



The spirituality of forests

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Vegetation - and especially centuries-old trees - constitutes a powerful visual symbol capable of conveying profound messages. Their longevity bridges generations across time; their transformation from microscopic seeds into organisms of immense stature reveals the extraordinary power of nature; and the ability of certain species to regenerate through root or stem sprouting evokes the notion of immortality. The symbolism of the tree is, in this sense, virtually inexhaustible. Across ancient myths and more recent traditions, diverse cultures tend to follow a shared pattern in which the tree represents the ever-renewing universe, embodies an inexhaustible source of life, and expresses the sacredness and fertility of the earth. Concepts such as the *Tree of Life*, the tree as *axis mundi*, and the *Tree of Knowledge* function as universal symbols through which the unity of the material and spiritual worlds - conceived as different levels of existence and eternity - is articulated and understood.

Across cultures, religious systems, and historical periods, imposing, majestic, centuries-old trees have been venerated as embodiments of nature's divinity and treated with reverence and honor. Examples include em-

blematic sacred trees all around the world such as the yew trees of cemeteries in Scotland and Ireland; the ginkgo trees accompanying Buddhist temples in China and Korea and Shinto shrines in Japan; the sacred fig trees serving as sites of pilgrimage and prayer in India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal; the *Cedars of God* forest in northern Lebanon; the birch trees that ritually aided Siberian shamans in their ascent to the heavens; and the centuries-old oaks that stand beside chapels in the rural landscapes throughout Greece.

In ancient Greek mythology, the symbolism of the plant world is equally rich. Dionysus manifested through plants such as the pine, fir, fig, and ivy. The oak was sacred to Zeus; the oracular laurel and the palm to Apollo; the myrtle, rose, and phillyrea to Aphrodite; the fir to Pan; the yew to the Erinyes; the Aleppo pine to Rhea; the cypress to Pluto; the black poplar to Hecate and Persephone; and the maple fell under the domain of Phobos. Similarly, in the ancient Roman world, Zeus - known as *Jupiter fagutalis* - was associated with the beech tree; Apollo's prophetic laurel crowned Roman emperors, symbolizing foresight; and Aphrodite, as *Venus myrtea*, was

linked to the myrtle. Among the mythological beings most closely associated with trees were the ageless, ever-youthful - though not immortal - nymphs, whose lives were bound to those of their trees. The most well-known were the Dryads, associated particularly with oak trees. Other nature spirits, such as Centaurs, Sileni, Satyrs, and Pan, were also believed to inhabit forests, endowing trees with miraculous qualities. One of the most striking examples is the sacred oak of the Oracle of Dodona in north-western Greece, believed to possess prophetic powers. According to myth, this tree sprang from the blood of a Titan slain by Zeus, and its roots - reaching down to Tartarus - symbolically explain its ability to reveal hidden truths.

Ancient sacred sites were so intimately connected to their trees that any natural disaster affecting them was interpreted as a sign of divine abandonment and often prompted the relocation of the sanctuary. Trees inhabited by nymphs were thus considered sacred and protected with deep religious reverence: those who safeguarded them were blessed, while severe punishment befell those who desecrated them. A well-known example is the myth of Erisychthon, who cut down the sacred tree of Demeter - thereby killing the nymph bound to it - to build a banquet hall. As punishment for this act of hubris, he was condemned to insatiable hunger, ultimately leading him to consume his own flesh.

Elements of this ancient spiritual worldview have persisted into later Christian beliefs and practices. In modern Greek tradition, trees are often perceived as either blessed or cursed. Among the former are the laurel, olive, and palm trees, while the latter include species associated with the Crucifixion of Christ, such as the Christ thorn (*Paliurus spina-christi*) and the Turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*), believed to have provided the wood for the Cross. Other traditions speak of oak forests said to

have sprung miraculously from the blood of chthonic creatures, such as dragons slain by saints like Saint George, Santa Paraskevi, and Saint Donatus. In other narratives, the Virgin Mary replaces the ancient nymphs, often venerated through icons placed within tree trunks. Miraculous discoveries of such icons were believed to indicate the precise location for the construction of churches. Trees situated near churches, monasteries, or other consecrated sites are thus regarded as sacred, rendering *the church and its tree inseparable elements of the Greek landscape*.

Ritual practices further distinguish sacred trees from secular ones. Examples include the “elevation” (ypsomós-υψωμός in Greek) of trees in northern Greece and the “signa” in the Agrafa region of Thessaly, along with similar customs and rituals throughout the Balkans. Such trees symbolically “cross” settlements by standing at the four cardinal points or encircle them like guardians at their entrances. In this way, they are believed to protect inhabitants and their livelihoods, warding off threats such as cholera, the plague, and other epidemics - often personified as malevolent forces that terrorized rural populations until as late as the 18th century.

In this context, the inclusion of stories such as that of Erisychthon in elementary school textbooks until as late as 1930, together with the recurring motif of the “ensouled tree” in early 20th century literature, provides an important cultural backdrop. This helps us better understand how notions of sacredness have contributed to the survival of many imposing, centuries-old trees within the cultural landscapes of Greece. Numerous recorded accounts of misfortune befalling those who dared to harm such trees in more recent times have further reinforced this protection, acting as a powerful deterrent. The punishments described in these narratives often follow a

pattern of gradual escalation: beginning with warning signs - such as sensations interpreted as petrification, paralysis, or loss of control over one's hand - and extending to accidents, misfortunes, and even the death of the offender or innocent family members, culminating in extreme cases in the annihilation of an entire lineage.

A characteristic expression of these beliefs is found in sacred forests. These are forested areas traditionally managed by local communities as protected sites, where resource use was either prohibited or strictly regulated through joint decisions of the Community and the Church. Sacred forests are found throughout Greece; however, long-term research in the mountainous region of Epirus has identified 79 such forests - 54 in Zagori and 25 in Konitsa municipalities. Their conservation, reinforced by systems of belief rooted in fear and reverence, became firmly established during the period of Ottoman rule (1430–1913). At that time, the Church often assumed roles typically associated with political and judicial authority, particularly in regions such as Zagori that enjoyed a kind of autonomy. These forests were typically dedicated to specific saints - either associated with churches located within them or serving as patron saints of the local settlement - or designated as excommunicated forests, often referred to as “eftapápada,” meaning excommunicated by seven priests. It should be noted that excommunication was a relatively common mechanism for resolving social and economic disputes during that period. In the case of forests, it functioned as a powerful, albeit indirect, form of deterrence: anyone attempting to exploit an excommunicated forest for personal gain risked being symbolically and socially excluded from the community.

Sacred forests thus represent sophisticated systems for the management of common natural resources, while simultaneously fulfilling

spiritual, ritual, and aesthetic functions. According to local communities, their primary purpose has been the protection of nearby settlements from natural hazards such as landslides, rockfalls, and avalanches. In other cases, they safeguard critical natural resources, including freshwater springs, or serve as reserve areas to meet emergency needs. Reflecting these roles, most sacred forests are situated in close proximity to settlements, often bordering their outermost dwellings.

Since 2012, the Sacred Natural Sites of Zagori have been included on the global map of Sacred Natural Sites. In 2015, the sacred forests of Zagori and Konitsa were inscribed in the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage. They also form part of the cultural landscape of Zagori, which was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2023. Such recognition has been crucial in strengthening their conservation in a modern context. Today, additional values complement their traditional protective, spiritual, and aesthetic roles, including their importance for biodiversity conservation and for understanding the long-term dynamics of forest ecosystems. The region hosts a remarkable diversity of vegetation types - juniper, beech, black pine, mixed deciduous forests, and both deciduous and evergreen oak forests - many of which have experienced minimal human disturbance over the past four centuries. Notably, several sacred forests exhibit characteristics of old-growth forest ecosystems, significantly enhancing their conservation value in line with the priorities of the European Forest Strategy 2020–2030. Among these are old-growth beech forests, which are considered among Europe's most threatened habitats and are protected as UNESCO World Heritage Sites through a transnational network spanning 18 countries. Although Greece is not yet included in this network, the protective forest of Greveniti village in Eastern Zago-

ri - with beech trees reaching circumferences of 5.31 meters, heights of 40 meters, and ages approaching 300 years - represents a strong candidate for inclusion.

Today, however, sacred forests face increasing pressures. Climate change and especially megafires, globalization, cultural homogenization, and insufficient institutional support - combined with challenges typical of marginal regions, such as population decline and potentially over tourism - render these scarce socio-ecological systems particularly vulnerable.

Initiatives such as the designation of September 1 as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation - established in 1989 by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and adopted in 2015 by the Catholic Church - can play an important role in raising awareness and promoting nature conservation. In this spirit, the message of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on September 1, 2025, emphasizes the deep interconnection between environmental and social issues and underscores the importance of placing ecological concerns at the center of inter-Christian and interfaith dialogue, as well as within the agendas of international institutions, scientific communities, environmental organizations, and civil society. The International Conference on *Old-Growth Forests and Ancient Trees - A Treasure of Nature, Life and Culture*, held in October 2025 in Florence and Vallombrosa, organized by the Forestry, Environmental and Agri-food Unit Command of the Carabinieri on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of *Laudato si'* demonstrates that

such initiatives can inspire and mobilize synergies for the conservation of sacred natural sites and the spiritual dimension of nature, under a unifying spiritual framework that is so greatly needed in our time and could be served as a good practice for the conservation of old-growth forests throughout Europe and beyond.

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