

ELVYRA USAČIOVAITE

THE SYMBOL OF THE TREE OF LIFE RESULTING FROM THE INTERFACE OF EASTERN AND WESTERN CULTURES

This article aims to explore the development of an idea at the crossroads of Eastern and Western cultures. The goal is to reveal the genesis of the symbol of the Tree of Life through discussion of modifications of form and meaning from ancient times, i.e. the civilisations of the Old World, following its manifestations in Christianity of Western Europe, to Lithuanian rural culture of the 19th – first half of the 20th centuries.

Since long ago, various nations around the world have worshipped trees. Due to a tree's strength, longevity, and height; because a tree grows as though it were aiming to reach the sky (by day its top is seen as being close to the sun, whereas by night – close to the moon, surrounded by stars); because its roots delve deep into the earth, trees were viewed as a link between the sky and the earth: unifying different worlds and cosmic spheres. Also due to its periodic renewal, when it revives after being leafless for a period of time (comes into leaf, blooms, ripens fruits), it was regarded as a symbol of regeneration.

The term "Tree of Life" has its roots in the Ancient East. It was recorded many thousands years before Christ in the Ancient World, namely in literature of Sumerians, Babylon, Egypt, Syria and Palestine. In this context its meaning was mythic and religious, that is why it is also referred to as the Holy Tree.

According to the Babylonian myth of Gilgamesh, the Tree of Life grows in the sky near the Eastern gate. It was called the Tree of Life because it grants eternal life to the gods. One can become immortal just by eating the fruits of this tree. However, this privilege is only for the gods, ordinary people do not have access to this tree¹.

References to the Tree of Life have survived not only in literature. The civilisations of Ancient Mesopotamia and elsewhere left images of the tree which are of a typical, well-known form, whereby a stylised Tree of Life occupies a central place between two or more figures facing it. These symmetrical figures represent gods, rulers or winged demons resembling griffins². The exclusive placing of the tree, i.e. in the centre, manifests its sacral character, indicating its role as a cult object. The symmetrical creatures meet each other near the Tree of Life; they look after and adore the tree. When one of these creatures is a deity and the other is a human, then the former grants vital powers to the latter, which can be seen manifested in the symbol of eternity which the man holds in his hand – a handled cross that is well-known in Egyptian culture by the name "ank"³. In some versions, creatures make sacrifices to the tree, with acts of pouring – libations⁴.

The most archaic illustrations of this kind survived in seals wherein the composition of the Tree of Life was carved in the hard stone, often in a gemstone which was usually of a cylindrical shape⁵. It was stamped onto documents with a rotating movement. At that time in Mesopotamia people wrote on clay tablets; and images were imprinted well. More examples of carving or engraving this symbol have been discovered than cylindrical seals. In fact, cylindrical stone seals used to be carried by hanging them around the neck or affixing them to the hand as an ornament, signifying high social status.

Representations of the Tree of Life were widespread in many eastern nations. It could even be observed in the Persian and Arabic world, where it was used to ornament textiles. The motif had a magic apotropaic meaning⁶. Researchers maintain that such ornaments emerged in the time of the Crusades. They were introduced by crusaders who had travelled to Jerusalem in order to redeem Christ's grave. They brought with them fabrics decorated with foliate designs in which they wrapped various relics stolen from indigenous temples⁷. Another way this symbol was introduced was through trade between eastern and western countries, and the third way was by Christianity spreading in Europe in the first years after the birth of Christ.

Due to the origin of Christianity being found in Ancient Palestine, it is worth exploring the symbolism of the Tree of Life in Jewish culture. The most prominent symbol of this kind is the menorah (in Hebrew – a seven branched candelabrum). This is a sacral object known from ancient times, which purportedly even accompanied Jews travelling through the Desert of Sinai from

Egypt to the Promised Land. At those times a menorah used to be put in a tent during prayers⁸. Later on the concept became inseparable from that of the Jerusalem temple, which, having been destroyed by the Romans, was symbolized by a menorah. During the times of Babylonian slavery the menorah was a symbol of hope. However, all of these are just secondary meanings of the menorah.

In its primary sense, the foot or base of a menorah symbolises the Tree of Life; the stem – the axis of the world. On the other hand, according to historian Joseph Flavius, branches of the menorah ending in candles symbolize the Sun, the Moon and planets, i.e. seven archangels in front of the throne of the God: Michael (the Sun), Gabriel (the Moon), Raphael (Mercury), Uriel (Venus), Raguel (Mars), Sariel (Jupiter) and Remiel (Saturn); they also symbolize seven days of a week, the seven worldly powers etc. In a temple, the wax candles of the menorah honoured Yahweh, while their light represented the closeness of god in the darkness of chaos⁹.

Other forms of the Tree of Life are also prominent in Jewish culture. This is demonstrated in the Old Testament. In the Book of Proverbs the notion of the Tree of Life is used figuratively. It metaphorically refers to wisdom. For example, one is said to be fortunate when he finds wisdom, as it is the Tree of Life (Book of Proverbs 3:18) Or: the right behaviour leads to the Tree of Life as opposed to violence, which leads one towards death (Book of Proverbs 11:30). Also, the Tree of Life names a reasonable speech (Book of Proverbs 15:4).

In addition, according to the Bible, the history of mankind stems from the Tree of Life. It should also be noted that nowadays the Bible is attributable not only to Jewish culture, but through Christianity it has become the heritage of the whole of Europe (and the world as well).

As is described in the legendary episode of the Bible, that having created the world, God planted various trees in the East and laid out the Garden of Eden, into which he placed a man, who used the garden to get food and who was charged to take care of the garden. The emphasis of the story is put on two trees growing in the garden, one of which is called the Tree of Life. (Older Lithuanian publications of the Bible refer to it differently: *gyvasties medis*, *medis givatos*, *medis gyvenimo*¹⁰.) Another tree in paradise was that of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God prohibited man from picking and eating fruits from the latter tree because otherwise they would die. However, the

first people did not obey and were therefore expelled from Paradise, losing their immortality.

In European art this story was often depicted by the figures of Adam and Eve standing on each side of the tree, in which the serpent was entwined. Such a composition can be found in Lithuanian folk art. Usually all of them refer to erotic temptation, but the meaning of the biblical Tree of Knowledge is much wider. Famous Russian clergyman Aleksander Men, an expert on eastern cultures and the Bible, interprets this episode of the Old Testament related to metaphorical sayings that are characteristic of the Bible. He maintains that although there are sensual interpretations of the word "jada", the Hebrew word for knowledge, such as *to feel, to experience, to communicate, to overtake* (that gave the aforementioned meaning of temptation¹¹), he draws attention to the name of the Tree of Knowledge, noting that it is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; whereas the Jewish phraseological unit 'good and evil' means 'everything'. Thus the first human's wilful eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge should be interpreted symbolically as the world being overtaken by the people who ignore the word of the God, which inevitably brings ill effects.

In this biblical story, another symbol is presented alongside with the Tree of Knowledge: the symbol of the Tree of Life. Having expelled the first people from Paradise, God put his angel with a flaming sword east of the Garden of Eden, to prevent people from coming close to the tree, picking its fruits and thereby becoming immortal: from communicating with the God. Thus in this case, the Tree of Life represents eternal life. The meaning of the Tree of Life is very close to the aforementioned Mesopotamian images of this tree. According to researchers, the previously discussed symbols of the Holy Writ are based on Babylonian legends; additionally, biblical Paradise is located in Mesopotamia which is represented by four rivers mentioned in the Old Testament that flow out of the Garden of Eden: two of them are called the Tigris and the Euphrates (Gen. 2:14). However, as opposed to Mesopotamian myths, according to which only gods could make use of the Tree of Life, the Bible states that the first people were also permitted to eat its fruit until they were prohibited from doing this due to sin.

The image of the Tree of Life emerges once again in the event of the redemption of the world, through the Revelations described at the close of the Bible. Thus it could be claimed that the symbol of the Tree of Life sym-

metrically frames the biblical story about mankind, as it is mentioned both in the beginning and at the end of the Bible, i.e. during the Eschatological Revelation of St. John where reference is made to the changed world. A tree is in the centre of the world, representing eternity. It grows in the arms of the river of Life and produces 12 yields: each month it yields fruits, and its leaves are suitable for healing nations (Rev. 22:2).

Thus immortality, being the aim of all nations (or of mankind), is represented through the archaic Tree of Life by the author, St. John, whose roots were Jewish, and thus his vision was described through his own cultural view. In other words, God speaks to a man in his natural language.

In the 13th century, in his work *"Lignum vitae"*, one of the greatest masters of the Church, St. Bonaventura, represented the Tree of Eternity of the Apocalypses with the Saviour's cross. Thereafter in Europe a cross was referred to as the Tree of Life. At the same time, it also meant the Tree of Knowledge as, according to the viewpoint of Christians, the faithful can gain eternal life only through the knowledge and application of Christ's learning.

A crucifix portrayed as the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge has been a theme of a number of songs, paintings, and vivid descriptions. As one legend goes, *"Before his death, Adam send his son Seth to Paradise to bring the oil of remission. Standing in the entrance, Archangel Michael refused to give the oils before the crucifixion. Instead he gave a branch of the Tree of Knowledge promising that Adam would be saved provided that the given part of the tree was planted and afterwards it bloomed. The part actually took root; a tree grew out of it which later was used to make the cross for Christ. The tree bloomed when the Saviour was crucified on it"*¹².

There was a tradition in European art to picture Christ crucified not on a cross, but on a tree. Various compositions of this sort, published in prayer books, became widespread¹³.

In St. Ann's Chapel in St. John's Church in Vilnius there is a very ornate Tree of Life wherein a cross is replaced by a Vine Tree. This is a great reliquary. Formerly, in place of the vines there were reliquiae of saints. This means that the fruits of the Tree of Life are considered to be Christian sainthood.

A Lithuanian religious book of the 19th century states that *"A cross is the Tree of Life which ripens fruits, whereas mass is a vessel which serves those fruits"*.

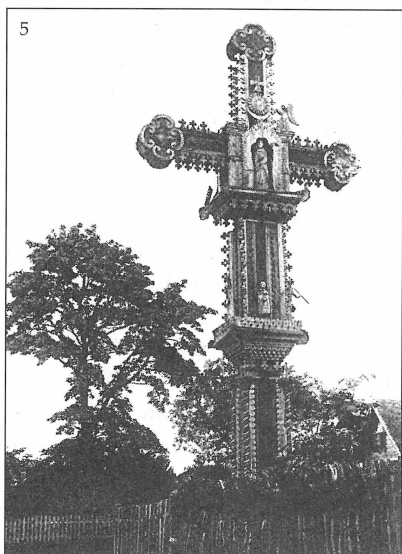
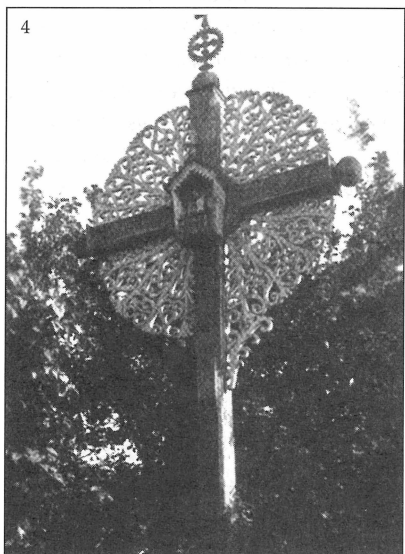
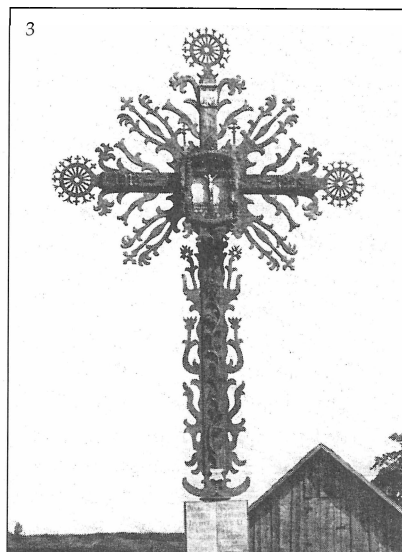


Fig. 1, 3-5 Lithuanian traditional crosses.
1., 3.-5. att. Lietuvišu tradicionālie krusti.



Fig. 2. Tree of Life, St.John's church in Vilnius.

2. att. Dzīvības koks, Viļņas Sv. Jāņa baznīca.

The aforesaid idea of the Tree of Life which is deeply rooted in Western Europe and modified in Christian art is demonstrated in Lithuanian folk wooden crosses made in 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, that were very artistic and original. During this period, crosses were an inseparable part of the landscape of the Lithuanian village. They were found in homesteads, on roadsides, in squares of towns and smaller settlements, near ponds, in cemeteries. There were so many of these monuments on the roadsides in the western part of Lithuania (Lower Lithuania) in the first half of the 19th century, that the distance between them was just several feet. Lithuania was thus rightly named as a country of crosses. Crosses were erected not only in the event of death but also for

many other reasons such as when asking God for health, his blessings, when marking events in the life of a family, community or nation. They used to be wooden and tall (reaching up to six metres), decorated with magnificent engraved ornaments. Due to their expressiveness, ornamentation and form, Lithuanian folk crosses are original, having no analogues in the world. Therefore a number of years ago, Lithuanian crosses and the art of cross making were put on the international list of values protected by UNESCO.

Nowadays traditional crosses are still erected in Lithuania; however they are not as ornamented and engraved as they used to be 100 or 200 years ago. Back then, one could encounter crosses that were decorated with foliate ornaments from top to bottom so that the cross itself was apparently turned into a symbol of the Tree of Life, expressing the idea of the Resurrection and eternal life¹⁴.

In Soviet times, researchers used to view such decorations as the heritage of Baltic paganism. However, it is more likely that such decoration belongs to the symbolism of the European Christian Tree of Life. When examining this problem it is necessary to separate the worship of trees and forests which existed in the pagan Lithuania from terms and understandings related to the Tree of Life which are attributable only to the Ancient East and Christianity. The appearance of the Tree of Life in Lithuanian archaic traditions cannot be verified by Baltic religions, mythological sources or archaeological findings. On the other hand, it is demonstrated by late Christian Lithuanian publications wherein it is embodied in Lithuanian folk crosses in an original way.

In conclusion, up until now, the examination of the Lithuanian folk art of decoration of crosses has wrongly pointed to their relationship to the Baltic pagan Tree of Life. Considering their origins, crosses were common in the European Christian traditions, and in Lithuania they were of a peculiar artistic form and shared the same soteriological meaning.

References

- ¹ *Knaurs großer Bibelführer*. München, 1990, S. 437.
- ² John Gray. *Near Eastern Mythology. Mesopotamia. Syria, Palestine*. London, 1973, p. 54–55, 58.
- ³ Burchard Brentjes. *Alte Siegelkunst der Vorderen Orients*. Leipzig, 1983, S. 104.
- ⁴ John Gray. *Near Eastern Mythology...*, p. 59.
- ⁵ Burchard Brentjes. *Alte Siegelkunst...*, S. 85, 100.
- ⁶ James Hall. *A History of Ideas and Images in Italian Art*. London, 1983, p. 162–163, fig. 55.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Джон Фоли. *Энциклопедия знаков и символов*. Москва, 1966, с. 181.
- ⁹ J. C. Cooper. *Lexikon alter Symbole*. Leipzig, 1986, S. 92.
- ¹⁰ *Bybeles tai esti wisas Szwentas Raftas Senojo ir Naujojo Testamento*. Halle, 1895; the following publication in Berlin in 1905.
- ¹¹ Александр Мень. *Как читать Библию*. Москва, 1977, ч. 1. с. 69.
- ¹² JČJ. Metford. *Krikščionybė: realijos ir legendos*. Vilnius, 2001.
- ¹³ Dalia Ramonienė. *Krikščioniškosios ikonografijos žodynas*. Vilnius, 1997, p. 139.
- ¹⁴ *Lietuvių liaudies menas. Mažoji architektūra*. Sudarė Kazys Šešelgis, Vilnius, 1990, pav. 270, 271, 278, 284 ir kt.
- ¹⁵ Additional information on this: E. Usačiovaitė. *Augimo samprata senojoje lietuvių kultūroje*. Vilnius, 2004, p. 214.

Elvira Usačiovaite
**Dzīvības koka simbola rašanās
Austrumu un Rietumu kultūru
mijiedarbības rezultātā**

Kopsavilkums

Dzīvības koka simbols ir radies Austrumos. Tas ir sastopams šumēru, per siešu un palestīniešu literatūrā un mākslā. Saskaņā ar plaši pazīstamo eposu par Gilgamešu, Dzīvības koks aug Debesīs un nodrošina mūžīgu dzīvību dieviem. Tā attēli ir saglabājušies mākslā. Piemēram, asīriešu karalis stāv koka priekšā vai koks, kuram apkārt atrodas spārnoti dēmoni, kas līdzīgi gri fiem. Spilgtākais koka simbols ebreju kultūrā ir *menora* – septiņu zaru sveč turis. Turklāt Dzīvības koks ir minēts arī Bībelē – Pirmajā Mozus grāmatā un Jāņa Atklāsmes grāmatā.

Dzīvības koka bibliskais tēls, simbolizējot Pestītāju, nonāca grieķu zemēs, kristietībā un ebreju kultūrā. Tādēļ eiropeskā stila baznīcās Kristus tika rādīts pie krusta, kurš izskatījās kā koks ar lapām, vai arī krusts ir ticis attēlots ar koku un citu augu zariem. Šādi Kristus simboli ir spēcīgi ietek mējuši lietuviešu tautas mākslu. 19. gadsimtā un 20. gadsimta sākumā lietu viešu tautas mākslā tēlotajiem garajiem krustiņiem bija augu ornamentu un saules stari. Tie simbolizē kristīgo Dzīvības koku. Pateicoties savai oriģi nalitātei un krāšņumam, šī mākslas forma ir iekļauta UNESCO Pasaules Kultūras mantojuma sarakstā.