

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

John Pollard

1974

Butterworth (E. A. S.) **The tree at the navel of the earth.** Berlin: de Gruyter. 1970. Pp. xii + 239. 31 Plates. Price not stated.

*Ex oriente lux.* This book inevitably invites comparison with Professor E. O. James' *The Tree of Life*. But whereas the latter is archaeological and objective the present work attempts to reveal the inner symbolism of the Tree. Those familiar with the kind of arguments advanced in the author's *Some Traces of the Pre-Olympian World in Greek Literature and Myth* will be prepared for the ingenious conclusions, based for the most part on subjective interpretations of highly controversial evidence, which distinguished that work. It did, however, deal, for the most part, with familiar ground. In the volume under review, which patently owes much to Mircea Eliade's *Toga* and *Chamanisme*, the range is so vastly extended that to do it full justice would require a specialist knowledge of oriental religions and in particular Buddhism. Nevertheless it is still possible for the general reader to follow with interest, if sometimes incredulity, the curious ramifications of the material assembled by B in his efforts to demonstrate the existence of mystical conceptions and practices connected with Shamanism and Yoga in Akkadian art of the third millennium b.g. and their survival in the classical and Christian eras.

For B the key symbol is the Tree of Life and the mountain (or mountains) with which it was associated situated at the navel of the earth. The evidence, for the most part oriental and Asiatic, is linked by B with the tree and pillar cult attested by Evans for Minoan Crete. Nilsson's doubts are dispelled on the authority of three Spartan reliefs of the first century B.C.—a type of chronological telescoping familiar to readers of A. B. Cook's *Zeus*, which is constantly quoted with approval.

The book is divided into eight chapters, of which the first deals with the Mountain, Pillar and Tree in Siberian, Hebraic and Homeric mythology, while the second considers the central symbols in the Mediterranean and beyond. B is much concerned with the *omphalos* which proves to be purely locative in conception and not specifically located. The chapter ends with a startling analysis, in the light of supposed Akkadian evidence, of the familiar Laconian vase painting of Atlas and Prometheus.

The third chapter introduces the further complication of the twin mountain symbolising the entrance and exit of the underworld described in the myth of Er. The kind of example which B instances in support of the survival of this symbolism is the Attic vase (*JHS*, XIX, 1892-3, E. Sellers) where two Sirens perched on twin cliffs serenade Odysseus bound to a pillar. The stars again associated with the Dioscuri (or rather Dioscurus, who turns out to be a shaman) are of the same mystic nature as those figured on the Akkadian seals.

What was the sin of Adam and Eve? The fourth chapter suggests that it was adopting the naked condition of the shaman and so attaining to knowledge independently of God. The serpent is a familiar Yoga symbol while Eve is in essence 'the deity that inhabits the Tree'.

The fifth chapter surveys the symbol of the lunar crescent which proves to be a vessel in which adepts attain to Nirvana. Heracles voyage in the bowl of Helios is quoted as an example.

The sixth chapter is mainly devoted to the thunderbolt, a pre-Olympian symbol of polarity and shamanistic power whose *motif* is the lotus. The chapter concludes with the arresting claim that the Zeus of Crete once held the *Bindu* (of the Yogi) in his hands.

The epic of Gilgamesh, perhaps inevitably, makes an appearance in chapter seven and is reinterpreted in shamanistic terms.

Further indications of the existence of Yoga in Asia and the eastern Mediterranean are noted in chapter eight, despite the seeming contradiction of the existence of a Babylonian pantheon.

The reader will doubtless feel more at home in the following chapter, which connects Akkadia with the Odyssey, but may be disconcerted to learn that the Cyclops' eye is 'the *Ajna-cakra* of a form of yoga! The Cyclops is, of course, a yogi and No-man is mocking at Zen-Buddhism!

The penultimate chapter discusses the secret channels through which the shaman operated. Mycenaean monuments, Prometheus and the Tower of Kronos are all reinterpreted in the light of oriental mysticism. 'Shamanism and yoga' we learn, 'are not the same', though the reader may be forgiven for becoming a little confused.

B closes with an examination of the Crucifixion on the Lotharkreuz at Aachen whose symbolism he is convinced descends from the Tree of Life.

This is a work of impressive erudition beautifully illustrated and printed. However unorthodox the author's claims it is impossible not to be moved by his remarkable industry and infectious enthusiasm while the awful doubt remains—suppose after all there is something in it!

'pupulate' should read 'populate' on p. 56.

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The Journal of Hellenic Studies, Vol. 94, pp. 214–215.

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