

# Oracle of the **TREES**

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Dedicated to those who believe in the magic of nature.

Blessed be.



# ORACLE OF THE TREES

# Introduction



If today, we were to ask a number of people of various nationalities, culture and religions, “What is a tree?”, we would probably receive similar, possibly even identical, answers. They would tell us that a tree is a large plant with roots, a wood trunk of some height, branches, and leaves. The dictionary defines a tree as, “a perennial plant with a branched wooden stem.” In reality, a tree presents itself to our eyes with these simple characteristics, distinguishing it from other types of plants. For many people, trees are just a part of the scenery to which we rarely pay much attention. When a tree is at the center of attention, it is usually because of unfortunate, though ever more frequent events: summer fires that destroy forests, trees felled during violent storms, parasites that kill these centuries-old sentinels.

But what is a tree really? What does it represent? The botanical sciences can help us describe, with great precision, the elemental aspects of trees, the chemical exchanges that take place between their roots and the earth, or between their leaves and the light of the sun. They explain in detail the miracle of photosynthesis, which nourishes the trees with carbon dioxide, and then provides us with oxygen. Science can explain to us how a tree functions as a living organism, as a complex mechanism, and as part of a specific ecosystem.

But a tree is much more than a series of functions. It is a being with its own life. A tree, like a human, is born from a tiny seed: it grows, it lives, it reproduces, and it dies. Its life is often much longer than that of a human, reminding us that the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires, of religions, dogmas, wars, and the conquests of man are but fleeting moments compared to the persistence of nature, relentlessly following its course. A visitor meandering through an archeological site surrounded by nature, like Villa Adriana in Tivoli, Italy, is met by a surprising contrast. What man constructed centuries ago now lies in ruins, while nature's majestic trees continue to triumphantly stretch their branches toward the heavens.

A tree is a witness of time, of the fragility of humans and their work, but it is also much more. A tree is a powerful symbol, established since the beginning of time, and as such is instilled with religious, mystical, and philosophical significance, and sometimes even magical power.

It is not surprising that in the past, trees were invested with sacred meaning. 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 man 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. According to the Bible, Adam, because of his sin, was banished from the Garden of Eden and could no longer eat the fruit of the Tree of Life, thus becoming mortal. But according to the Revelation of John, such a tree would be reborn in the Heavenly Jerusalem, and the righteous would once again be able to partake 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 mortals and gods. Certain trees became the centers of oracular cults, as happened in the case of the celebrated 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 trees' leaves.

Many peoples, even those separated by great distances, like 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 also symbolizes the bond between past, present, and future, or between the various generations of a family, as shown on a genealogical tree. The very leaves of the tree, falling, then growing once again, represent the transitory nature of human life, the eternal cycle of life and death. This is reflected in Islamic tradition by the Angel of Death, emblematically waiting for the leaves to fall from the Tree of the Deceased. On each leaf is written the name of a person to then be called to death.

This darker aspect notwithstanding, 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. We will talk more about this ahead.

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. With their colored lights, these trees stand as luminescent beacons on cold winter nights, a promise that spring will come soon, bringing light and warmth.

As a final note, if all of this is not enough to explain why the tree, of all the natural elements, was destined to become a universal sacred symbol, we can state one final quality 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 (Daphne, Cyparissus, or Ampelos), or of the amadriads, beautiful creatures who lived in the trees. The Celts knew it, attributing human per-

sonality 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 human, 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 *figus religiosa*, that Buddha received his illumination.

The Oracle of the Trees presents a voyage among the sacred trees of various cultures, with their symbology and their history, as a means of understanding what still binds us to them, and how they can help us discover our destiny, by listening to what they are whispering to us.

# A History Made of Trees



Real or imaginary trees have always 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 pieces 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.

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 about 160 feet 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, but also of power. It was,

in fact, thanks to the wood of this tree that the Phoenicians were able to construct their celebrated ships, a determining factor in their great commercial success. The same wood was also used by the Jews to build their most sacred structure, the Temple of Solomon. In the Bible (I Kings 6:1-38), it is written that the walls of the temple were faced with cut cedar, while part of the structure itself was built with great beams of cedar, which were considered eternal.

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 emanations, or the 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.

The Tree of Life has notable importance in Christianity as well. According to tradition, its wood was used to make the cross of Christ. An instrument of torture and death thus becomes for Christians a new Tree of Life, with the power to give eternal life to those who take up their own crosses and follow Jesus.

Returning once again to pagan tradition, trees in Ancient Greece often had key roles in various myths of metamorphosis, as with the nymph Daphne, who transformed into a laurel tree to escape the amorous advances of the god Apollo. Young Cyparissus became a cypress so he could

spend all eternity mourning the death of his beloved stag. Ampelus, the lover of Dionysus, was immortalized as a vine.

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. Woods and forests, as with fields and nature in general, were consecrated to two very ancient divinities, Silvanus and Faunus, who were in fact quite similar. The first was usually shown with a long beard and a full head of hair, wearing a crown of pine needles and holding a pitchfork. Faunus was typically represented with hooves and goat horns, similar to the Greek Pan, whose animalistic traits were later associated with the devil.

But the ancient civilization that attributed the most central role to the cult of trees was absolutely 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 shown 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.

As mentioned above, 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 Æsir gods.

It is interesting to note how in Norse mythology, man and woman were created from trees. Odin was walking one day with his two brothers, Vili and Vé, when they came upon two trunks. They decided to give them human shape, soul, and intellect, thus forming the first man and woman. Since they were created from an ash and an elm, the gods gave them the names Askr (ash) and Embla (elm).

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 men and the branches stretched up to paradise. For the Mayans, another fundamental tree was the cacao. It is generally acknowledged that chocolate was invented by the Mayans, who used to grind the seeds to use in an infusion reserved for the nobility and the priesthood, called “the

beverage of the gods.” This is why the Swedish botanist Linneus called the plant *Theobroma cacao*. (*Theobroma* in Greek literally means “beverage of the gods.”)

Moving 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 Australia, we encounter an Aboriginal legend that reflects remarkable similarities to the biblical story of original sin. In this tradition, Baiame, god of the heavens, created the first man and woman. He forbade them two things: damaging the eucalyptus tree marked by him and eating the honey from the hive nearby. But the woman broke off some branches from the eucalyptus tree to make a fire, and she took some honey from the hive to eat. These actions released Narahdarn, the bat who served as the custodian of the tree and who, from that day on, brought death to men.

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 shall 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 seventeenth 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.

We have now reached the end of this journey. It has taken



us to every continent on the globe, tracking down trees and the divinities that inhabited them, and perhaps still do.

We are ready now to begin another journey, to the discovery of the Oracle of the Trees. In the first part of this book, you will find information relative to the rituals for purifying and consecrating the deck. Following that is a detailed study of each card, complete with historical, symbolic, and botanical information regarding the corresponding tree.

Let us embark on this path in the hope that each of us may find joy and inspiration in his or her favorite trees.

# The Oracle of the Trees



## PREPARING THE CARDS

In this part of the guidebook, we present two rituals to perform before beginning a reading with this new deck. We start with purifying the deck, a very simple but important ritual designed to rid the cards of any outside energy. Once this ritual is complete, we will move on to the consecration. This slightly more complex ritual is fundamental for the proper functioning of the cards, which will thus be charged with positive energy and will benefit from the protection of the spirits of nature, in this case the trees, whose blessing we will invoke.

These two rituals will create a strong bond between us and the deck, which will thus become our own personal companion in future divinations. At the end of these procedures, which we can also use with other decks or divinatory instruments, we will be ready to immerse ourselves in the study of each individual card.

### Purifying the Cards

One might ask why it is necessary to purify a deck that is still new and untouched. It should be kept in mind, though, that the cards themselves, as divinatory instruments, easily absorb energy, positive or negative, not only from people, but also from the surrounding environment. This is why,

even with a new deck, it is always best to see to eliminating all undesired energy the cards may have come into contact with, even before we acquired them.

Even after we have begun to use the deck, it is a good idea to repeat the ritual of purification of the deck every so often, in order to restore balance and harmony.

### **Basic items needed:**

- Incense (For this particular deck, I suggest natural arbor-based incense, such as frankincense, derived from the *Boswellia* tree, or pine resin-based incense.)
- A white candle
- Coarse salt
- A laurel (bay) leaf (Sacred to Apollo, it favors intuition and the development of psychic ability.)
- A bit of cloth (smooth, like satin, is best), at least 50 cm x 50 cm (20 x 20 inches). I recommend using cloth of a single tone, with no pattern or design that could break concentration. The cards, rich with symbol and detail, should seem to jump off the cloth. This same cloth will also serve to wrap the cards when we are ready to put them away. The color can be chosen according to personal taste, or to coordinate with the decoration on the back of the cards, or based on the colors associated with the signs of the zodiac. Especially appropriate are colors that reflect natural elements, such as yellow and orange, which remind us of the sun, or white, like snow and clouds, or the blue of the sky and the sea, etc.

Those who wish to further personalize their deck might also add a stone, because of its particular properties, or that corresponds to one's own zodiacal sign, or represents a certain chakra. Any stone can be useful, but for rituals of purification, rock crystals and tourmaline are especially effective. The stone can be placed on the table near the cards while the ritual is being performed. Once completed, the stone should be placed back into the receptacle where the cards will be stored. This can be kept nearby while readings are given.

## Grounding and Centering

Before beginning the ritual itself, those who wish to might dedicate a few minutes to a brief meditation, as often employed in various disciplines and religions, such as yoga and Wicca.

By "grounding," we mean a form of creative meditation that can bring the practitioner, through particular visualizations, to a true reconnection with nature. By this process, Mother Earth recharges us with the energy needed to perform magical rituals or to read the cards. "Centering" is a focusing of our energy, both physical and psychic. This is accomplished by exercises of deep breathing, concentrating on our breathing, being completely present in the here and now, and thus avoiding the distraction of wandering thoughts.

To begin, sit comfortably with your feet firmly planted on the floor. This meditation can be done at home, or perhaps in a garden, with your back against the trunk of a tree to which you feel particularly drawn. Close your