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### [Review of the book *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations*, C.M. Cusack, 2011]

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## Book Review

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Carole M. Cusack, *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), xvi + 200 pp., £34.99 (cloth), ISBN: 978-1-4438-2857-4.

The title of Carole Cusack's book, *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations*, needs more geographical specification as it may cause today's global citizen to feel culturally disoriented, or at least to expect something different than what the text provides. It becomes clear only after browsing the latter part of the extensive summary on the back cover that this work focuses on conversion processes in pre-Christian societies of Northern and Western Europe. Although the author positions her study within the Indo-European matrix and makes use of Mircea Eliade's universalistic imagery of the tree as both *axis mundi* and *imago mundi*, her eye is trained on ancient Greek mythology, Roman historiography, and Christian imperialism in Northwestern Europe from the third to the eleventh centuries.

Within this confine, Cusack does a good job in pointing out that European Pagans were indigenous people whose culture was partially destroyed by Christianization. The book dramatically opens onto an illustration of an alabaster scene on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum, depicting Boniface felling the Oak of Jupiter. In her PhD dissertation (*Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples*, 1998) Cusack had analyzed medieval texts that, among other things, described the destruction of sacred trees by missionaries such as St. Boniface and St. Martin of Tours. More or less as an antidote to these Christian triumphalist narratives, she wrote this follow-up book with more focus on the symbolism of the sacred trees. The underlying idea is that the ancient Greeks and Romans, as well as the Irish, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and Scandinavian peoples, all understood and celebrated the power of trees as symbols. Both the tree and its derivative, the pillar, are taken by Cusack as markers of the center. For local cultures, such central trees and pillars would have symbolized the stability of cosmos and society.

It is at this point that the design of the book, however sympathetic and well-intended, begins to show its limits, as the indigenous ideas and practices around sacred trees in that era are mostly known merely indirectly. Cusack refers to the much-needed post-colonial approach when admitting that the records of the Greco-Roman world and the literate culture of medieval Christianity are necessarily lopsided when read as sources 'representing' the barbarians of Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. But how to give due attention—in retrospect—to suppressed voices from non-literate civilizations? Northwestern European paganisms encompassed a

heterogeneous variety of disparate beliefs and practices. Written records that could tell us about Pagan lived religion often rely on textual sources produced by Christian missionaries or later Christianized writers, such as in the case of Norse mythology.

Regarding sacred trees, sacred groves, and sacred pillars, scholarly understanding of so-called Pagans is likewise incomplete. Although equally handicapped by the lack of first-hand emic records, archeologists, on the other hand, are coming up with alternative sources: built structures, decorated funerary urns, monumental mounds, and other material evidence of a conjectured ritual repertoire. When, for instance, the remains of an elaborately carved wooden pole are found, there is a tendency to regard it as a sacred pillar, but it could well have functioned as simply marking a grave, a kinship territory, or an assembly place. Other scholars have focused on the traces of Pagan cults in place-names, royal genealogies, ancient charms, folkloric rhymes, and human-made changes in geographical features. The author hardly includes such alternative sources and mainly quotes Roman historiographers, medieval missionaries, and later Christianized folklorists. In addition, she uses much secondary literature from specialists in these respective fields. The result is that we get deeper insights into the ways in which monotheistically inspired outsiders reflected upon indigenous cults, but in the process we hardly get drawn into a wider, resonant landscape presumably dotted with sacred centers. But as soon as one is able to let go of the initial disappointment—searching for trees but finding proselytizing monks instead—and surrender to a treasure trove of texts, persons, places, and events, one may cast off a fashionable nature-based neo-romanticism and acknowledge that contemporary reverse processes of de-Christianization and re-Paganization may provide today's reader with equally biased gazes. It is only then that chapters on sacred trees in Celtic, German, Anglo-Saxon, and Scandinavian lore can be truly appreciated.

Although glimpses of an indigenous sense of the naturally sacred are tantalizingly few, deep-rooted local imaginations and practices shine through. And exactly when the reader may have been drawn into a mood of mild enchantment, the axe falls: the grand *Irmunsul* (Germanic for 'mighty pillar') oak tree trunk is hacked down.

It is hardly comforting that Christianity concurrently created its own tree monument, the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. It came to signify resurrected life, but in another register, another mood, another narrative. The great, bare, human-made standing crosses in the Christianized landscapes of Northern and Western Europe often combined the image of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden with the corpus on the cross. A Christian version of the tree as *imago mundi* was thus produced. Or, as the author mournfully remarks: 'Pagans treasured trees, and the Christians reduced them to stumps' (p. 173). Their meaning was thus transformed, but Cusack critically yet hopefully ends on a further note about another transformation: this book may have dealt with myths about sacred trees as much as about Christ, but science, in the long run, will provide a more prosaic set of data that in less poetic (or less theological) language will reinforce the same conclusion: trees are lifesavers, inextricably linked to the planetary future.

This book is recommended to those scholars who are sensitive to the usual abuse, conjecture, or mindless admiration regarding Paganism in general and Northwestern European Paganism in particular. Its limitation is also its strong point: it attempts to get closer to the sacred trees in some pre-Christian civilizations in Europe, but it can

do so only indirectly. By close-reading unfashionable missionary accounts, the author allows us a glimpse of sacred trees, sacred groves, and sacred pillars as powerful symbols at the point of transformation, or, in the eyes of others, tragic extinction.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Editor's Note: for more about sacred trees, see the special forum on arborphilia in issue 9.4 of *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*.