

HEILIGE BÄUME



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THIS MONOGRAPH EVOLVED FROM A MASTER'S THESIS, submitted in 2019 in Ancient History at the University of Göttingen. The text (120 pages) and the endnotes (70 pages) are followed by the bibliography, a useful general index, one map and a short abstract.

The introduction (chapter 1, pp. 9-23) defines the subject and its treatment in scholarship. The author (MZ) studies trees that are “*von Bedeutung*” (which can mean of relevance, significance, importance) in religious contexts (cult and myth). Which functions did they have and which relevance was ascribed to them? The focus is on cases that are best attested for the Greek mainland, including islands (and exam-

ples in Asia Minor), from Archaic through Hellenistic times. The study is based on literary sources, with epigraphical ones added when relevant. Images are considered selectively. Archaeological remains are scarce; the trees studied do not exist anymore.

The term “sacred tree” emerged in 19th century scholarship which was obsessed with “nature” as a primordial principle of religious thought. Divinities were thought to have been derived from natural phenomena, venerated in nature and next to natural landmarks, including trees.¹ Edward B. Tylor’s concept of animism and fetishism and James G. Frazer’s belief that religion originated with fertility cults were highly influential.² Greek sacred trees were thought to have been the seat of divine power or spirit.³ Animistic approaches have long been abandoned in studies of Greek religion. However, as MZ argues, ancient evidence for specific sacred trees (qualified as *hieros*) calls for a nuanced study of the phenomenon.

Chapter 2 (pp. 25-37) discusses trees in groves. An *alsos* (grove) was an area characterized by its vegetation, connected to (or defined as) a sacred area. An *alsos* provided the visitors of sanctuaries with shade and a pleasant atmosphere (in Hellenistic times, a sepulchral area could qualify as a grove, too). Groves may have been chosen or created by the cult recipients themselves, and they were protected by them, as demonstrated by Callimachus (Hymn 6: Demeter appears and punishes Erysichthon who felled a tree in her “beautiful” grove in Dotion, Thessaly) and Herodotus VI 75 (grove of Argos), and by *leges sacrae*. Some activities reported for groves remain obscure (e.g., the fate of chariots in Poseidon’s grove in Onchestos, mentioned in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo).

Groves were sacred because they belonged to the owner of the sanctuary. MZ asks whether there was anything else to convey their sacredness. Were nymphs supposed to live in the trees, were trees thought *to be* nymphs? The tree about to be felled by Erysichthon in Dotion yelled; Ovid has a nymph living in the tree and speaking. Nymphs can visualize springs or trees since Homeric times, and they can live together with trees (Homeric hymn to Aphrodite). Their existence can be linked to trees, but as anthropomorphic figures with speech they are different from trees. MZ adds that there were no attested cults for nymphs of trees.

Chapter 3 (pp. 39-78) investigates single trees in sanctuaries, focusing on four examples: Zeus’s oak tree in Dodona, Athena’s olive tree on the Acropolis in Athens, the *kótinós* in Olympia, and a tree on Delos.

1. See Bötticher, 1856.

2. Tylor, 1871; Frazer, 1890.

3. Mannhardt, 1877.

The oak tree in Dodona (pp. 39-57) is mentioned in the *Odyssey* as the seat of Zeus's oracle.⁴ There are, however, divergent traditions regarding the oracle; doves or priestesses are also attested as a medium. MZ emphasizes that Homer (as well as Aeschylus and Sophocles) insist on a speaking oak tree (without priests as interpreters); later sources might have maintained this Homeric tradition (because this was how the Greeks wanted to imagine the origin of the oracle). The sources do not give clear information about the practice of the oracle in the Classical and Hellenistic periods. However, there is one lead tablet (of the many ones that contain questions to the oracle, dating from late 6th cent. to late 2nd century BCE) that mentions the oak tree (in the early 4th cent.), and coins of ca. 300 BCE with an image of the tree attest to its function as a distinctive marker of the sanctuary.

One cannot expect a master's thesis in ancient history to engage with the subtleties of archaeological research and debate, but MZ's comment on the reconstruction of the various phases of the sanctuary as hypothetical and the location of the tree as "*unsicher*" (uncertain) might be misleading. Is there a plausible alternative to the location suggested by the excavator Sotiris I. Dakaris,⁵ widely accepted by scholarship?

When the god "speaks" by the tree, what does this say about the tree and its "agency" (p. 39)? Apparently MZ is not sure whether the tree is a representative of Zeus or his occasional seat, and she oscillates throughout the text between the "talented oak tree" and its function as a medium. She looks for other cases of trees sacred to Zeus or trees in which divinities may house (but I think one should separate these examples from the unique case of an oracular tree). In the end, MZ sees its function as a medium as a hypothetical possibility. As she is right to point out, the tree is not linked to the god in a way it might be to a nymph. It seems not even to have been originally linked to Zeus (as a scholion to the *Odyssey* suggests). The oak tree gets its "*Bedeutung*" (relevance, importance, significance) through the association with Zeus; in MZ's words: "*erst dadurch wird dem Baum 'agency' zugesprochen*" (p. 56). No, the tree might be speaking, but it is not its agency; it is the god who speaks, with the tree as the medium (and the tree has no independent message). If a god takes the shape of a hero's companion or of a swan or of rain, it is not the companion's or the swan's or the rain's agency, it is the divinity's agency, and the divinity is acting in disguise.

The olive tree was Athena's gift to the Athenians (pp. 58-64). MZ starts with Apollodorus who says that Athena was "the first to plant the olive tree", in the context

4. For Dodona and its oracle, see now Chapinal-Heras, 2021.

5. See Dakaris, 1963, pp. 35-49 (with reconstructions).

of the strife between Athena and Poseidon for Attica. This myth is not attested before the mid-5th cent. BCE.⁶ Athena's olive tree on the Acropolis, however, was thought to be one of the most ancient trees in the Greek world (sources in n. 312). The Epidaurians asked for Athenian olive trees as material for statues of two goddesses because these trees were either the only ones existing at that time or the most sacred ones (Hdt., V 82; reference for a 7th-6th cent. date in n. 332).

Numerous sources attest to the importance of the olive tree for Athens.⁷ Athena's tree, situated in the Pandroseion next to the Erechtheion, was said to have been burnt by the Persians in 480 BCE but to have budded the next day, and this was taken as a demonstration of Athena's continuous presence and care and of the continuation of Athenian life and cult, as MZ points out. I also agree that it is not necessary to assume the existence of one everlasting plant. Although physically replaced from time to time, the tree symbolically remained the same one. It is not attested to have had a function in cult practice. .

The wild olive tree (*kótinós*) in Olympia (pp. 65-69) was introduced by Herakles, in order to provide crowns for the winners (Pindar) – a tradition that pushes the origin of the games back to mythical times. The *kótinós* is among the oldest trees mentioned by Theophrastus. MZ assumes a possible reference to Athens and its cultivated olive, with the Olympian wild olive as a deliberate counterpart (and, according to one source, it derived from a tree in the Ilissos area of Athens). MZ doubts whether the *kótinós* can be exactly located (but Paus., V 15, 3 saw it behind the temple of Zeus, that is, west of it!). The relationship of this *kótinós* to the attested grove in the sanctuary remains unclear (since Hellenistic times, the crowns were taken from only one tree). The tree apparently served no cultic function.

The games in Olympia were the oldest Panhellenic ones, and those introduced later in Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea likewise awarded crowns made of plants. In Isthmia, the crowns were also taken from the leaves of trees in a sacred grove (of pine trees).

A tree on Delos (pp. 70-78) was thought to have supported Leto when she arrived on the island to give birth to Apollo and Artemis. Was it a palm tree (Homeric hymn to Apollo) or an olive tree (Callimachus) or an olive tree associated with a palm tree and a laurel tree (Euripides)? A palm tree is commonly associated with Apollo, and a palm tree on Delos was listed by Theophrastus among the oldest trees. The winners of the games on Delos were crowned with palm branches, a custom introduced by

6. For a discussion of the relevant sources see Meyer, 2018.

7. This subchapter might have profited from a consultation of the reviewer's monograph: Meyer, 2017, pp. 38-41, 69-70, 295-299, 395-415 (on the olive tree and the strife of Athena and Poseidon).

Theseus (Pausanias). MZ assumes that the olive tree, Athens' sacred plant, was added to the older tradition at the time of Athens' dominant position in the Delian League.

MZ takes Callimachus's statement about the stump or trunk of the olive tree being "guarded" by the Delians as a starting point for reflections on the fate of the physical trees. She is – with good reason – skeptical whether decayed trees were preserved as sacred relics (but ponders the idea that such an interest might have emerged in Hellenistic times). The existence of sacred trees in Roman Imperial times presupposes cases of replacements, as MZ reminds us. She cites the case of a tree felled in a sanctuary and subsequently dedicated as a clue for a possible interest in preserving the material remains of sacred trees.

Sacred trees in sanctuaries often were, as MZ convincingly argues, connected to a divinity or a hero and as such reminders of a distant past, evidence for a long tradition of the sanctuary. They were not sacred because of their material quality, but because of their symbolic value. They were neither objects of cults nor included in cult practices.

Chapter 4 (pp. 79-115) discusses individual trees outside sanctuaries.

Such trees were not the property of cult recipients but might be part of their myths (as they are seen, treated or planted by gods or heroes) and might thus serve as links of the location to a figure of the remote past (and MZ is right to point out that this is not a late phenomenon, of Hellenistic and Roman Imperial times). As examples, MZ lists the plane tree in Gortyn that marked the spot of Zeus's union with Europa and the Lygos tree on Samos that was Hera's birthplace (and, according to Pausanias, the oldest tree). By including this tree (which had been given much attention by the excavator Ernst Buschor) in this chapter MZ implies that the Lygos tree stood outside the sanctuary, but is it plausible to assume that Hera's sanctuary did not comprise Hera's tree? (cf. Paus., VII 4, 4: near the Imbrasos river).

The relevance and function of individual "sacred" trees in the context of cult is usually not specified by the sources. An example of a tree that got local attention beyond the myth is the myrtle tree in Boiai (chosen by Artemis as the location for the foundation of the city and subsequently venerated).

Prominent examples for trees of relevance in cult are the Athenian *moriai*, sacred trees that provided the oil for the prizes at the Panathenaia, Athens' main festival for the city goddess. According to late sources (Photios, Suda), the *moriai* in the Academy were used for the prize oil. However, as Lysias's 7th speech (shortly after 397 BCE) and a passage in the *Athenaion politeia* (see below) reveal, *moriai* also grew next to other olive trees (that were not sacred) on private ground – and they were protected not just by divine powers (Athena and Zeus Morios), but also by Athenian law. MZ convincingly concludes that the sacredness of the *moriai* was defined by function, not by location or ownership. Both sources raise further questions that MZ

prefers to leave open. Was the dissemination of the *moriai* (from the Academy to more sites in Attica) a gradual process?⁸ Was the *sekos* referred to in Lysias's speech a tree stump or an enclosure? Did the change in the practice of recruiting the prize oil, as attested in the *Athenaion politeia* (formerly by private leaseholders, later by the archon, collected as a tax on the estate and not from individual trees) mark a decrease of relevance of the *moriai*? And might the tradition that the *moriai* were descendants of Athena's sacred tree on the Acropolis (a belief not attested until Hellenistic times, as MZ emphasizes) be a late construction in order to compensate for their decreased relevance? I prefer to think that the *moriai* had always been believed to be descendants of Athena's gift. The *Athenaion politeia* furthermore states that formerly anybody who dug up a *moria* or fell one was tried by the Areopagos and, if convicted, punished with death; later, the law remained in force, but there were no trials. MZ interprets the severe punishment at the time of Lysias's speech with the experience of the damage done to the Attic countryside at the time of the Peloponnesian war.⁹ Curiously, she does not discuss the date of the changes attested in the *Athenaion politeia*, convincingly based on the first appearance of the archon's names on the prize amphorai in 392/391 BCE.¹⁰

Is there any evidence for a "*Baumkult*" (trees as object of cult), as assumed in the 19th century? MZ analyzes the practice described in Theocritus' poem of the marriage of Helen and Menelaos, with a chorus of girls singing about a plane tree with an inscription that calls for the veneration of the tree as a plant of Helen. MZ (who considers the passage to be the poet's fiction, n. 611) concludes that hanging ribbons on trees is no proof of cult practice concerning the tree but part of the cult for a divine being; the plane tree has to be considered as the tree of a heroine (Helen).

Was *Baumkult* practiced in order to evoke the epiphany of a divinity? As there is evidence for cult images made of sacred trees, MZ discusses the relationship of such images to the respective tree. Trees could remind of the wood a cult image was made of, but they did not become sacred nor could a living tree serve as a kind of an aniconic cult image. MZ compares the tradition of "sacred stones" and natural phenomena as objects of cult. Convincingly, she aligns sacred trees to sacred mountains.

8. For the *moriai* as the providers of the prize oil see Bentz, 1998, pp. 23-40. For the enormous quantities of oil required for the amount of prizes given in the early 4th cent. BCE, see Papazarkadas, 2011, pp. 271-275 (Papazarkadas's book is listed in MZ's bibliography).

9. *Contra* Papazarkadas, 2011, pp. 267-268.

10. See Bentz, 1998, pp. 23-27 and Papazarkadas, 2011, p. 267. The most comprehensive study of the phenomenon of the *moriai* remains Papazarkadas, 2011, pp. 260-284 (consulted by MZ). On the collection and use of the prize oil see Valavanis, 2014.

The sacredness of a mountain depends on its connection to a divinity as whose seat it serves. Rivers, on the other hand, are venerated in their own right – and in anthropomorphic shape, as personifications. This is revealing: Wouldn't the cult of a tree presuppose the personification of such a tree, as a female figure, a nymph?

Chapter 5 (pp. 117-120) summarizes the results. Sacred trees are a complex phenomenon. Their location is a decisive criterion for their function and "Bedeutung". They generally owe their sacredness to a connection with a cult recipient (and this is true for Zeus's oracular oak tree, too), and, as property of a divine being, they were not allowed to be felled. Holy groves contribute to the atmosphere of a sanctuary. Individual trees often serve as reminders of the connection to a mythical figure and thereby link the location to the remote past and a long tradition. Sacred trees could be used for specific purposes (crowns for the winners in Olympia, olive oil for the winners in Athens).

Sacred trees might be involved in cult ritual but, contrary to assumptions by earlier scholarship, they were not the object of cult (and the idea of nymphs living in trees has turned out to be of minor relevance for the sacredness of trees).

MZ has chosen a complex topic. The evidence for sacred trees is of diverse nature and usefulness, scattered over centuries, and often ambiguous. In numerous cases, the evidence raises more questions than it can answer, and MZ cannot be blamed for the fact that much remains elusive. I do see, however, a certain reluctance to take decisions in matters that are controversially discussed and a tendency to leave questions open. Is it really that hard to arrive at a conclusion about the meaning of *sekos* in Lysias's speech? How could a *moria* be distinguished from other trees nearby if not by some kind of enclosure?

MZ has consulted a vast number of authors, and she is eager to demonstrate this in abundant endnotes. These are the main place for her comments on the approaches and arguments by previous scholarship. Not all of the endnotes contribute substantially to the discussed topic. MZ's concentration on literary sources is fully legitimate for a master's thesis in ancient history, but she would have been well advised to consult at least some standard studies in archaeology (e.g., Bentz 1998 on the Panathenaic Amphorai and their olive oil).

Her text would have profited from an attempt to achieve more consistency and – above all – clarity. It is not at all easy to follow MZ's arguments and interpretation. She tends to present long, convoluted sentences with idiosyncratic syntax and phrasing. Even a native speaker has a hard time understanding what she intends to say.

With this book, MZ presents a survey of a multifaceted phenomenon of Greek culture that has been difficult to grasp in its diversity and ambiguity. She has focused

on the most relevant examples, discussed the pertinent evidence and scholarship, and, hopefully, once for all closed the debate about the worship of trees.

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