

## The Significance of Plants for Indo-Europeans

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The present study aims at investigating the place of plants, and specifically trees, among Indo-Europeans; this necessitates a brief look at the very land since the environment and echo system have always been influential in the expression of human behavior. Of course, the very issue of Indo-European's place has always been a challenging issue that has been the matter of discussion for more than two centuries with no unanimity acquired. Therefore, the present study would be a concise survey attempt in this area. In order to reach the present aim first the original place of the Indo-European tribe would be discussed. Next, the etymology of the name of trees would be brought under scrutiny, the aim being to reach an understanding of the mind of the creators of such words through investigating the roots of the words they attributed to trees and plants. Tree in Indo-European culture, religion and myth, is the next matter of discussion; therefore, the cultural milieu of the tribe will be investigated with regard to the significance of tree.

### 1. THE ORIGINAL PLACE OF INDO-EUROPEANS

There has been much debate regarding the original Indo-European ecosystem, and such vast lands covering from the western Provinces of China to the western European Plains have been regarded as the dwelling place of this tribe. It is greatly significant to specify the approximate borders of this era due to the fact that the plant composition as well as the weather would be important factors in reaching any sort of conclusion in this matter. Nowadays, most of the scientists consider the original place of the Indo-Europeans to be the Southern Plains of Russia, Ukraine or Hungary. In any case, the fact that these people have inhabited the lands would be proved by some lingual evidence, since the special plant coverage reflecting in Indo-European languages does not exist in the Eastern areas.

Fridrich, Paul (1970) has carried out one of the most unique studies about the trees among Indo-Europeans and believes that this tribe had lived in an area covered with rainforests and lots of trees on the riverbanks. Due to the abundance of the vocabulary related to trees in Indo-European languages, he has come to the conclusion that living in such an area, the people have been well familiar with trees and their features (Ibid 16).

### 2. ETYMOLOGY OF THE NAME OF TREES

The place and importance of trees for such an ancient tribe with no remaining written document or with no easily adaptable ancient findings seems to be a very difficult and rather unattainable issue at the first glance. In such circumstances, the only way open to the scholar is to use etymology so that an understanding of the mind of the creators of such words could be reached through investigating the roots of the words they attributed to trees and plants.

The original word for tree in Indo-European languages is *\*dóru-*, the remnants of which could be found in almost any Indo-European language like *‘dāru-*, in Sanskrit, *dóru-*, in Greek, *dāuru-* in Avestan, *daur-* in Ancient Irish and *دور* in New Persian.

Another interesting word which we would discuss is “birch”, which is called “ghan”, “tose” and also “ghoshe”. The word comes from the Indo-European stem of *\*bherəǵ* which means to shine. (Pokorny,

1959, 139). From the same stem in Sanskrit comes bhraj (Mayerhofer 1986-2001, V. 12, 529) in ancient Slovia Berza (Derksen 2005, 38) in Iranian languages : Furz ( Gerson 1920, 75). But why should the name of a tree be taken from a stem meaning “to shine”? According to the popular belief of Europeans regarding the Ghan tree, Fredrich has come to the conclusion that this tree has been a symbol of virginity among Indo-Europeans. (Fredrich, 1970, 27). Nonetheless, the ancient Persian word for ‘birch’ has not entered Farsi and has stayed in Eastern Languages. Thus, from a long time ago, words derived from ‘birch’ would mean purity and chastity. For instance in Haiti the word *parkui*, of same stem with birch, means innocent. (Kloekhorst 2008, 637), or in Latvian there is an idiom meaning “the bridegroom and the top of ‘Ghan’ tree” (Gamkrelidze, Ivanov. 1995, 532).

Given that some species of Birch tree has a white skin, it could be imagined that the primary Indo-Europeans had taken the white color as a symbol of innocence, chastity and purity. This tree has been the source for the satisfaction of so many needs especially at ancient times.

The other Indo-European word is *\*ābel*, meaning apple in English and *apfel* in German, which has remained in different forms in various languages and has been derived from the stem *om-* meaning “raw, bitter, sweet” (Pokorny, 1959, 1) . The implications of variations of this word would suggest that the Indo-Europeans have named this tree for one of its natural attributes, while the fruit of apple, and most likely the wild apple, slightly different from today’s apples, have been an edible fruit for a long times at least in Europe.

The other tree name is “yew”, which in ancient Indo-Europe was *\*(e)i-uǝ-*, *\*(e)i-uā* an extension of *ei-* meaning ‘reddish, colorful’ (Ibid, 297).

The etymology would, thus, suggest that Indo-Europeans have had a transcendental attitude towards some trees at least. Some yew species were symbols of eternity for Indo-Europeans or at least Haitians, and they have always attributed longevity to this evergreen tree. One of the remnant scribbles from the most likely ancient Indo-European sources regarding yew asserts:

Just as yew, the ever green, that does not lose its leaves, Mayst the King and Queen prosper for eve, their deeds last forever.

In the meantime, such beliefs were not specific to the Haitians, and it seems the Indo-Europeans have also regarded this tree as a symbol of eternity before the Great Migration. The German people considered yew to be the symbol of resurrection, and the ancient Anglo-Saxon people used to plant yew in their graveyards (Gamkrelidze, Ivanov, 1995, 542-541). The same sort of practice was done by the ancient Iranians who long used to look at the yew and even inscribe it on tombstones.

The tree in a clear association with gods was the Oak, or the Indo-European *\*perk<sup>w</sup>u-s* (Pokorny 1959, 822), the word which was used to refer to the god of thunder at the same time, and which exist with little phonological difference almost among all Indo-European languages. *Farguni* in *Guti·ferguniō* in German ‘*quercus* in Latin’ and *plaks□á* in Sanskrit, This word has also meant “rock and stone,” also used to refer to the god of thunder and rain. The same word was used in the form of *parjanya-* “god of wind and rain”/ (Williams, 2018). According to the ancient beliefs of Indo-Europeans, mountains were the inhabitant place of the god of thunder and since the old, tall oak trees are more prone to thunder, Indo-Europeans might have concluded that there was a relationship between *Perkon*, the god of thunder, and these trees (Gamkrelidze, Ivanov, 1995, 527-528). These beliefs persisted until late after Indo-European separation. In ancient Prussian, *Percunis* meant thunder and the great god of Haitians was also called *perwaš*; however, it seems in the history of the ancient Indo-Europeans that oak has been of great significance, not only for the popularity of its name, but also for the important role it played in the prayer sessions at the temples.

Another tree which was undoubtedly familiar to all Indo-Europeans was beech, or the Indo-European *\*bhāgō -s*, from which so many words have been derived and are still used in Indo-European languages. For example, the English word ‘book’ and the German ‘buch’ are both of the same root with this Indo-European word, showing the fact that the skin of this tree has been used for writing from a long time ago. In this regard, this word could be compared to the Farsi word “*poust*” and the Sanskrit ‘*pustaka*’ meaning “text, book” (Williams, 2218). However, the fact that these words are from independent roots also suggest that at the time of separation, the Indo-Europeans have been much away from one another with regard to writing. (The Farsi word; “*poust*” comes from *apa.vas.ta*, from the root *-vah-* meaning to cover). Beech later gained so much significance among

Indo-Europeans, especially after their separation, that it became associated with gods such as Diana and Jupiter among the Romans.

Hornbeam was another familiar tree for the Indo-Europeans, \*grēb(h)o-s, \*grōb(h)o-s, which is a derivation from the root gerebh- meaning to scrub (Porkorni 1959, 257), suggesting that the skin of this tree had been used for painting and drawings. In the meantime, some critics have concluded that the Indo-Europeans have entered the stage of writing long before their separation, due to the root of some trees such as \*bhāgō –s, yew: \*(e)i-\*uḡ- and \*grēb(h)o-s, which are all derived from the roots meaning to scrub. However, such induction has been very much quick and done in accordance to the tendency to demonstrate the primary Indo-European civilizations. It might be possible that the Indo-Europeans have used the wood and skin of these trees for drawings or even for the religious signs, which does not necessarily suggest their attainment of writing and alphabet, the same ways as the etymology of the Farsi word for writing \*ni.paiθ-shows, the word originally meant to paint and draw.

“Ash” was another tree known to this tribe as evident by the names from the same stem in Indo-European languages. The Indo-European form was ōs- (Pokorny, 1959, 782), the stem from which most of the words for tree in Indo-European languages are derived; for instance, ash in English, ah in Albanian, hac in Armenian, jaseiń in Polish, and asc in German. The name of this tree has been derived from the same root in almost all Indo-European languages except for Indo-Persian languages, which suggests that in main land Indo-Europeans this tree was abundant and known to everyone.

Speiddar is also among the trees in the original land of Indo-Europeans, and its present names such as aspe in German, osina in Russian and Osa in Polish are all derived from the Indo-European \*aspā- (Ibid, 55). Some critics doubtfully assert the Sanskrit word sphyá- meaning a piece of wood as a derivation from the same root (Gamkrelidze, Ivanov, 1995, 538). However, there is no solid evidence regarding the Indo-European form of this word in Indo-Persian languages. Thus, it seems more reasonable to put aside the first part of the word related to the Indo-European \*aspā- and regard it as the same familiar word of Black and White. Meanwhile, some points must be mentioned here: first, not a clear stem has been proposed for its name; thus, it is not possible to know the exact reason for such naming, a fact which most likely suggests this tree did not enjoy such a high status among Indo-Europeans. A support for such an idea would be the fact that Indo-Europeans respected trees such as oak, yew and others, after their separation which was rooted in the great migration, while Sepiddar does not have such place.

The Indo-Europeans also knew the family of willow tree and the names of this tree which are all from a single root. Even today, these names are used to refer to the same tree, in some Indo European languages, while in some others slight changes have occurred. For example, in Avestan it is called vaēiti ‘Willow’ (Williams, 3469), in the Old Prussian vetasáh- and in Sanskrit vetasáh 540).

It takes too long to mention all of these terms and their homonyms in Indo-European languages, all deriving from the Indo-European \*uei- meaning to sway. This tree, willow, has a name taken from its naturally interwoven branches, and while transcendental signs cannot be viewed in such naming but unlike some other trees such as oak, willow in Indo-European ritual did not fit as such. Ever green trees such as pine and spruce trees have been the focus of attention for Indo-Europeans for a very long time. As tombs and gardens are decorated by cypress trees in Iran, Europeans celebrate their religious traditions with the trees of this family which is a very ancient practice. Common words in Indo-European languages suggest that they have been familiar with ever green trees such as pine trees. The Indo-European word for Pine is \*peuk-, \*peug-"" which has remained in many Indo-European languages such as fiuhtia in Ancient Saxony and ochtach in Middle Irish, peuse in Ancient Prussian and peúkē in Greek.). The term appears to have reached Indo-Iranian languages (since it has remained as puc in Pamir languages). Today, the term \*pit-, Indo-European word for "pine", is also used in some languages. Thus, pītu. dāru in Sanskrit: pīnus in Latin piše in Albanian and finally pit which confirms the existence of the name in ancient Persia. Nonetheless, the interesting point regarding the Indo-European root \*peuk- is that it is stemmed from \*peik meaning ‘to dye’. There is the possibility that such naming is due to the fact that the tree or some parts of it have been used for drawing. It should be noted here that \*peik- has its root in the ancient Persian origin nipištānai (ni-prefix) The root is used as paēs- in Avestan.

A kind of pine with the English name of Spruce was among other trees in some parts of India, called \*edlo-, the word which later reflected a few other Indo-European languages, egl in Latvian el: Russian, egl: Latvian, addle: Old Prussian.

The terms derived from the Indo-European word\* edlo are mainly found in Ballet and Slavic family of languages, the reason could be the fact that these trees grew only within the inhabitant place of these tribes or it could be because this tree had no place in the rituals of the Indo-European people except for the Slavic peoples, as the name was forgotten and later another name was used for that. It is noteworthy that the root for \*eldo- is also not clear; however, Pokorny suggests that\* eldo-r is from the root word of \*edh- meaning "sharpen" (Pokorny, 1959. 289). However, even if we are still certain about the doubtful derivation, we cannot assert that this tree is sacred neither can we find ceremonial functions reflected in its name. Perhaps it would be better to consider the tree as a marginal one.

In Iranian languages the term "Nvzhn" is used to refer to trees of the pine family which is of unique features from the etymological point of view. The oldest form of the word in the Persian ancient is in the form of naucaina- as an adjective to refer to pine (Kent, 1953 192). The term lacks any other word with the same root in any other Indo-European languages and only in Croatian language the word nazw is used to mean pine The origin of these two words has turned out to be a problematic etymological issue as some know it as Croat and others as a Persian word and regard the existence of the word in these two languages as a result of borrowing. Kent does not mention a word of Persian origin, but -Gamkrelidze - Ivanov in his voluminous footnotes with no mentioning of the source of the term regards the words nāv-the naucaina as related to the Ship, (Gamkrelidze, Ivanov, 1995546), which appears to be the result of the construction of boats from the trunk of this tree.

Alder trees were also among the trees which grew in early Indo-European homeland. The old Indo-European word for alder was \* eliso-/ \* aliso- or as Mallory says \* Haéliso (Mallory, 2006-157). Pokorny regards this word to be derived from the roots \* el-1, \* ol-, \* el meaning red, brown (Pokorny, 1959,302). The words derived from \*eliso-/ \*aliso- are only used in a few Indo-European languages including Latin: *alnus*, Spanish: *Aliso*, Old English *Olar* and New English *alder*. Apparently there is no word derived from \*eliso-/ \*aliso- in Indo-Iranian languages, however; the early Indo-Europeans used the word \*wer-n- for adler which appears to be much older than \*eliso-/ \*aliso- since it exists in Sanskrit as we shall see later on. The word is used in Sankrit as varana-meaning "trunk" (Mayerhofer, 1976, Vol3, 149). However, no clear meaning has been suggested for its Indo-European root and the word has undergone important syntactical meaning. It seems that the early word common in Indo-European languages is the same \*wer-n- which is later substituted by \*eliso-/ \*aliso- in Europe and areas where various trees from pine family existed. (Gamkrelidze Ivanov, 1995, 546).

The words analyzed so far show that Indo-Europeans have named these trees on the basis of their natural features. In these names there is no sign of sacredness, suggesting at the first sight that these peoples lacked beliefs in sacredness of plants and trees in ancient times; otherwise, it must have been reflected in their naming. For instance, plants of March which has long been used as a perfume in religious places suggest the ritual function in its name from the root of spanata meaning sacred. Lack of such evidences in the Indo-European tree names should not lead to wrong conclusions. In the following parts the significance of trees among Indo-Europeans will be discusses suggesting the sacredness of trees among the Indo-European.

### 3. TREE IN INDO-EUROPEAN CULTURE, RELIGION AND MYTH

Investigating the history of Indo-Europeans after the Great Migration suggests various cases of praising the sacred trees by these peoples. Among the Celts, trees were so significant that the word Droid, the name of their priests, was derived from the Indo-European word of \*dóru-, *tre*. (Warner, 2006, 20). It appears that they used to regard some of their gods in form of trees as one ancient historian asserts they knew Jupiter as an oak (Runkin, 2003, 276). They also regarded Mistletoe as sacred since they grew on oaks. Moreover, they had some sacred plains in which the victims were sacrificed for gods (Ibid, 280). They regarded gods the inhabiting place of gods or even the god himself (Warner, 2006, 25). When an oak tree dried up, Celts made a cross form shape out of its trunk and praised it as a sign of god (Philpot, 187, 35). Of course, praising the oaks was not exclusive to the Celts, and in many European regions covered with large oak jungles, people attributed oaks to their

gods. For instance, the Romans regarded oak as the tree of Jupiter and the Greek knew it as Zeus, the German considered it as the special tree of their great god Donar, and of course Celts considered oak tree as the special property of Lugh, one of their most important gods.

There were holy plains among many Indo-European tribes which either were denoted to gods or were the place of religious ceremonies. The Droid priests educated their pupils in remote jungles (Runkins, 2003, 280). In Uppsala Sweden, there was a sacred plain which was the place of sacrificial ceremonies (Frazer, 1387, 547); the catch point is that these victims were not plants or animals but human beings sacrificed in front of gods in order to attract their attention or satisfaction, gods being considered so close to trees. This suggests the significance of the tree gods for the ancient nations. It might be surprising to the modern readers that there was a time when trees were decorated by the human blood and torn limbs in order to satisfy gods. Among the ancient Semitic tribes, there was a god called Moluch for the sake of whom people sacrificed their children in a very horrific way, by casting them into fire, but before that they scrub blood of the child to the trunk of the sacred oak tree (Warner, 2006, 20). Sacrifices of human beings for the sake of gods is a very historic phenomenon.

The German tribes also used to perform their religious ceremonies in jungles. Prussians, one of the German tribes who remained faithful to their ancient religion up to the sixteen century had temples in jungles where they praised Perkono god, and Christians could not set foot there (ibid 39). The ancient German rulers regarded very severe punishments for the invaders of trees. For instance, if a person peeled a live tree, they would stretch out his umbilical stump, and then they would bound the offender to the tree in the same point he has peeled off the skin, forcing him to turn around the tree so much that his gut would cover the tree, thus, healing the peeled off part by his own limbs (Frazer, 1387, 152). In Germany and Scandinavia, some trees were under the protection of female deities often called as Mrs or Mam, to whom some gifts were denoted and their permission was also needed if the trees were to be cut off (West, 2007, 289).

In the most ancient historical periods of Greek the trees were also regarded as temples of gods, where they dwelled, that was why trees were praised in these periods (Philpot, at, 1897, 18). In Dadona temple, probably the most ancient temple in Greece, it was imagined that Zeus dwelled in a holy oak, and it was also mentioned that the first oak was grown out of one of Titan's blood, when he invaded Zeus place and was killed (Ibid 28).

The ancient Greek also had a Great Mam superior to all their gods, who was very close to trees. Eric Newman writes about her in this way:

The great mam who has created all out of herself so clearly is the mother to all plants. Rituals and traditions related to the productivity of earth all over the world are rooted in this belief that this guardian angel is reflected in the tree the dwelling place for birds and their nests. Moreover, the tree trunk is the place where the soul is purified as it dwells within body. The female nature of the trees is reflected in the fact that tree trunks could be productive like Adonis and many others. (Newman, *Great Mam*, 48-49, Quoted from Warner, 2006, 23)

Apollo was another Greek god hardly close to the trees and laurel tree was his special tree. None of these temples was considered as complete without this tree, and the Temple of Apollo was not constructed in the areas not suitable for the growth of laurel tree, the prayers could only accomplish their rituals while carrying its leaf (Philpot, 1987, 36). Dionysus, one of the greatest Greek gods who was praised as an imitation of the Eastern, was considered as the god who grew leaf and fruit on the trunks and the grape tree was believed to be a gift from this god yielding wine (Regardie, 1968, 96). In a ritual called Oschophoria which was specified to Dionysus, people carried grapes branches as a symbol of respect to the god. In this ceremony, some races were also held and in a ritual called Oschophoria which was specified to Dionysus, people carried grapes branches as a symbol of respect to the god. In this ceremony, some races were also held and the youngsters ran from Dionysus to Athena Temple while carrying grape branches (Philpot, 1897, 48).

The Slovak, one of the Indo-European tribes, still praised trees and plains even centuries after the spread of Christianity. They had a strong belief in goddesses or nymphs dwelling in trees. The tree nymphs were girls who had died young and their ghosts have turned into nymphs. No one could ever cut the dwelling trees of these nymphs (West, 2007, 291). Some even praised oak so much that they expected responses. Besides some of their villages, there were some sacred plains in which even to break a branch would be considered as a guilt, the punishment being death (Frazer, 1387, 152-153).

For the Slovaks, the oak tree was special to Perune, to the god of thunder, rain and war (Warner, 2006, 23). It might be possible to trace the oldest task of this god as the god of productivity, whose task was to send out rain, and who became familiar with the wars as a result of the progress of human kind. Russians attributed transcendental features to trees even by recent centuries; for examples, the Russian villagers believed the breaking the oak would be a healing act (Fokarld, 1897, 98-99). They also believed in some cryptic residents of the tree which would disappear with the leaf fall and reappear with re-growth. These residents had teeth, ear and goat-like horns (Philpot, 1897, 69). Some of the Indo-European myths also reveal some oldest beliefs of this tribe. In most of their myths, there are plants or trees containing elixir of life, defended by some huge beings while many other devil creations are after these plants and immortal life. According to the Irish myths, there is a tree growing in a utopian land guarded by a dragon. In mythology, there are some apples through which gods never grow old, while the apples are being supported by a god called Idunn (West, 2007, 159). These myths about life plant existing among Indo-Europeans. They also believed in gods living in trees or dependant upon trees for their lives. For instance, in some parts of Germany, they believed in gods who lived in trees; cutting these trees off would lead to the death of the god living in it. These German gods were usually females, having names such as Lady of the Woodland or the Forest Lady (Ibid, 289).

#### 4. TREE ANCESTOR

Investigating the Indo-European myths also reveals the fact that this tribe somehow believed human beings to have originated from some trees. It is not clear though to what extent these beliefs were common among them before the Great Migration. In the meantime, it could be stated that at least these beliefs were present among early Indo-Europeans according to the spread of this belief among the Indo-Europeans living in Europe and also on the basis of some samples of this myth among Indo-Iranians. In ancient Greece it was believed that man has originated from an ash tree, and this tree was itself a creation of goddesses (Warner, 2006, 53). Moreover some studies have suggested that the olive tree of Athenians was their totem, with its fruits having a special function in some religious rituals (Philpot, 1897, 38). The Athenian coin was also decorated with olive leaf.

In the ancient city of Rome in the Forum, which was considered as the heart of city, there was an old grand fig called the Holy Romulus Fig, which was praised during the reign of the Great Roman Empror. Any kind of damage in the trunk of this tree would cause distress among the citizens. In the same city, in the back stretch of Palatyn hills, there was a Blueberry tree, which was one of the holiest things in the city, and whenever one person noticed any sort of dryness in its foliage, he would cry out for help and people would rush to bring water (Frazer, 1387, 153). Such sacredness and consideration was probably due to the belief in the life existing in the tree.

An investigation on the inhabiting place of Indo-European tribe as well as the etymology of the tree, together with the cultural and mythological approach to the trees among this tribe lead to the fact that tree has played a very significant role among the Indo-Europeans, the current life style of the tribe being the most important factor in the formation of the outlook.

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## **The Significance of Plants for Indo-Europeans**

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