it is also an *imago mundi*, in that it supported the nine worlds of the Norse cosmos. In Anglo-Saxon England, the Venerable Bede's account of King Oswald of Northumbria erecting a wooden standing cross before the battle of Denisesburna in 634 CE can be deconstructed to reveal a Pagan military practice, the erection of a temporary or *ad hoc* Irminsul (world-maintaining column, indicating a sacred centre) in honour of the god of victory (usually Woden) which has been transposed into a Christian key. Other examples of the roles played by holy trees adduced included the tree as marker of territory and meeting place in the landscape, as in the case of Augustine's Oak, where the missionary Augustine met representatives of the British church, and the Glastonbury Thorn, which participated in the creation of England as a new Jerusalem, an esoteric Christian sacred centre.

Finally, the fully Christianised sacred tree, which has been assimilated into the cross of Jesus' crucifixion and the tree of life, and has become in the process both an *axis mundi* and an *imago mundi* that expresses the

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[73] Josef Szoverffy, "The Place of the Song 'Der Traume des Baume(s)'," *Journal of American Folklore* 78/310 (1965): 349.
[74] Ernst S. Dick, "Der Traume des Baumes," *Journal of American Folklore* 78/310 (1965): 346-348.
[75] Mary Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 102-103.

homology of tree=human=world, was considered. This image is commonplace in later medieval Christian literature, and suggests that during the conversion process older Pagan notions became imbricated with incoming Christian notions and produced a popular, hybridised or syncretistic Christianity that appealed to the bulk of the population in ways that the elite discourses of orthodox, institutional Christianity could not. Richard North also identified the faint survival of the tree as horse in the Christian examples, particularly as the steed of Christ in his battle with Satan. As Yggdrasill is the steed of Óðinn, and Óðinn and Christ are equated in many texts (for example the "Nine Herbs Charm") this strengthens the relationship of the Pagan world tree with the Christian image of Jesus on the cross that is also the tree of life. This chapter also examined incidences of syncretism in the conversion period, including the ways in which Christian prayers took on aspects of Pagan spells and *vice versa*, and the role of the Lord's Prayer and the cross, along with other rituals and texts, as protective symbols to protect against harm.[76]

[76] Karen L. Jolly, "Tapping the Power of the Cross: Who and For Whom?" in *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England*, 58-79.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SACRED TREE IN MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA: JUDGMENT, LAW AND FATE

> The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. *Revelation* Chapter 8, Verse 7[1]

Introduction

The mythology of the Pagan Norse preserves in more complete form several of the Indo-European themes associated with the sacred tree than medieval Irish, Anglo-Saxon or continental German sources. The principal texts from which these myths are known are both from the thirteenth century CE; the *Elder* or *Poetic Edda* (sometimes called *Saemund's Edda*), and the *Younger* or *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson. These sources are supplemented by material from the quasi-historical sagas and historical texts such as the *Landnamabok*, which details the settlement of Iceland in the ninth century CE, and by archaeological and folkloric evidence. In this chapter the world tree, the ash Yggdrasill, is investigated, particularly in terms of its association with judgement and fate; the gods Óðinn, Thor and Heimdall are all seen to have a particular relationship with the sacred tree or pillar as *axis mundi*; and the creation of humans from logs, the cult of the high-seat pillars, and the function of anthropomorphic images made from tree trunks or branches are also discussed.

Christian missionaries did not enter Scandinavia until the ninth century, when Anskar of Corbie began his forty-year attempt to convert

[1] *New International Version*, at BibleGateway.com, http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%202:9&version=NIV, accessed 19 December 2010.

the Swedes and Danes, which resulted in one convert, Herigar, the prefect of Birka.[2] Other missionaries were also unsuccessful in converting the Scandinavians until the late tenth century, when King Harald Gormsson (Bluetooth) of Denmark was baptised by the German priest Poppo, and the Danes officially converted (although the process of eradicating Pagan beliefs and practices took much longer). The conversion of Norway and Iceland was effected from the in the late tenth through the early eleventh centuries, by the forceful efforts of the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason (d. 1000 CE), who had been baptised during his military career in Christian nations, being confirmed in England with King Ethelred the Unready as his sponsor.[3] Christianity did not take firm root in Sweden until the mid-twelfth century.

Scholars have disputed how "barbaric" and "violent" the Viking incursions into Christian Europe were. It is undeniable that such terms are emotive and may be differently constructed across societies. Chapter 4 indicated that the Viking incursions into the northern territories of the Frankish empire were not acts of aggression, but rather were reactions to Charlemagne's brutal Christianization of the Saxons and the Frisians, Pagan peoples with whom the Danes traded and communicated regularly. This chapter contends that sacrifice remained crucial to Scandinavian Paganism and that this included human sacrifice. This was because the Norse retained the Indo-European understanding that the physical universe had been created from the dismembered body of a primordial being, and that this ritual had to be repeated periodically to renew the world. Alfred Smyth suggests that Vikings were violent, and that this was logical in terms of their world-view, which coded people as insiders and outsiders; Christian societies were outsiders whose religion sought to eradicate the traditional Pagan gods of the Norse. Therefore, it was appropriate to sack monasteries and slaughter Christians, who were enemies.[4]

In the first half of the eleventh century Christianity was established in Norway under the sainted king Óláfr Haraldsson (d. 1030 CE), who used

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[2] Carole M. Cusack, *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples* (London: Cassell, 1998), 137-140.
[3] Joseph H. Lynch, *Christianizing Kingship: Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 225.
[4] Alfred P. Smyth, "The effect of Scandinavian raiders on the English and Irish churches: a preliminary reassessment," in *Britain and Ireland 900-1300: Insular Responses to Medieval European Change*, ed. Brendan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 10-15.

military might to bring about conversion, in imitation of his hero Charlemagne. After Óláfr's death in the battle of Stiklestad, his son Magnus (named for Charlemagne) continued the process of forced Christianization. Thus, texts that were produced in Iceland in the thirteenth century were relatively close to the actual historical transition from Paganism to the new Christian religion. Much skaldic poetry (composed by *skalds*, or court poets) is both firmly datable and pre-Christian.[5] Eddic and skaldic poetry are difficult and allusive modes, intended, as Ursula Dronke observes, for a "heathen audience with a practised ear, well-versed in old traditions."[6] By contrast, Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* consists of three parts: the first, *Gylfaginning* ("The Deluding of Gylfi"), is a compendium of Pagan myths; the second, *Skáldskaparmál* ("The Language of Poetry"), is a collection of phrases and expressions traditionally employed in the composition of verse; and the third, *Hattatal*, was a heroic poem authored by Snorri as a model for aspiring poets. This book was written for an aristocratic readership: it is noteworthy that the Christian Snorri presented Pagan mythology as an appropriate subject for poetic composition and a vital part of the education of well-born men. It is also interesting that he felt the traditional poetic modes needed to be explained, as it was more than two hundred years since the conversion of Iceland in 1000 CE.

The comparative method, which explores motifs from Scandinavian poetry and seeks analogues and parallels from other Indo-European mythologies, offers many insights into Norse religious concepts and assists greatly in the elucidation of the motif of the sacred tree. This chapter will analyse Yggdrasill as both *axis mundi* and *imago mundi*, and argue that it is the most complex example of the sacred tree found in medieval Paganism. It has consequences for the organization of human society through embodying law and thus is sociogonically significant, and it has eschatological and cosmological significance as it encapsulates the fate of the world. Scandinavian Pagan temples and places of judgement drew their structural features from Yggdrasill's location in *Himinvangar*, the "heavenly meadows," in conjunction with a water source and sacred temple or enclosure.

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[5] Ursula Dronke, "Eddic poetry as a source for the history of Germanic religion," in *Myth and Fiction in Early Norse Lands*, Ursula Dronke (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 656-657.

[6] Dronke, "Eddic poetry as a source for the history of Germanic religion,"174.

Yggdrasill: The *Axis Mundi* and the Structure of Fate

The cosmos described in Scandinavian mythology is very complex, comprising nine worlds that are sustained (and to some extent constituted) by the world ash, Yggdrasill. This cosmos came into being as the result of sacrifice; the slaughter and dismemberment of the primordial being, the *jötunn* (giant, with the literal meaning of "earth-born") Ymir. This Indo-European sacrifice was effected by the ruler-god Óðinn and his two brothers (Hœnir and Lóðurr or Vili and Ve), and described in Snorri's *Edda* as follows:

> Bor's sons killed the giant Ymir, and when he fell, so much blood poured from his wounds that they drowned the whole tribe of frost ogres with it – except for one who escaped with his household; this one is known to the giants as Bergelmir … They took Ymir and carried him into the middle of Ginnungagap, and made the world from him: from his blood the sea and lakes, from his flesh the earth, from his bones the mountains; rocks and pebbles they made from his teeth and jaws and those bones that were broken … From the blood which welled freely from his wounds they fashioned the ocean, when they put together the earth and girdled it, laying the ocean round about it … They also took his skull and made the sky from it and set it over the earth with its four sides, and under each corner they put a dwarf. These are called: East, West, North, and South. Then they took the sparks and burning embers that were flying about after they had been blown out of Muspell and placed them in the midst of Ginnungagap to give light to heaven above and earth beneath. They gave their stations to all the stars, some fixed in the sky; others (planets) that had wandered at will in the firmament were now given their appointed places and the paths in which they were to travel.[7]

The cosmos that results from the sacrifice of Ymir was one in which binary oppositions dominated, and it was necessary to keep these oppositions in balance to maintain order and prevent the onslaught of chaos. Eleazar Meletinskij listed a number of these binary oppositions: two families of gods that war against each other, Æsir and Vanir; the gods' constant struggle against the giants (*jötnar* or *Þursar*); on the horizontal axis, the contrast between Midgard, the human habitation near the centre, and *Jötunheim*, the giants' abode on the periphery; on the vertical axis, the contrast between Asgard, home of the gods, and Hel, the realm of the

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[7] Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson*, ed. and trans. Jean I. Young (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964 [1954]), 35-36.

dead, which are linked by Yggdrasill; the opposition between the dragon at the roots of Yggdrasill and the eagle on its top branches, which parallels the way that Óðinn enters the mountain as a serpent in order to steal the mead of poetry from the giant Suttung, yet departs it as an eagle; and the contrast between the creation of the world from the body of Ymir, and the destruction of the world in Ragnarok, where the world-tree Yggdrasill falls.[8] This presupposes the Indo-European homology tree=man=world. Meletinskij concluded that the world's fate is embodied in the world tree, which is eschatological, whereas "the theme of the world creation from Ymir's body never extends beyond the cosmogonic framework: it is as if the world has indeed been created from Ymir, yet its structure is further determined not by the shape of the human body, but by that of the tree."[9]

It is here argued that the two possibilities are harmonious rather than mutually exclusive. Snorri's *Edda* attributed the creation of human beings to Óðinn and his brothers, who, while walking along the beach found two trees (or perhaps logs or pieces of driftwood): "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]."[10] This creation story indicates that the physical characteristics of trees call to mind the human body, a perception that is echoed in the New Testament. When Jesus restores the sight of a blind man, he says; "I see people; they look like trees walking around."[11] Thus in the Norse mythological cycle the world is born from a human body but meets its end in the form of a tree (which, as will be seen later, can be understood as a particular god, Heimdall, and thus a human form, too).

Present from the creation, the world tree Yggdrasill (the "steed of Ygg," one of the names of Óðinn) has a particular relationship with fate and the doom of the gods, *Ragnarok*. The roots of Yggdrasill are connected to water sources, which is reminiscent of the tree and water connection that has been exhibited in the majority of sacred trees and pillar

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[8] Eleazar Meletinskij, "Scandinavian Mythology as a System of Oppositions," in *Patterns in Oral Literature*, eds Heda Jason and Dimitri Segal (The Hague and Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1977), 252-258.
[9] Meletinskij, "Scandinavian Mythology as a System of Oppositions," 258.
[10] Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed. and trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1987), 13.
[11] *Mark* Chapter 8, Verse 24, *New International Version*, at BibleGateway.com, http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%208:24&version=NIV, accessed 21 December 2010.

monuments examined thus far. The most important of these wells is that of Urðr, the first of the Norns (*Nornir*), who are the personifications of fate in the Scandinavian cosmos. Urðr and her two sisters, Verðandi and Skuld, have parallels in other Indo-European mythological systems. The Roman *Parcae* and the Greek *Moirai*, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, were represented as three women, the first of whom spun the thread of life for each human at birth, the second of whom measured the thread, while the third cut it, terminating the life symbolised by the thread. Joanna Hubbs reflected on the sacred tree in medieval Russia, noting that the *rusalki* (divine women who were "mistresses of the horse like the Greek goddesses Artemis, Athena and the horse-headed Demeter")[12] tended the oracular birch tree. They were spinners and the tree was cast as their spindle from which they spun human lives. Like the Norns, they were associated with water, in that they "raised water from the ground into the sky, making rain."[13] The Norns, too, are represented as performing these activities. Anthony Winterbourne, whose study of time and fate in Norse Paganism draws heavily on Meletinskij's notion of binary opposites, has noted that the term *moira*, in Greek, means "allotted share." This meaning is generally connected to fate through the idea that it was:

> man's share of life, his life span, but interestingly some inscriptions suggest that, on the contrary, this share was of death – in other words, that which is truly common to all men. It is at the moment of death that a man's Moira has been fulfilled. And so we have the idea of Moira as both life and death. As death Moira destroys everyone; yet she also stands for life, for the duration of life.[14]

In Old English *wyrd* (which is etymologically identical to Urðr), like *moira*, means "fate" in the broad sense. The Norns have responsibility for the establishment of laws and the nourishment of Yggdrasill. They are frequently associated with the temporal sequence past, present and future, and Winterbourne connected the irreversibility of time to Meletinskij's vertical axis (the world tree), which reinforced the fact of the world's fate being concentrated in the tree.[15]

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[12] Joanna Hubbs, *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 32.
[13] Hubbs, *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture*, 33.
[14] Anthony Winterbourne, *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 101.
[15] Winterbourne, *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism*, 62-68.

He linked this relationship between time and fate to the famous verse from *Grímnismál* ("The Lay of Grímnir") from the *Poetic Edda*, in which Óðinn speaks of the two ravens, Hugin (Thought) and Munin (Memory), that perch on his shoulders:

> [t]he whole earth over, every day,
> hover Hugin and Munin;
> I dread lest Hugin droop in his flight,
> yet I fear me still more for Munin.[16]

Memory is vitally important in societies where literacy is absent or partial; laws and genealogies may be reconstructed if memory is functional. For Winterbourne functional memory is control of the past, "the only aspect of time about which there could be knowledge," so exercises such as the recitation of one's ancestors is fundamentally important to making the present "continuous and contiguous with the past."[17] That is, it is the temporal equivalent of mapping territory through the erection of tree or pillar monuments to connect featureless new lands to the established sacred centre, a process discussed in Chapter 1. Thus Óðinn fears more for Munin, for memory. This primacy of the past also explained the dominant role accorded to Urðr among the three Norns. The names of the Norns are often taken to mean Past, Present and Future, although Fate, Being and Necessity have been offered as alternatives.[18]

Winterbourne argued that Fate, Being and Necessity are logical concepts, not temporal concepts like Past, Present and Future. He separated time from fate (while acknowledging the fact that the past rather than the future determined fate) and focused on the Norns' activities. He concluded that spinning, weaving, and binding are crucial images and connect to earlier Indo-European mythologies. The gods are often referred to as "those who bind," yet they themselves are bound by Norns' decrees. Binding recalls the etymology of "religion" discussed in Chapter 1. According to Lactantius, *religio* may be derived from *religare*, to bind fast, to fetter or shackle.[19] There may be positive aspects to binding, such

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[16] Anon, *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), 57.
[17] Winterbourne, *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism*, 40.
[18] Paul C. Bauschatz, "Urth's Well," *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 3 (1975): 53-86
[19] Gavin Flood, *After Phenomenology* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999), 44.

as the wearing of cord-amulets for protection. In terms of fate, if an individual is bound in certain ways, he or she is not able to avoid the effects of those fetters. Fatalism, as Winterbourne concluded, "says that the only actions that are within anyone's power to perform are those actions which he does, in fact, perform … We *can* only do those things that we *will*, as a matter of fact, do – and what we will do is not up to us."[20] He also demonstrated that the sacred tree as *axis mundi* has the vital role of binding human beings with their gods. The sacred tree performed this role through existing as a pathway connecting the realm of the gods to the realm of humans, both living and dead, which could also be travelled shamanistically in certain cultures.

This binding can also be understood in terms of law and protection. It was at the world ash Yggdrasill that the Norse gods gathered each day to "*doema*, to adjudicate on the affairs of the world."[21] The well of Urðr was situated at the tree's roots, as was the well of Mimir, from which Óðinn drank, sacrificing one of his eyes for the wisdom vouchsafed by the draught. In a direct parallel to the cord amulet, Yggdrasill is also a *vårdträd*, a "guardian tree," like those found in Scandinavian folk traditions, which continued to exist as late as the nineteenth century. Hilda Ellis Davidson observed that such trees were often the recipients of offerings, like food "and ale poured over its roots at festivals, as in the case of a huge birch standing on a mound beside a farm in western Norway, which fell in 1874."[22] Such trees also connect to the Germanic central house pillar, the *firstsul* or *magansul*, mentioned in Chapter 5. A prime example in Icelandic saga literature is the vast tree in the hall of King Volsung, the grandfather of the semi-divine hero Sigurd in the *Volsungs Saga*. Sigurd's father Sigmund drew from the tree a sword placed there by Óðinn, that no other could remove.[23] Further, understandings of particular gods possessing the qualities of trees (for example, Zeus, Hera, Artemis, Heimdall and Thor) may indicate their

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[20] Winterbourne, *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism*, 110.
[21] Clive Tolley, "Oswald's Tree," in *Pagans and Christians: The Interplay Between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe*, eds Tette Hofstra, L. A. J. R. Houwen, and Alasdair A. MacDonald (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1995), 164-165.
[22] Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 170.
[23] Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 24. Ellis Davidson connects this incident with the young Arthur's taking of Excalibur from the stone.

guardianship of their people and community. Ursula Dronke has drawn attention to early images of deities that were depicted bound or chained, noting that the people may "have wished to keep them as a fixed presence in their midst, upholding their universe and guarding their society, never leaving them, never stolen away."[24]

Yggdrasill and the Sacrifice of Óðinn

The name "Yggdrasill" has been translated as "the steed of Ygg," which is one of the names of Óðinn, meaning "the terrible one." The sacrifice of Óðinn on the world tree was discussed briefly in Chapter 5 in the context of the Anglo-Saxon fusion of the cross of Christ with the tree of life and the subsequent intimate connection that developed between the crucified Christ and Óðinn hanging on the tree. In Norse Paganism Óðinn is consistently presented as a transgressive deity whose primary quest is for knowledge. His ravens, Hugin and Munin, search the world each day and return to him with information. His *valkyries*, shield maidens, ride forth to battle and choose the bravest of the slain to reside in Valhalla, Óðinn's hall, and to serve as his personal army at *Ragnarok*. He sacrificed his eye for a drink of water from the well of Mimir, and earned opprobrium for his practice of *seiðr*, a type of magic that involved spirit possession and which was performed by women.[25] In *Völuspá* ("The Sybil's Prophecy"), a cosmological poem from the *Poetic Edda*, the source of this magic is a witch called Gullveig ("gold-drunkenness") who may be identified with the Vanir goddess Freyja. In the poem, Óðinn has summoned a seeress from deep sleep or perhaps death, and questioned her concerning the fate of the world.

She recalls the origins of the world, the gods, and human beings. Óðinn's purpose in questioning her is to avert the death of his son Balder, and the subsequent doom of the gods at *Ragnarok*. As the ruler of the Æsir and Vanir, Óðinn is responsible for the breaches of contract and other violations of the law that result, which include the cheating of the giants who built Asgard of their promised payment, the goddess Freyja. Óðinn's sacrifice of himself to himself on the world tree Yggdrasill was conducted so that he might gain power over the runes. It is described as follows in the poem *Hávamál* ("Sayings of the High One"):

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[24] Dronke, "Eddic poetry as a source for the history of Germanic religion," 666.

[25] Thomas A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 122-128.

I wot that I hung on the wind-tossed tree
all of nights nine,
wounded by spear, bespoken to Óthin,
bespoken myself to myself
[upon that tree of which none telleth
from what roots it doth rise].
Neither horn they upheld nor handed me bread;
I looked below me –
aloud I cried –
caught up the runes, caught them up wailing,
thence to the ground fell again.

From the son of Bolthorn, Bestla's father,
I mastered mighty songs nine,
and a drink I had of the dearest mead
got from out of Óðroerir.

Then I began to grow and gain in insight,
to wax eke in wisdom:
one verse led on to another verse,
one poem led on to the other poem.

Runes wilt thou find, and rightly read,
of wondrous weight,
of mighty magic,
which that dyed the dread god
which made the holy hosts,
and were etched by Óthin.[26]

In this text, which is usually called the "Rune Poem," Óðinn described the sacrifice of himself to himself on the world tree, Yggdrasill (his steed, as he "rides" the tree, so it is also the equivalent of his supernatural eight-legged battle horse, Sleipnir). He sustained a spear wound; Óðinn's spear *Gungnir* ("swaying one") is a powerful weapon that always hits its mark, unfailingly brings death, and confers victory on the army that the god hurled it over, which was generally chosen randomly.[27]

In the second verse Óðinn mastered the runes and subsequently descended from the world tree. The "Rune Poem" does not specify whether Óðinn died and was restored to life during his ordeal, but in the quest for wisdom those who had experienced death possessed ultimate

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[26] Anon, *The Poetic Edda*, 36-37.
[27] Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 175.

knowledge, so it is a highly likely interpretation. In the third verse Óðinn learns nine mighty songs (three and nine are sacred numbers in Indo-European cultures) from his uncle (the brother of his mother Bestla). It has been speculated that this uncle is Mimir, the guardian of the well from which Óðinn drank.[28] Mimir is a difficult figure to place in Norse mythology, and he has been variously identified as a member of the Vanir and a *jötunn*, but all sources agree that he is a figure to whom Óðinn turns for advice. The second thing that Óðinn gains, a sip of the precious mead from the vessel called *Óðroerir* (meaning "stirrer of the mind," referring to poetic inspiration), refers to the aforementioned myth of the theft of the mead of poetry (formed from the blood of Kvasir, the wise man born of the spittle of the gods at the truce after the war between the Æsir and Vanir, who was later killed by dwarves who mixed his blood with honey to form mead) from the giant Suttung. This was achieved through the seduction of Suttung's daughter Gunnlöð, who permitted her lover to take a sip of the mead.[29] Óðinn drained the vat and escaped to Asgard in the form of an eagle. From that point he spoke in verse, and, despite the existence of Bragi, the god of poetry, Óðinn usurped that function (as he had usurped the function of other gods, including Tyr, whose name indicates that he is the Scandinavian instantiation of the Germanic sky-god Tiwaz Fader).

The sacrifice of Óðinn involves the world tree as *hippodendron* (horse-tree), one meaning that was alluded to in Chapter 1, but which has so far appeared only vestigially in medieval Christian material in Chapter 5. James L. Sauve has disputed interpretations of this cosmic act as primarily a shamanic journey, in which Óðinn ascends the tree to seek wisdom through a spirit journey. Rather, he argued that Óðinn in this incident was to be understood primarily in theistic terms (a deity rather than priest-shaman) and as a cognate of the Vedic Prajapati (lord of progeny), whose epithet recalls the epithet of Óðinn, "all-father." For Sauve, Prajapati is "the prototype par excellence of the divine victim, who suffers self-immolation within a reflexively creative and productive ritual syndrome."[30] He is convinced that Óðinn died and was resurrected, as that is required by

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[28] Kathleen N. Daly and Marian Rengel, *Norse Mythology A-Z*, Third Edition (New York: Chelsea House, 2010 [1991]), 13, 69.
[29] Hilda Ellis Davidson, "The Smith and the Goddess: Two Figures on the Franks Casket from Auzon," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 3 (1969): 218.
[30] James L. Sauve, "The Divine Victim: Aspects of Human Sacrifice in Viking Scandinavia," in *Myth and Law Among the Indo-Europeans*, ed. Jaan Puhvel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 180.

the Indo-European parallel myths. Sauve's exploration of Indian texts is informative and sheds light on the Scandinavian material. The *asvattha*, the holy tree whose name may mean "horse stead" or "horse abode," also appears as the *skambha* ("supporter"), which "is portrayed by the author of the *Atharva-Veda* … as fashioned from the trunk of a tree in a way comparable with the formation of the Irminsul."[31] Sauve's analysis of the difference between the terrestrial and cosmic versions of the sacred tree is fascinating; the *yupa* is the cosmic axis, the *asvattha* is the terrestrial instantiation, and these trees are closely connected with the *purushasamheda* (human sacrifice) and the *asvamheda* (horse sacrifice). In Chapter 1, Jaan Puhvel's contention that these two sacrifices were functionally identical was mentioned.[32] Sauve concurred, arguing that the *Uttara Mimamsa* ("later enquiry") texts "declare that it is Prajapati himself who is sacrificed in the form of a horse …" and he connected this to Adam of Bremen's account of the Uppsala temple, in the sacred grove in which the corpses of dogs and horses hung alongside human victims.[33] This temple is discussed in the next section. The most important consequence of Sauve's analysis is the emphasis it places on the cosmic significance of Óðinn's sacrifice. Óðinn as "all-father" and Prajapati as "lord of progeny" still function within polytheistic systems, but they are conceived of much more as sole deities, indeed as anterior to the other gods and creatively bringing about their existence. This brings them closer to the monotheistic creator gods; analogous to Christ hanging on the cross. This means that the image of Óðinn hanging on Yggdrasill is best understood as the homology tree=human=world, which stakes a claim that Yggdrasill, however faintly, preserved the meaning of the Indo-European sacred tree as *imago mundi*.

Thor and the World Pillar

It has been demonstrated that Scandinavian Paganism accorded great significance to the sacred tree and that the world-ash Yggdrasill encapsulates several of the Indo-European meanings detailed in Chapter 1. These include a residual identification with the world (the sacred tree as *imago mundi*) and a strong understanding of Yggdrasill as the sacred centre (the tree as *axis mundi*). Moreover, Yggdrasill is closely connected

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[31] Sauve, "The Divine Victim: Aspects of Human Sacrifice in Viking Scandinavia," 182-183.

[32] Jaan Puhvel, "Victimal Hierarchies in Indo-European Animal Sacrifice," *The American Journal of Philology* 99/3 (Autumn 1978): 354-355.

[33] Sauve, "The Divine Victim: Aspects of Human Sacrifice in Viking Scandinavia," 185-186.

to creation and destruction, fate and judgement, and the god Óðinn, who sacrifices himself upon its branches. But Óðinn is not the traditional Indo-European sky- or thunder-god associated with the sacred tree. That god in the Norse pantheon is Thor, the son of Óðinn by Jorð (Earth) and the god of thunder and lightning, weather and fertility, whose sacred symbol is the throwing-hammer, *Mjöllnir* ("the crusher"),[34] which represents his thunder- or lightning-bolt.

There is considerable evidence to support the contention that Thor was the most popular deity of the Norse pantheon: more personal and place names contain his name as an element than do names with reference to any other god (and indeed, there are no personal names incorporating the name of Óðinn);[35] and amulets in the shape of hammers are common in medieval Scandinavian archaeology and indicate that men and women sought to place themselves under the protection of Thor (in the sagas there is also reference to "making the sign of the hammer"). Ellis Davidson suggested that the chains on which some of these hammers hang might symbolise Thor's great enemy, Jormungand, the World Serpent.[36] *Mjöllnir* is much more than just a lightning-bolt, however. It is the chief weapon of the gods' chief defender against their enemies the *jötunns*, and is also used by Thor to combat other enemies such as trolls. Further, the goats that draw Thor's chariot can be slaughtered and eaten, and when he hallows them with the hammer they return to life. When the god of justice, Balder, is laid on his funeral pyre after being treacherously killed, Thor hallows the pyre with his hammer. Medieval Scandinavians used hammers in imitation of Thor in sacral contexts, such as weddings and funerals, and to take oaths upon. Ellis Davidson compared Thor's hammer to the club of the Dagda ("the Good God") of Irish mythology, and noted that both gods have a connection with boundaries, and thus with sacred centres;

> the club of the Dagda was more than a lightning symbol, however; it was said to leave a mark like a boundary ditch between provinces … Similarly the hammer of Thor was associated with boundaries, since he protected law and order in the community and it might be marked on boundary

[34] Oscar Montelius, "The Sun God's Axe and Thor's Hammer," *Folklore* 21/1 (1910): 70.

[35] H. Munro Chadwick, "The Oak and the Thunder God," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 30 (1900): 22-23.

[36] Hilda Ellis Davidson, "Thor's Hammer," *Folklore* 76/1 (Spring 1965): 10.

> stones as a warning that failure to respect them would arouse the god's wrath.[37]

Thor is therefore connected with the *axis mundi* and the upholding of law in the sense of maintenance of the cosmos, which is a core Indo-European value. It was noted in Chapter 1 that the regular appearance of the dawn goddess symbolised the stable maintenance of the cosmos.

Thor as thunder or sky god in the Scandinavian pantheon possesses obvious phallic and generative connotations. In the poem *Þrymskviða* ("The Lay of Thrym"), his hammer is stolen and Thor travels to *Jötunheim* to retrieve it dressed as Freyja, as the thief, the giant Thrym, wishes to marry her. The trickster god Loki, who is Óðinn's blood-brother, accompanies Thor dressed as a maidservant. At the wedding:

> [s]aid Thrym these words, the thurses' lord:
> "Bring the hammer the bride to bless;
> on the maiden's lap lay ye Mjölnir;
> in Vor's name then, our wedlock hallow![38]

Thor's sexual vitality related to his function as god of the weather, particularly rain and storms. There were sacred forests that were dedicated to Thor, where presumably rituals took place. In Ireland, where the Vikings had dominated throughout the ninth and tenth centuries, the Irish Christian king Brian Boru cut down "Thor's woods, *caill Tomair* in Irish, at the Battle of Glen Mama in 1000, but we cannot know whether this grove of trees was still being used for pagan religious purposes. A similar stand of woods is mentioned near Dublin in the chief Irish account of the events of [the battle of] Clontarf."[39] These sacred woods and groves can be connected to the Greek and Roman material that associated Zeus and Jupiter, the thunder- and lightning-gods who were also sky-fathers and rulers of their pantheons, with groves of oaks. There is a strong connection between the thunder god and the oak tree. For example, in the sixteenth century chronicler Simon Grunau's description, the sacred grove of Romowe in Prussia contained idols of three gods, Perkuno, Potrympas and Patollus, the deities of thunder, rivers and springs, and the underworld.

[37] Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 204.
[38] Anon, *The Poetic Edda*, 109.
[39] William Sayers, "An Irish Perspective on Ibn Fadlan's Description of Rus Funeral Ceremonial," *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 16/1-2 (1988): 174-175.

Perkuno, the Prussian equivalent of Thor, was associated with the sacred oak, and a perpetual oak fire burned in front of his statue.[40]

At least one statuette of Thor has been identified, a small cast bronze from Eyrarland in northern Iceland, of a "bearded man leaning on a hammer," thought to date from approximately 1000 CE.[41] It is clear that there were much larger statues of Thor in Pagan Scandinavian temples, and that he was often represented driving a chariot. Adam of Bremen's description of the temple at Old Uppsala records that it contained three "idols" of gods, the most prominent of which was Thor:

> [t]hat folk has a very famous temple called Uppsala, situated not far from the city of Sigtuna and Bjorko. In this temple, entirely decked out in gold, the people worship the statues of three gods in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber; Wotan and Frikko have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: Thor, they say, presides over the air, which governs the thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather crops. The other, Wotan - that is, the Furious - carries on war and imparts to man strength against his enemies. The third is Frikko, who bestows peace and pleasure on mortals. His likeness, too, they fashion with an immense phallus. But Wotan they chisel armed, as our people are wont to represent Mars. Thor with his scepter apparently resembles Jove.[42]

The "sceptre" of Thor described by Adam must have been his hammer. Adam of Bremen also recorded that the temple was bound about by gold chains, and was situated within a sacred grove. There is dispute about the status of Adam's knowledge of the Pagan religion, but the description of the Uppsala temple appears to be founded on solid information. Adam described the ritual activities at the temple as follows:

> it is customary to solemnise in Uppsala, at nine year intervals, a general feast of all the provinces of Sweden. No one is exempt from attendance at this festival. Kings and people, all and singly, send their gifts to Uppsala … The sacrifice is of this nature: of everything that is male they offer nine heads, with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort.

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[40] Louis Herbert Gray and George Foot Moore (eds), *The Mythology of All Races*, Volume 3, John Arnott MacCulloch and Jan Machal, "Celtic and Slavic" (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1918), 302.
[41] Ian Heath and Angus McBride, *The Vikings* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2004 [1985]), 59.
[42] Adam of Bremen, *The History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, ed. and trans. Francis J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 207.

> The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple. This grove is so sacred in the eyes of the heathen that each and every tree in it is considered holy because of the death and putrefaction of the victims. Even dogs and horses hang there along with men; a Christian told me he had seen seventy-two bodies suspended there promiscuously. Furthermore, the songs customarily chanted in the ritual of a sacrifice of this kind are so manifold and unseemly that it is better to keep silent about them.[43]

On the basis of Adam's description, it is tempting to view the human sacrifices recorded at Uppsala as cosmic re-enactments of the slaughter of Ymir (bearing in mind Caesar's comment that being prohibited to attend sacrifices was "the heaviest punishment that can be inflicted upon a Gaul"), and the nine years to link to the nine worlds of the Norse cosmos (and the nine nights of Óðinn's ordeal), and to a ceremony of renewal.[44] The presence of horses hanging in the grove and the ritual homology between tree and horse, and tree and human, has already been mentioned in the discussion of Óðinn's sacrifice. Jens-Peter Schjødt has noted that the parallel is not exact, because the grove is not the equivalent of Yggdrasill, but rather is sacred because of the putrefaction of the victims. On another occasion, Adam of Bremen wrote of "another tree, which judging by its size, the extent of its branches and the fact that it is evergreen must form the cultic counterpart to the World Tree … This tree stands near a well, just as the World Tree can be localised to a place near Mimir's or Urðr's well."[45]

An interesting parallel exists in the thirteenth century *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (which was a major source of J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth mythology). In Chapter 16, the Christian King Ingi has had little success in converting his Pagan subjects, and the Swedes charged him with breaking their ancient laws at an assembly. Ingi's brother-in-law Sveinn was given the kingdom after he offered to prepare a sacrifice. The text states: "Sveinn was then taken as king over all Sweden. Then a horse was led to the assembly and was hacked apart and prepared for eating, and the sacred tree was reddened with the blood. Then all the Swedes cast off

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[43] Adam of Bremen, *The History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, quoted by Magnus Magnusson in *Vikings!* (London: Bodley Head, 1980), 101.
[44] Julius Caesar, *The Conquest of Gaul*, ed. and trans. S. A. Handford, Chapter 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976 [1951]), 32.
[45] Jens-Peter Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008), 187-188.

Christianity, and began sacrifices, and they drove King Ingi away."[46] This ritual of horse dismemberment, which Jaan Puhvel argued was functionally identical to human sacrifice in the Indian material, is linked to the Pagan renewal of the realm, which is a form of re-creation of the world, which, however faintly, reinforces the equation horse=world (and analogically, human). The sacred tree that featured in the ritual is another small piece of evidence to add to the picture.

Ursula Dronke argued that, for the Germanic peoples, human sacrifice is a commemoration or re-creation of the primordial rite.[47] She connected the sacred grove of the Semnones, discussed in Chapter 4, where ritual participants who enter the grove are bound with cords, and must leave the grove by rolling along the ground should they fall during the ritual, with the scenario in the Eddic poem "The Second Lay of Helgi Hundinsbani," in which Helgi is killed by Dagr, wielding the spear of Óðinn, in *Fjöturlundr* ("Fetter Grove"). Dronke noted that Óðinn is closely associated with bonds and fetters; in *Hávamál* he states that he was "fettered" by the "heron of oblivion," which appears to be a metaphor for drunkenness. He also names his *valkyries* in *Grímnismál*, and one is named as Herfjötur ("war fetter").[48]

Worshippers of Thor apparently used certain techniques to simulate the sound of thunder within his temples. One sculpture of Thor driving a chariot was able to roll back and forward on wheels, making a loud noise, and the twelfth century *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus tells how the Christian Magnus Nilsson removed a number of hammers from a temple of Thor in Sweden:

> [h]e took care to bring home certain hammers of unusual weight which they call Jupiter's, used by the island men in their antique faith. For the men of old, desiring to comprehend the causes of thunder and lightning by means of the similitude of things, took hammers great and many of bronze, with which they believed the crashing of the sky might very well be imitated by the smith's toil, as it were. But Magnus in his zeal for Christian teaching and dislike to paganism, determined to spoil the temple of its equipment and Jupiter of his tokens in the place of his sanctity. And even now the Swedes consider him guilty of sacrilege and a robber of spoil

[46] Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda*, Vol. 2 (Reykjavik: Islendingasagnautgafan, 1954), 70-71.
[47] Dronke, "Eddic poetry as a source for the history of Germanic religion," 658-659.
[48] Dronke, "Eddic poetry as a source for the history of Germanic religion," 661.

belonging to the gods.[49]

Indian mythology supports the identification of Thor with the world pillar, as the deity who is so identified in the Vedas is Indra, who is the functional cognate of Thor. Indra is, like Thor, the great champion of the gods, whose weapon is the thunder or lightning bolt, called the "axe of heaven" in the Vedic hymns.[50] Indra's identification with the *axis mundi* was examined in Chapter 1; it is important to note that his great enemy was the serpent or dragon Vritra, and Thor's adversary in Norse myth is the serpent Jormungand, the monstrous offspring of the treacherous Loki, the blood-brother of Óðinn and enemy of the gods (and another serpent, Niðhöggr, is the enemy of the world tree, and attacks its roots). Kuiper situated his analysis of Indra's identity with the *axis mundi* in the wider context of the battle between the two groups of gods in Vedic mythology.[51] The Devas are "good" and Indra is their champion; the Asuras are "bad." This opposition is replicated in the Scandinavian sources, where Thor is the champion of the Æsir, who exist in constant opposition to the *jötnar*, to whom they are related by blood.

Thor is also associated with the cult of the "high seat pillars," which sustain houses (and are thus the domestic equivalent to the Irminsul, the cosmic support). This connection existed in Anglo-Saxon religion, too; the place name Thurstable was originally *Þunres stapol* (Thunor's pillar). Gabriel Turville-Petre noted Tacitus' mention of pillars erected to Hercules (the Roman cognate of Thor), and interpreted Thurstable to mean there was a pillar to Thor there, which was used as a meeting place.[52] Dronke argued that Thor was a patron of marriage (his wife's name, Sif, means "relationship through marriage"), and that connected him to the family and the home. Pagans travelling to new lands took the high-seat pillars from their old dwelling, and threw them into the water to float ashore, so that Thor could guide them to the site of their future home. There are many instances of this practice in the sagas, and the *Landnámabók* tells of Hallstein, who sacrificed to Thor (some sources say his victim was his son) and requested him to send pillars. E. O. G.

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[49] Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 8.
[50] Montelius, "The Sun God's Axe and Thor's Hammer," 61.
[51] F. B. J. Kuiper, "The Basic Concept of Vedic Religion," *History of Religions* 15/2 (November 1975): 117-120.
[52] Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Nine Norse Studies* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1972), 21.

Turville-Petre summarised: “shortly afterwards a huge tree-trunk drifted ashore, and pillars were made of it, not only for Hallstein’s house but for all the houses in the neighbourhood.”[53]

Dronke associated Thor’s connection with the high-seat pillars with the myth of the creation of human beings, discussed earlier. She argued that the shore was the “house” of the earth, and that the logs or driftwood that would become the first humans floating ashore, referred to a cosmogonic myth in which the motifs of floating ashore and “divine concern” are combined.[54] *Völuspá* stated:

> [t]o 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.[55]

Interestingly, the Eddic poem *Rígsþula*, in which Heimdall (“World Radiance”), another god associated with the world tree, Yggdrasill, plays a leading role in the creation of human social and political structures, replicates these motifs. The poem commences with Heimdall walking along the seashore, approaching the house of Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother, the first couple whose lives he will transform. He is here called Rigr, a pun explained by Dronke as involving Icelandic *rigr* (stiffness, in the sense of the tree’s rigidity) and the Irish *ri(g)*, king, in that he established the human institution of kingship.[56]

Heimdall as World Tree

Heimdall, the watchman of the gods, is the god who is most closely associated with the world tree. His name has been translated to mean precisely that. He is a somewhat mysterious deity; it is not clear if he is a member of the Æsir or the Vanir. He is linked with Óðinn (who sacrificed his eye for a drink from Mimir’s well) and Tyr (who sacrificed his hand by putting it in the jaws of Fenris, the wolf son of Loki, as a pledge of good faith as the gods deceitfully bound him in dwarf-fashioned magical cords). Heimdall is said to have sacrificed his hearing, which is acute enough to

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[53] Turville-Petre, *Nine Norse Studies*, 25.
[54] Georges Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Einar Haugen (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 118-125.
[55] Anon, *The Poetic Edda*, 3.
[56] Dronke, “Eddic poetry as a source for the history of Germanic religion,” 671.

hear wool growing on the backs of sheep (he is also connected to the ram). In *Völuspá*, *strophe* 27, the female seer "is said to know of the existence of 'Heimdallr's hearing concealed beneath the holy tree-trunk which is accustomed to the bright vault'."[57] This could have been one of Heimdall's actual ears; as Óðinn placed his eye in Mimir's well. Like Óðinn and Thor, Heimdall has cosmogonic significance; he is linked to the sea and is the son of nine mothers. The Eddic poem *Hyndluljóð* (which is sometimes called the "Little *Völuspá*") speaks of the child of nine female giants, "at the earth's edge" at the beginning of time. Ellis Davidson argued this connected him with "other wise giants able to remember the first days … the strength of this being came from the earth and the ice-cold sea, and he must surely be Heimdall, who according to early poets was born of the waves."[58] Other information about Heimdall stresses his wakefulness, that he guards the rainbow bridge Bifrost to Asgard, and will blow Gjallarhorn, his trumpet, to sound the beginning of *Ragnarok*.[59] Further, his abode is called Himinbiorg, "heaven-hill," which suggests a ritual enclosure or holy place, in which Heimdall is the sacred tree. Clive Tolley also noted the fact that the tree or pillar played the role of "watchful guardian … the guardian tree (*vårdträd*)."[60] Heimdall, as watchman of the gods, is the guardian tree of Asgard. Like the tree, he is associated with judgment and fate (for example, his horn blast heralds the end of the world).

As the world tree, Heimdall's nine mothers are linked to the roots of the tree that penetrate into the worlds of the Norse cosmos. He is the *axis mundi*, in that he links the underworld, through the middle realm, to the heavens where the gods dwell. He is also associated with begetting children and fertility; he is strangely said to have been killed by a man's head, and will die again at *Ragnarok* in mortal combat with his enemy Loki (whom he previously battled in the form of a seal). There was apparently no cult or worship of Heimdall, though the Norse poets who wrote of him drew upon extensive and largely coherent traditions. Dronke argued that Óðinn's constant sacrificing of himself in the quest for wisdom

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[57] Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 280.
[58] Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 211.
[59] E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974 [1965]), 147-150.
[60] Clive Tolley, "Oswald's Tree," in *Pagans and Christians: The Interplay Between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe*, eds Tette Hofstra, L. A. J. R. Houwen and Alasdair A. MacDonald (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1995), 163.

ends in failure, but poets indicated that Heimdall possessed the secrets of the world:

> [h]e is born at the beginning and new life will be born from him: after the *fimbulvetr*, "giant winter," at the end of this aeon of the world, the last man and woman will hide in his wood – *i holti Hoddmimis* – and live on to give birth to the next race of men. Such myths run parallel to social practice in many cultures … the dead are buried in trees to ensure the renewal of their life; what was born from a tree once – *megir Heimdallar*, "sons of Heimdallr" – will be born from the tree a second time.[61]

The motif of people enclosed within Heimdall's trunk recalls the creation of humans from tree trunks, logs or driftwood. It is also reminiscent of the unworked log or plank images of the gods that are mentioned by Tacitus as a feature of Germanic religion, and also feature in ancient Greek religion.

It has been noted that Thor is intimately associated with pillars that function as mobile "centres," in that they render unfamiliar geography "home." Óðinn and Heimdall are associated with the creation of humans from "unfated" logs, but there is further evidence in the *Poetic Edda* that links Óðinn with the animation of wooden images. Richard North has analysed *Hávamál strophe* 49, in which Óðinn stated:

> [i]n the fields I fared, (for fun) I hung
> my weeds on two wooden men;
> they were reckoned folks when the rags they wore:
> naked, a man is naught.[62]

North argued that the verse meant more than simply "clothes make a man." He interpreted the verse to mean that Óðinn clothed or armed "two idols and brings them to life as demons of battle: 'I gave my gear to two wooden men (*tvein tremonnom*) for use on the field; they seemed warriors when they had some clothing; a naked man is ashamed'."[63] North's translation differs somewhat from the self-consciously archaic rendition of Lee Hollander, but the meaning is not substantially changed. Earlier scholars, including Sigurður Nordal, connected these "tree men" with the creation of human beings by the gods.

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[61] Dronke, "Eddic poetry as a source for the history of Germanic religion," 668.
[62] Anon, *The Poetic Edda*, 21.
[63] North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 93.

North identified four other instances of "tree men:" one in *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*; one in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*; and two in *Flateyjarbók* (Chapters 173 and 323). In Chapter 173 Ogmundr the Dane made landfall at Munarvág in Sámsey. His men fetched fresh water and wood. In the forest "they found an ancient wooden man (*tremann fornan*), a hundred and forty feet high and grown over with moss, and yet they saw all his features; and now they discussed to themselves who would have worshipped this great god'."[64] They question the idol, which answered them in three verses. In Chapter 323 of *Flateyjarbók*, Óláfr Tryggvason tells the heathens of Trøndelag that the idol of Freyr that they worshipped was in fact "one of two tree-men (*tremenn*) the Swedes made when Freyr died, which they put into his burial mound … Later, he says, these wooden men frightened tomb-robbers and thus prevented them from leaving with their booty. The Swedes took the statues out and sent one of them to the Trondheim region, keeping the other at Uppsala. Both statues were then worshipped as Freyr himself."[65] This accords with other instances of animated statues of Freyr in Norse literature (for example, the tale of the fugitive Gunnar Helming, who ousted an animate idol from the cart in which it was travelling, accompanied by a priestess, and took its place, being worshipped as Freyr by the people until he was detected and had to flee).[66] North concluded from this evidence that when kings died in battle, effigies were made of them that were placed in tombs and sanctuaries. These effigies were part of the process of divinization in which a deceased warrior king became a member of Óðinn's bodyguard in Valhalla, the *einherjar*. These élite troops will fight for Óðinn at Ragnarok. In *Hávamál strophe* 49, then, Óðinn outfitted two of these wooden effigies, which North identified with Hermóðr and Sigmundr, his lieutenants in Valhalla.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the textual evidence for the sacred tree in medieval Scandinavia and demonstrated that the surviving Pagan mythology contains the most extensive and complex sacred tree to survive in Europe after the conversion to Christianity, the world ash tree, Yggdrasill. Yggdrasill is clearly the *axis mundi* of the Norse cosmos, extending into and supporting the nine worlds. Created from the body of Ymir, the tree is both man and world, a full instantiation of the Indo-European cosmological

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[64] North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 93-94.
[65] North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 94-95.
[66] Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 170.

picture established in Chapter 1. In this light, the most important god associated with the tree is Heimdall, who is a god of beginnings and endings, born at the dawn of time and marker of the doom of the gods. His name means "world tree," and elements from myths link him to both the tree as guardian and the tree as a site for the delivery of judgements. Further, Yggdrasill is also a hippodendron, the tree as horse, and in that mode is associated most closely with Óðinn, whose epithet Ygg ("the terrible one") gives the ash its name ("the steed of Ygg"), and whose sacrificial hanging in order to gain the power of the runes is recalled in Adam of Bremen's account of rituals conducted at the temple complex at Uppsala in Sweden.

Both Heimdall and Óðinn are also connected to the cosmic tree and pillar through myths about the creation of human beings. These myths reflect the liminal status of both deities; Heimdall is born on the shore where land and sea meet, and Óðinn has crossed the boundary between life and death, and returned. These tales feature the sea-shore, the realm of potentiality, upon which the driftwood or logs wash up, and are animated by the gods. This motif introduces Thor, the third Norse deity with strong connections to the world tree and pillar. He is a guardian of law and protector of the home, the gods' champion against their enemies, and the cult of the "high-seat pillars" (which uphold the house) participated in the potential of the sea and the liminality of the shore, as settlers threw the high-seat pillars of their former dwelling place into the sea as they approached the shore, allowing Thor to guide them to their new home. This ritual linked the high-seat pillars with the tree and pillar as *axis mundi*, in that they linked featureless new territory (the periphery) to the known sacred land (the centre). Óðinn also is connected to the animation of wooden idols or effigies, which is interpreted as a process of divinization after death, which echoed the initial creation of human beings. The meanings of the tree as *axis mundi* and *imago mundi* (the latter because Yggdrasill to a certain extent constitutes the cosmos, and it is the embodiment of the fate of that world), described in Chapter 1 as the most important Indo-European meanings of the sacred tree, are clear and unambiguous in the Scandinavian sources. The homology tree=human =world is fully worked out and there are constant variations in the literature on this theme.

Scandinavia was still being slowly Christianised in the twelfth century. Most of the textual sources for the Norse Pagan religion were written in the thirteenth century, and are thus very close to the transition between

Paganism and Christianity. Sources from outside Scandinavia indicate that Paganism persisted beyond "official" conversion dates. Ruth Mazo Karras noted that Archbishop Unwan of Hamburg was still fighting tree worship in the eleventh century.[67] Adam of Bremen wrote that the Archbishop "ordered all pagan rites, of which superstition still flourished in this region, to be entirely uprooted in such a manner that he had new churches built throughout the diocese in place of the sacred groves which our lowlanders frequented with foolish reverence. Among these groves he also commanded the Basilica of Saint Vitus to be built outside the town and the Chapel of Saint Willehad restored because it had burned."[68] The sacred tree had meanings that were complex and had far-reaching consequences for those peoples whose world was dominated by it. The new teaching of Christianity, though certain of its motifs were compatible with the tree (chiefly the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross), absorbed and modified aspects of the traditional religion in a process of indigenisation that resulted in a distinctive Germanic medieval culture, and a very impressive body of literature that testified to the continued relevance of the Pagan gods, myths and symbols.

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[67] Ruth Mazo Karras, "Pagan Survivals and Syncretism in the Conversion of Saxony," *The Catholic Historical Review* 72 (October 1986): 570.
[68] Adam of Bremen, *The History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, 87.

CONCLUSION

SACRED TREES AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MEANING

> Even their children remember their altars and Asherah poles beside the spreading trees and on the high hills. *Jeremiah* Chapter 17, Verse 2[1]

The fundamental nature of the tree as a symbol for many communities reflects the historical reality that human beings have always interacted with and depended upon trees for their survival. Trees provided one of the earliest forms of shelter, along with caves, and the bounty of trees, nuts, fruits, and berries, gave sustenance to gatherer-hunter populations. This study has concentrated on the tree as sacred and significant for a particular group of societies, living in the ancient and medieval eras in the geographical confines of Europe, and sharing a common Indo-European inheritance, but sacred trees are found throughout the world, in vastly different cultures and historical periods. Sacred trees feature in the religious frameworks of the Ghanaian Akan, Arctic Altaic shamanic communities, and in China and Japan.[2] The Buddhist *bodhi* (enlightenment) tree, like the Glastonbury Thorn, has had cuttings taken from it and has proliferated the world over. The depositing of votive offerings and the performance of rituals at sacred trees are also frequently similar, despite the different religious contexts.

The two meanings of the sacred tree that this study concentrated on were the *axis mundi* and the *imago mundi*. The Greeks and Romans in the ancient world, and the Irish, Anglo-Saxons, continental Germans and Scandinavians in the medieval world, all understood the power of the tree,

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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.

[2] A. R. Wright, "Tree Worship in China", *Folk-Lore* 17/2 (1906): 190; Y. T. Hosoi, "The Sacred Tree in Japanese Prehistory," *History of Religions* 16/2 (August 1976): 95-119.

and its derivative the pillar, as markers of the centre. Sacred trees and pillars dotted their landscapes, and the territory around them derived its meaning from their presence. Unfamiliar or even hostile territory could be tamed and made meaningful by the erection of a monument that replicated the sacred centre. Such monuments also linked with boundaries, and by extension with law and order, custom and tradition. The sacred tree and pillar as centre symbolised the stability of the cosmos and of society. Ken Dowden has argued that geography determines sacredness, not the presence of dedicated buildings. Nature, particularly in the microcosmic form of water source, stone and tree, "inevitably underlies the choice of place in which to perform ritual."[3]

The Pagan religions examined in this book were polytheistic, nature-oriented, this-worldly, local and pluralist, and they did not develop systematic theologies that mandated certain beliefs and practices correct and others deviant. This does not, however, mean that they lacked complex symbolism or failed to provide profound explanations for human life and the place of people in the cosmos. The second meaning of the sacred tree explored herein, the sacred tree as *imago mundi* (world picture), is found less often, and in more nebulous forms, than the *axis mundi*. Nonetheless, it is highly sophisticated, and employed the human body as a model for both the world and the sacred tree.

Maurice Bloch has observed that, for humans, trees are "good to think with."[4] Trees share life with humans, and their physical form invites comparison, with the sap analogous to blood, the trunk to the core body, the roots to feet, and the branches to limbs. J. R. R. Tollkien, a distinguished medievalist and a strikingly original fantasy novelist, employed the tree in this way in the figure of Treebeard and his people, the Ents (derived from the Anglo-Saxon for "giant"). These creatures are animated speaking trees. Tolkien named the Ents from two phrases in the Old English poem "The Ruin," that describes crumbling Roman cities; *orþanc enta geweorc*, "the work of cunning giants," and *eald enta geweorc*, "old work of giants."[5]

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[3] Ken Dowden, *European Paganism: The Realities of Cult from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 27.
[4] 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.
[5] Tom Shippey, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 88.

Tolkien's short story "Leaf by Niggle," in which an artist creates a beautiful tree that comes to life, was "prompted by the felling of a favourite poplar tree," and he has been credited with promoting an ecological vision in which "the fate of trees is a moral indicator of those who act upon them."[6]

Pagan Europe was gradually eclipsed by Christianity, which spread from the Middle East through the Roman and post-Roman world. Christianity is a universalising monotheism, and regarded polytheistic Paganism as at best deluded, and at worst demonic. Sacred trees and pillars were visible signs of the presence of the gods in the landscape, and as such they were popular targets for axe-wielding saints and missionaries who desired to force the conversion of the landscape as well as the people. Martin of Tours felled a holy tree in the Touraine, Patrick cut down the wood of Fochloth in Ireland, Boniface demolished the Oak of Jupiter in Hesse, and Christian kings including Charlemagne and Brian Boru, and bishops including Unwan of Hamburg, cut down entire forests that were places of worship of the Pagan deities. Richard Sullivan has noted that attacks by Christians on Pagan objects of worship are logical. For Pagan audiences the failure of their gods to respond might be taken as evidence of the Christian God's superior power.[7] Paradoxically, Tolkien, a devout Christian, wrote in *The Lord of the Rings* "Gandalf, the wise and moral wizard, is a lover of trees, whereas his counterpart Saruman … becomes blinded by self-interest and is a destroyer of trees, making 'wastes of stump and bramble where once there were singing groves'."[8] In reality, the Pagans treasured trees, and the Christians reduced them to stumps.

The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of both revived modern Paganism and the environmental movement. The 1960s was a crucial decade for both Pagans and ecologists; Rachel Carson's clarion call *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, and in 1967, during the Summer of Love, the medieval historian Lynn White Jnr published an article in which he argued that environmental devastation was a direct consequence of Judeo-Christian theology, which drew a sharp distinction between Creator and

[6] Richard Hayman, *Woodlands and Western Civilization* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2003), 200-201.
[7] Richard E. Sullivan, "The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan," in *Christian Missionary Activity in the Early Middle Ages*, Richard E. Sullivan (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), 705-740.
[8] Hayman, *Woodlands and Western Civilization*, 201.

creation, with the latter viewed as soulless matter.[9] Interestingly, White praised the Pagans of the ancient world in order to hammer home his criticisms of Christianity. He wrote:

> [i]n late Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own *genius loci*, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids showed their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying Pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."[10]

White's position was enthusiastically taken up by nature-worshipping Pagans and by the environmental movement, which encompasses a variety of philosophical positions. These range from a quasi-religious "spiritual" ecological consciousness, which reveres indigenous religious traditions, participates in animism and embraces the Hua-yen Buddhist notion of the interconnectedness of everything. Religious studies scholar Bron Taylor has termed this "dark green religion."[11] At the other end of the continuum is an entirely secular pragmatic ecological awareness that argues that the future of humanity depends on the conservation and cultivation of nature, which is the framework within which human life is possible. In Western countries it has become increasingly common to vote Green, to support First Nations' land rights claims and to respect indigenous sacred sites. In Australia, the driest and most thinly populated continent on earth, Maurice Ryan noted that, "native plants and trees are used in bushland settings. There has been a stirring of the national conscience over the welfare of our native birds and animals but just how widespread are the concerns remains for future judgement."[12] The future of humanity is inextricably linked to the future of the trees. Myths assert that trees and human are created together, are mutually constitutive of the cosmos, and perish together at the end of time. It is not too much of a risk to hazard that science, in the

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[9] Lynn White, Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-1207 at http://aeoe.org/resources/spiritual/rootsofcrisis.pdf, accessed 21 December 2010.
[10] White, Jr "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis."
[11] Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2010), 13-41.
[12] Maurice Ryan, "Woodsman, Woodsman, Spare that Tree," *Australian Folklore* 8 (1993): 33-39, 39.

long run, will provide a more prosaic set of data in less poetic language that nevertheless reinforce the same conclusion.

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