

# **Book Review: The Tree at the Navel of the Earth**

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E. A. S. Butterworth: *The Tree at the Navel of the Earth*. Pp. xii+239; 31 pls. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970. Cloth, DM.68.

Pursuing a restricted, if important, theme over a wide field involves obvious perils, and they are well illustrated in the first chapter of this book. An attractive tale told by the modern Yakuts of Siberia is expounded in which the navel of the earth figures as well as the 'White Youth' (explained as the First Man), a big-breasted goddess, a mighty hill, and a great tree. Some of it resembles the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. It is established that the tree is the World Tree or the Tree of Life and that the hill is the World Mountain or Central Mountain; other Siberian tribes, who provide many parallels, speak of a central pillar. Similar concepts in the ancient world are then presented, and the danger is apparent that any sacred tree or indeed collection of trees can qualify as a Tree of Life. The Garden of Eden of course has an indubitable Tree of Life, although it may have a second tree. That Ogygia, Calypso's island, is similar in this respect is argued from the allusion to its being 'where the navel of the sea is' (*Od.* i. 50; Butterworth imprecisely identifies the island and the navel) and from the details (*Od.* v. 50 ff.) about a wood growing around her cave. This wood, although it contains several kinds of trees, is cheerfully identified *in toto* with the Tree of Life, since a similar thing happens in a story from Central Asia. Even the birds in the trees are equated with animals that move in the wood seen by the 'White Youth' in the Yakut story. (Why the Yakuts of modern Siberia should dictate the norm for much earlier mythic material is hard to understand; probably the presiding genius is phenomenology.)

The World Pillar is more plausibly associated with Atlas, though even here there is the embarrassing fact that the World Pillar is one central shaft whereas the pillars of Atlas are plural. The idea of a central pillar passing through the universe is also to be seen, we are told, in Plato, *Rep.* 616 b, where Er tells of a 'straight light, like a pillar' that stretched through the whole of heaven and earth. Now the pillar here is only in a simile; what Er saw was light, and it is then compared to a rainbow. Again, the Biblical Eve is smoothly equated with the Yakut goddess-in-the-tree, and by way of comparison an Egyptian painting is cited which shows Tuthmosis III being suckled by a breast which emerges from a tree. It should be pointed out that a multitude of sacred trees are attested for ancient Egypt.

The author is extremely well read and adduces a wealth of comparative material, some of which appears in the finely produced plates. Too often, however, he impresses one as a scholar relentlessly bent on finding what he wants to find. He cannot be blamed, perhaps, for finding the cult of the tree-omphalos-pillar in the Minoan-Mycenaean material studied by Arthur Evans; at least the interpretation offered by Evans himself was partly on these lines. But surely some of these trees are merely the sacred trees of sanctuaries. Evans sometimes ascribed the pillar to a solar cult, and he explained the disc with inner concentric circle on a Cretan seal (see here p. 22) as a representation of the sun. A similar sign appears on seals from Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria, and

Cyprus; and Butterworth, following Holmberg, wishes to explain it as the navel of the world. He admits (p. 90) that the sign occurs above the cone and head of Zeus-Ammon on an Alexandrian coin. There can be no question that A. B. Cook was right in explaining it as a solar disc; Egyptian cult is influential here, and a similar sign represents the sun in Egyptian hieroglyphs: see Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* 3, 485.

The author's ingenuity must certainly be admired in his attempt to relate the stela of Naram-Sin to ideas which he associates with the Dioscuri or with white and black shamans. For sheer speculative bravura it is hard to beat the interpretation of a scarab from Gaza (*c.* 1800 b.c.) as representing 'a group that practised something like Kundalini yoga and consisted of a master and twelve disciples'. Indian traditions are richly deployed throughout, and while the exposition is often instructive in itself, only vague suggestions are made as to possible historical connections with Western Asiatic material. One recalls Dumézil's thesis about the debt of Roman religion to an Indo-European matrix; Butterworth, however, is dealing mainly with non-Indo-European cultures.

A discussion of the Garden of Eden begins firmly and relevantly with the 'Tree of Life' and the 'tree of knowledge of good and evil', but the theme is soon abandoned for an analysis of the realization of nakedness on the part of Adam and Eve. Because shamans are often naked when they shamanize, the offence of Adam and Eve, it is argued, was they had 'cultivated a practice, at least akin to shamanising ...'. If this seems wildly improbable, one has at least been conditioned, by the end, to avoid an excess of astonishment when the Lotharkreuz at Aachen (*c.* a.d. 1000) is compared, initially, with the bronze plaque from the Psychro cave in Crete (Late Minoan I, *c.* 1500 b.c.). The parallel elements stressed are the tree, the dove, the sun, and the moon. On the Lotharkreuz the cross has a serpent figured round its base; clearly it is identified with Eden's Tree of Life. Butterworth is prepared to admit that changes in symbolism have occurred in the vast interim; thus, if the dove in Crete was 'originally the spirit of the tree', now it is 'the victorious spirit of the Christ'. Nor does he neglect entirely the artistic background that is closer in time and space. Yet this background demands fuller attention—a point which may be applied to much else in the book. For instance the sun and the moon were personified on crucifixes to denote the sorrowing creation: see the processional cross (a.d. xii) in Bonn reproduced in *Aus rheinischer Kunst und Kultur* (Landesmuseum, Bonn, 1963), fig. 106 and p. 137.

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