

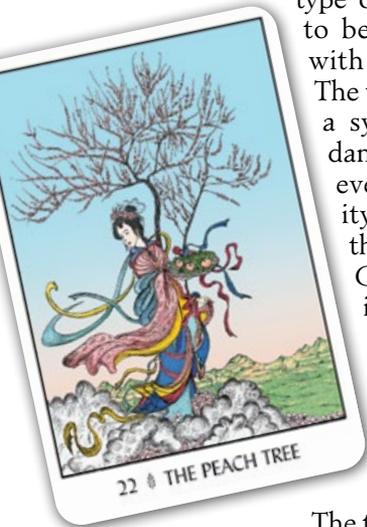
Celebrating the Magic of Trees



By Francesca Romana Valente
Illustrations by Mariuccia d'Angiò

A tree is a witness of time and a powerful symbol instilled with religious, mystical, and philosophical significance, and sometimes even magical power. It is not surprising that in the past, trees were invested with such sacredness. One need only consider what trees represented for our ancestors, as well as for many populations today. In a material sense, trees provide food and shelter, they purify the air, hold the ground firm, and prevent landslides. They offer safety to animals, give shade to travelers, present beautiful foliage and flowers, and often even provide useful medicines in their leaves and bark.

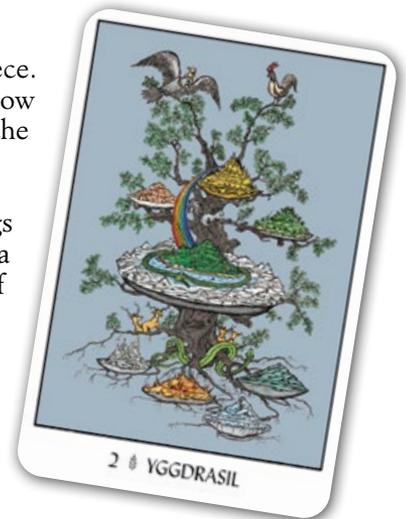
Precisely for these various properties, trees in the past were regarded as being of divine nature, powerful allies of man, or at least as gifts from some benevolent god or goddess. In Genesis, for example, it is written that God gave mankind every type of tree, beautiful to behold and heavy with exquisite fruit. The tree thus became a symbol of abundance, of well-being, even of immortality, as a result of the divine hand of God. The peach in Chinese tradition, and the Biblical Tree of Life, gave eternal life to whoever ate of its fruit.



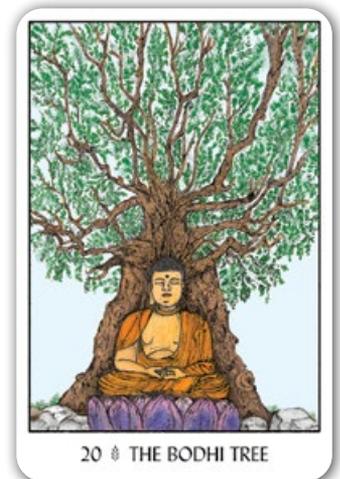
The tree could also be understood as a bridge between man and God. With its vertical structure, anchored in the depths of the earth, but projecting up towards the skies, the tree easily lends itself as a representation of a connecting axis between the kingdom of hell, the world of men, and the realm of the divine. This is why trees were at times considered to be privileged communication channels between humans and gods. Certain trees became the centers of oracular cults, as happened in the case of the cel-

ebrated sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona in Greece. Here, only the priests and priestesses knew how to recognize the whispering of the gods in the rustling of the oak tree's leaves.

Many diverse civilizations such as the Vikings and the Maya saw the tree as a cosmic axis, a mythical connector between various planes of reality and various worlds. For the Vikings, in fact, the entire cosmos was held up by the gigantic ash tree Yggdrasil, sacred to Odin. For the Maya, a ceiba tree, the so-called Yaxche, performed the same function.



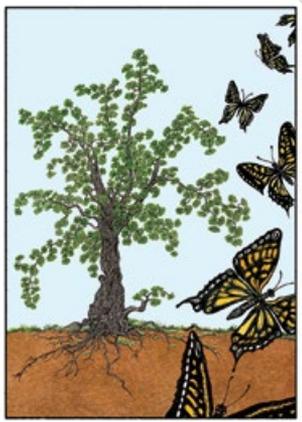
The tree is also a symbol of strength in adversity, of firmness, of vital energy and rebirth, as is seen in those rare trees that grow in extremely unfavorable conditions, such as the acacia in the South Saharan Ténéré desert. The tree is now universally recognized as a symbol of the victory of light over darkness, as demonstrated by Christmas trees in homes and public squares all over the world. If all of this were not enough to explain why the tree, of all the natural elements, was destined to become a universal sacred symbol, we can examine one final aspect of these green monuments; they resemble us, and thus they represent us. The ancient Greeks understood this, as is seen in their fascinating stories of young nymphs, women, or boys transformed into trees or of the amadriads, beautiful creatures who lived in the trees. The Celts knew it, attributing human personality traits not to the stars under which they were born, but to trees, creating a true arboreal horoscope. The tree, with its upright form, resembles that of a man, with its feet firmly planted in the ground, its arms reaching toward the skies. This is not, however, a symbol merely of man's physical form but also of his inner being, with his origins, his bonds, his evolution, his deeper aspirations, and his higher spiritual yearnings. It is no coincidence that it was under a great tree, a *ficus religiosa*, that Buddha received his illumination.



A HISTORY MADE OF TREES

Real or imaginary trees have played an important role in history, culture, religion and mythology. We can thus confidently affirm that there is no past civilization that did not devote a special cult to one or more trees. The tree is a universal symbol, one that constitutes a powerful point of contact between distant cultures, separated by time or space, or both.

The traces of tree worship are lost in the mists of time. One of the most ancient elements of evidence that we have goes back to the very birth of civilization in Mesopotamia. The ancient god Assur, the most powerful of the Mesopotamian pantheon, whose honor is documented as early as the third millennium BCE, is often shown above a date palm. This particular tree was also associated with Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war, and with Hathor, the Egyptian goddess who was the giver of joy and fertility.



I ♪ THE TREE OF LIFE

Also to be remembered are the very Ancient Phoenicians and their admiration of cedar trees, reflected even today in the Lebanese flag. This majestic conifer, which can easily grow to 50 meters in height, grew spontaneously in mountainous zones covering a great part of Lebanon and Syria. Cedar wood was highly prized for its durability, and thus was considered a symbol of immortality, and also of power.

In Jewish culture, besides real trees, the legendary Tree of Life is the object of particular veneration. This mysterious tree, whose species and aspect are not specified, was placed by God in the center of the Garden of Eden and its succulent fruit brought immortality. But in the Kabala, The Tree of Life is not simply a tree; it becomes a symbol of creation itself, accomplished by God through His origins, or Sephirot. The design of this process, as presented in the Kabala,

has the form of a stylized tree, holding the most intimate essence of the created and of God Himself.

Trees in Ancient Greece often had key roles in various myths of metamorphosis. The trees themselves were the dwellings of woodland divinities, like the driads, who lived in oaks, or the amadriads, whose lives were permanently linked to individual trees. There were also many trees that were sacred to the better-known gods: the olive tree for Athena, the laurel for Apollo, the oak for Zeus, the elm for Morpheus, and for Dionysus, the vine. Entire woods were sacred to the Romans, especially those with trees with great trunks.

But the ancient civilization that attributed the most central role to the cult of trees was the Celtic world. The Celts regulated their entire lives according to the rhythms of nature. Many of their most important festivals corresponded directly to the solstices and the equinoxes. The importance bestowed on trees by the Celts, who considered them to be intelligent creatures, is testified by the fact that the thirteen months of their lunar calendar were named after trees. Even the twenty-five letters of the Celtic alphabet (Ogham) were each coupled with a specific tree.

The Celts believed that the personality of each newborn baby was determined by their “tree sign,” based on the vegetative phase of the trees at the time of birth. The Celts reserved particular admiration for the holly, symbol of winter; the hazel, with protective properties; the elm, associated with the feminine divinities; and the oak, especially when hung with mistletoe, which was considered a potent antidote to all types of evil. Further to the north,

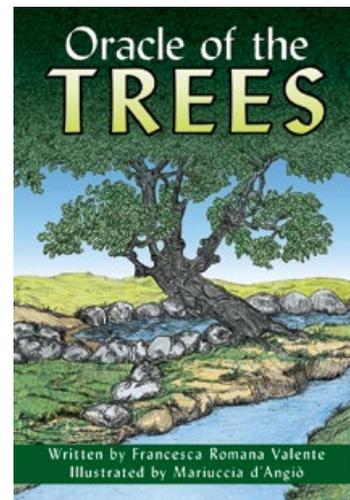
we encounter the Germanic tribes and the terrifying Vikings. For these peoples, the most sacred tree was the gigantic ash Yggdrasil, which held up the nine worlds of Nordic cosmology. Its roots were sunk into Niflheim, a frozen hell made of ice, while its branches extended up into Asgard, the realm of the esir gods. It is interesting to note how in Norse mythology, man and woman were created from trees.

On the other side of the world, the Maya civilization offers another very interesting example of a cosmic tree, quite similar to Yggdrasil—the Yaxche Tree. It was a ceiba tree, also called “cotton tree”, which was considered to be the backbone of the Mayan cosmos. Its roots burrowed down to the infernal pits, while the trunk supported the world of humans and the branches stretched up to paradise. Further north on the American continent, trees are still of central importance today to what remains of Native American populations, for whom nature itself is the principal divinity. At the heart of Native American spirituality, we find the Sacred Tree, which represents life, time, the changing of the seasons, and the connection between Heaven and Earth.

In this great panorama of tree cults, we cannot forget the African continent. Here, and especially in Benin, there are entire forests held to be sacred, where the trees are the residences of gods and spirits. Some of these forests serve as cemeteries for the notable people of various villages. Being buried in these holy places is a great privilege, since the soul of the deceased lives again in the sacred vegetation. But there is one African tree in particular that holds true primacy—the baobab. This great green giant is considered the most supreme sacred tree, and with good reason. Its fruit has medicinal uses that are still being studied today. Much richer in vitamin C than oranges are, the fruit of the baobab has anti-inflammatory, anti-tumoral, and anti-viral properties.

To conclude this survey of sacred trees from across the world, we cite two trees from the Far East, the peach tree and the so-called fan tree, or ginkgo. The first is practically considered a symbol of China itself, and is held to be the tree of immortality. It is associated with the goddess Hsi Wang Mu, the Queen Mother of the West, whose hair is adorned with ripe peaches that bestow eternal life. But only a fortunate few, chosen by the goddess herself, are allowed to eat them. The last tree we shall discuss is the ginkgo biloba, commonly called “the fan tree” due to its curiously shaped leaves. Indigenous to China and Japan, the tree has a very ancient and surprising history. The ginkgo, which was believed until the 17th century to be extinct, is the oldest surviving deciduous tree (a tree whose leaves fall). Fossils bearing the marks of its unmistakable leaves have permitted us to calculate that the ginkgo appeared on our planet some 250 million years ago. The ginkgo, symbolizing the harmony between Yin and Yang, was used principally as decoration in the gardens of Buddhist temples. One can still admire today a splendid garden that is roughly 800 years old at the temple of Zempukuji in Japan. The extraordinary resilience of the ginkgo is exemplified by six trees that survived the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. Since then, they have been a symbol of rebirth and hope for a better future.

Oracle of the Trees presents a global voyage among the sacred trees of numerous cults, cultures, past and present. This deck and book set expertly explores botanical wisdom from history, philosophy, myth, magic and spiritual traditions, revealing the profound role trees, real or imagined, have had in our lives. From these stories we learn how the tree can be understood as a bridge between humankind and the divine. Each tree's description includes botanical and historical information, symbology, keywords, meanings, and advice. Instructions are also given for divination. Oracle of the Trees helps us discover our destiny, by listening, as in the past, to what they are whispering to us. Set includes 32 cards and 156-page illustrated guidebook.



Oracle Of The Trees (32-card deck & 156-page guidebook)

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