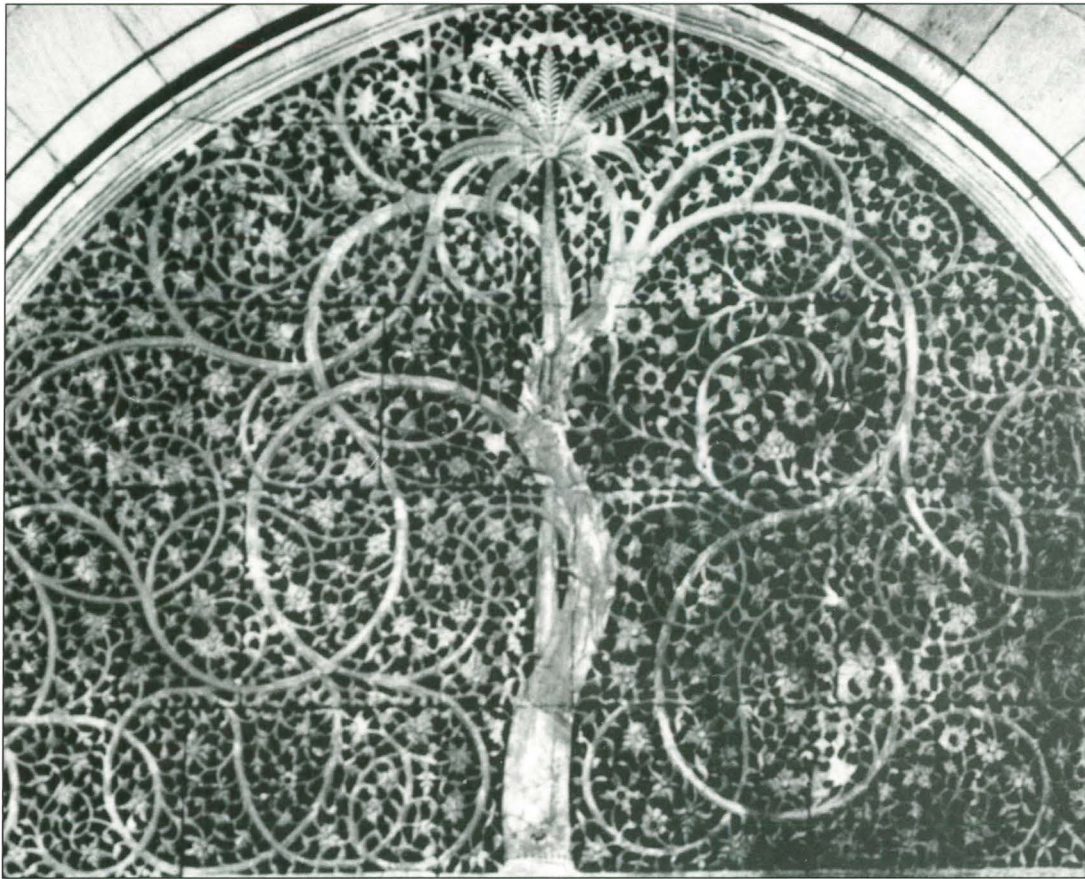




# The Tree of Life

by Elizabeth Moynihan

The remote, mountainous Kohistan district of Pakistan was one of the most difficult and dangerous passages along the historic Silk Road as described by the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Faxian at the beginning of the 5th century. If travelers from Xinjiang survived crossing the rope suspension bridges that linked narrow footpaths chiseled into the rock walls above the Indus River, they then had to avoid marauding tribesmen.



The constant tribal wars of these fierce mountaineers kept the northern provinces isolated and largely unexplored by Westerners until the 1890s. However, in the 1970s you could follow the old Silk Road in relative safety. In early spring the valleys were alive with wildflowers, but, colorful and evanescent as a rainbow, they disappeared, and within a few short weeks the arid valley floor became shrouded in dun-colored dust. It shimmered in the sunlight, and everything — travelers, donkeys, the car, even the birds — was covered with a fine coat of dust.

The road skirts the base of the mountains which rise steeply here, and many small, ancient Buddhist shrines are carved in the rock walls. Said to lead to a sacred site, one of the side tracks lacing across the historic route was a difficult path up a rocky, dry riverbed bounded by buff banks that wound through the sere landscape. Around a deep curve on a bluff stood a solitary tree, old, wind-whipped, and crooked, its roots partially exposed

where the bank had been scoured out below. Its branches were adorned with a few prayer flags, faded and frayed beneath a layer of dust. The surprise of this unexpected, vivid image swept away the centuries and intervening cultures and elicited a reverential response to the tree.

This sacred tree in Kohistan represented one of the oldest known forms of veneration; tree cults were common to all ancient cultures and civilizations, and the tree as a symbol of rebirth was universal. The prominence of votive trees in religious ritual was particularly well developed very early along the Eurasian routes of the Silk Road. For example, a wonderful carving, now in the British Museum, shows Ashurnasirpal, who ruled Assyria in 885–60 B.C.E., pouring the Water of Life on the Tree of Life.

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*An image of the Tree of Life is delicately carved in stone in the 16th-century Sidi Sayyid Mosque, Ahmedabad, India.*

Photo by Elizabeth B. Moynihan



Using the familiar objects of trees and water as symbols was well established 5,000 years ago in the Middle East. In 1937 Dr. Phyllis Ackerman of the American Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology devised an enchanting explanation of the Tree of Life or Moon Tree based on the early Mesopotamian conception of the sky as a triangle and depicted as a mountain. The moon, which brought relief from the relentless sun, was represented as a tree atop the mountain of the sky. As trees mark an oasis and the moon is a life-giver, so the sap of the moon tree must be water, the elixir of life.

From prehistoric times there was communication between the civilizations of the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, and the Iranian plateau. Indus Valley seals incised with a Moon Tree resembling the peepul tree native to the subcontinent were found at Susa, an ancient Persian site.

The myth of the miraculous Cosmic Tree not only represented regeneration and immortality but in some cultures symbolized a means of ascent to heaven. In the ancient Brahmanical tradition of India and the shamanism practiced throughout much of Central Asia, the sacred tree symbolized the Axis Mundi, the central axis of the earth. Such a World Tree is a powerful unifying symbol, the center of the universe, binding the heavens to the earth.

Often a shaman's ritual garments were decorated with the Tree of Life to aid him in invoking spirits and reaching an ecstatic state. An actual tree or pole representing the tree as a ladder to the heavens was central to the ceremony in which the shaman made a celestial journey or descended to the underworld.

Sacred trees are mentioned in the literature of the world's major religions as the Tree of Knowledge or the Tree of Good and Evil. In the Book of Revelation (22:1-2) and in Genesis (2:9) the Tree of Life in Paradise is associated with the rivers of life. The Koran (13:38) mentions the Tuba Tree in Paradise. The Cosmic Tree is depicted in an inverted position growing downward toward the earth with its roots in heaven in the Upanishads of ancient India and in medieval cabalistic writings. In the Middle Ages, the Tree of Life, associated with the Cross of Christ, was a major allegorical theme in religious art and writings.

From ancient times, priests in India maintained groves of sacred trees at temple sites and used the blossoms in religious

ritual. Certain trees and flowers were thought to symbolize deities or possess qualities which could enhance man's spiritual life. Such was the sacred Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha attained perfect knowledge. There is a legend that in the 3rd century B.C.E., before his conversion to Buddhism, the great Ashoka burned this sacred wild fig tree, and it was miraculously reborn from its own ashes. In the 7th century C.E., a cutting from this tree was the greatest gift an Indian ruler could send to the emperor of China. Such a gift would have been carried along the Silk Road in the footsteps of the monks who first brought Buddhism to East Asia.

Another gift the Chinese emperors coveted were "flying horses" from Fergana, now in Uzbekistan, famed for their speed and endurance. In the early 15th century, when the importance of the Silk Road had greatly diminished, Babur, a feudal prince from Fergana who ruled Kabul, conquered northern India and founded the Mughal dynasty. His ancestor, the Central Asian conqueror Timur, had brought the tradition of the paradise garden to Samarkand from Persia, and Babur introduced these walled gardens with their symbolic trees and water in India.

In the wake of the caravans along the southern route crossing the high Pamirs, as well as the northern route across the Heavenly Mountains, cross-cultural influences were reflected in the arts, architecture, and handicrafts of the city-states and throughout the mountains, steppes, and deserts of the Silk Road. Classic and stylistic representations of the Tree of Life are still ubiquitous, rendered on everything from richly embroidered Uzbek coats and Chinese robes to block-printed cottons, carpets, porcelain, and bronze. Today, centuries after commerce moved away from the Silk Road, the Tree of Life motif remains, its tendrils binding the multitudes along the route that crosses boundaries and the ages, reaching even to the National Mall of the United States.

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