

**Bintley, M. D. J. 2015. *Trees in the Religions of Early Modern England*. The Boydell Press, Woodbridge**

**Review by Ceri Houlbrook**

In 1988, Douglas Davies observed that ‘trees are not simply good to climb, they are good to think’ (1988: 34). Michael D. J. Bintley demonstrated the truth behind this statement in his 2009 doctoral thesis, *Trees and Woodland in Anglo-Saxon Culture*, in which he investigated the Anglo-Saxon perceptions of trees and woodland, tracing the Christian adoption of the symbol of the tree and subsequently demonstrating its malleability. It is this thesis which forms the basis of Bintley’s 2015 *Trees in the Religions of Early Modern England*.

Bintley’s *Trees* is divided into six chapters, the first of which is an introduction. This outlines the book’s place within the broader context of studies, with a well-deserved nod to Hooke’s *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, and provides helpful definitions of terms used in the following chapters, such as ‘religion’ and ‘Germanic’. The introduction also sets out the book’s primary objectives, of which there are a few. Firstly, Bintley seeks to redress the misleading binary opposition of pre-Christian and Christian; a polarisation which, he argues, suggests a rapid and absolute transition. Bintley aims to demonstrate that the conversion to Christianity was achieved through more gradual, and less violent, processes of inculturation and assimilation – and he aims to do this through a focus on trees. He aims to demonstrate the significance trees had in pre-Christian belief and religion; the role they fulfilled in inculturative processes of conversion; and how trees formed part of Christian belief systems, not as pagan survivals but as fully integrated aspects of Christianity.

In order to address these issues, Bintley adopts an interdisciplinary approach throughout, drawing on methodologies from history, art history, archaeology, and literature. He employs, for example, Ian Hodder’s notion of ‘entanglement’ in order to understand how trees were entangled with the minds and bodies of the Anglo-Saxons. He also adopts a Deep Historical approach, limiting himself neither by discipline nor by chronological period, drawing on evidence from the first to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD in order to contextualise a 600-year period. The evidence he draws upon is equally varied, ranging from the material culture of monuments and artefacts to legal, homiletic, and penitential sources; from *Beowulf* to Tacitus’ *Germania*. Bintley appears a little self-conscious about the breadth of his focus, acknowledging that some scholars may be ‘uncomfortable’ with it, but he stresses that providing a representative picture

of changing Anglo-Saxon beliefs requires a broad chronological focus and an inclusive attitude towards sources and methodologies.

Chapter 1 focuses on the conversion period and the tree's function in processes of inculturation; for this, he draws on three case-studies which neatly represent his three primary forms of evidence: monumental, literary, and artefactual. The first is the early medieval site of Yeavinger, a high-status, pre-Christian site where a ritual alignment, defined by wooden posts, was superseded by a church, which replaced the posts with 'hypothesised wooden crosses'. Secondly, a literary piece: the *Dream of the Rood*, which illustrates the association of the cross with a tree, mediated between the pre-Christian veneration of trees to the Christian veneration of the cross. And thirdly, archaeological artefacts: the ten silver Byzantine bowls found in the Mound 1 ship burial at Sutton Hoo, adorned with rosettes, which Bintley interprets as the possible flower of a sacred tree and metaphoric of the earth. All three case-studies aptly demonstrate the appropriation of pre-Christian traditions in the processes of inculturation during the conversion period.

Chapter 2 concentrates on interactions between heathenism and Christianity, primarily the tree's role as meeting places and secular markers within the Anglo-Saxon political landscape. Bintley then goes on to draw on comparisons with Scandinavia and Germany, positing that there were many similarities between how the English conceived of their holy trees and how they were perceived and engaged with elsewhere in northern Europe. He uses these similarities to argue that the English may have had some concept of a cosmic tree; an equivalent to the Norse world tree Yggdrasill and the Saxon Irminsul.

Chapter 3 moves further along chronologically, considering the roles played by trees during the conversion period and later, investigating how trees became a normalised part of early English Christianity from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Bintley investigates how later believers rationalised the tree-worship of their Anglo-Saxon ancestors as a precursor to the worship of the cross, and how 'replanted', or ideologically realigned, tree traditions flourished in Christian England, drawing here on the cult of St Oswald in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*; the iconography on such monuments as the 9<sup>th</sup>-century Sandbach crosses; and the poems and illustrations of the Junius 11 manuscript.

Chapter 4 offers a comparison between how the Anglo-Saxons and how the Scandinavians engaged with trees on a more personal level, as physical entities, drawing on Old Norse and

Old English literature which discuss bodily and metaphoric relations between humans and trees. Exploring Norse tree anthropogony in Norse Eddic and skaldic poetic traditions, which attest to the possible belief that humans originated from trees or wood, Bintley searches for parallels in Old English literature – for example looking at the preface to Alfred the Great’s translation of St Augustine’s *Soliloquies* – which suggest similar, although not identical, uses of trees in the metaphorical vocabulary of England.

This is not the first book to focus on the role of trees in Anglo-Saxon culture; as Bintley states himself, Hooke has already achieved this. Nor is it the first book to investigate the malleability of tree symbolism within the context of religious change; Alexandra Walsham’s work on *The Reformation of the Landscape* (2011), for example, focuses on the changing perceptions and recontextualisations of the religious and political landscape, including trees, during the post-Reformation period. However, Bintley himself professes that his work is not intended as a comprehensive overview, but rather as an attempt to encourage new, more disciplinary-inclusive methods of investigation into tree symbolism in the early modern period. Bintley is successful in using a wide variety of sources in order to illustrate not only that religious changes altered the Anglo-Saxons’ perceptions of trees, but also that trees played a surprisingly prominent role in effecting such religious changes. Bintley demonstrates the malleability and indomitability of tree symbolism and, in doing so, provides a deeper, more rounded insight into the changing Anglo-Saxon culture and systems of belief.