

THE TREE. SIMBOL AND REPRESENTATION IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE SACRED SPACE

ARBORELE. SIMBOL ȘI REPREZENTARE ÎN ARHITECTURA SPAȚIULUI SACRU

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Abstract. *The tree is an element present from the beginning of the world, a symbol of verticality, the world's axis linking in the same substance heaven, earth and hell. Fountain of thought, the tree summarizes its entire importance as the main symbol of the Mother Goddess, of natural regeneration and of time's renewal. Viewed from the perspective of the transcendence of temporary cyclical death, the tree can be regarded as the «Tree of Life». This study aims at identifying and decoding the representations of the «tree» in the Christian architecture of the sacred space: the Forest, the Cross-Tree, the Tree with the roots in Heaven, etc.*

Key words: *symbol, tree, forest, cross-tree, sacred-space, sacred architecture*

Rezumat. *Copacul sau arborele este un element prezent încă de la începuturile lumii, simbol al verticalității, axă a lumii care leagă în aceeași substanță cerul, pământul și infernul. Izvor al gândirii, arborele rezumă întreaga importanță a lui, ca principal simbol al zeiței Mame, al regenerării naturii și al reînnoirii timpului. Arborele privit din perspectiva transcenderii morții ciclice temporare, poate fi considerat ca «Arbore al vieții». Acest studiu urmărește identificarea și decodificarea reprezentărilor «arborelui» în arhitectura spațiului sacru creștin: pădurea, arborele-cruce, arborele cu rădăcinile în cer, etc.*

Cuvinte cheie: *simbol, arbore, copac, pădure, copacul-cruce, spațiu sacru, arhitectură sacră*

INTRODUCTION

The tree is an element present from the beginning of the world, a symbol of “verticality”, *the world's axis* linking in the same substance heaven, earth and hell. Placing it in the position of “*Fountain of thought*” (Behaeghel, 2010), the tree summarizes its entire importance as the main symbol of the Mother Goddess, of natural regeneration and of time's renewal. By excellence the tree is a vertical existence, “*the man thinks with it or through it*” (Behaeghel, 2010) and viewed from the perspective of the transcendence of cyclical and temporary death, it can be considered being the “*Tree of Life*”.

Christian sacred space has an architectural component at the same time a symbolic one. The symbol implies representation, being most often a mark or an image associated with a few words or abbreviations of the item that it

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represents. Symbols have always helped in finding or identifying certain values, beliefs, ideas or creed. (Cehan and Gheorghită, 2014)

MATERIAL AND METHOD

"The tree" or "the forest" appear frequently represented in the architecture of Christian sacred space, not only as decorative motifs, but as a defining element of the space. This paper identifies and interprets these representations of the tree and the forest in the architecture of sacred space. As research methods were used: theoretical and photographic documentation, observation and case study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Because there is a universal link expressed through analogic solidarity of the symbolic chain represented by *Axis Mundi, the Cosmic Tree – the Cross - Universal Man*, the model represented by the symbolic geometry *the Tree with the arms into the sky* (Fig.1) describe best the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm.

Both in the East and the West, the universe is sometimes represented by an inverted tree rooted in the sky and with branches spread all over Earth (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1994). This reversal might have its origin in a certain conception of the role of the sun and the light in the development of beings: they draw their life from above, from the sky, and try to get it down on Earth. Hence, the overturning of images: the branches act as roots and the roots act as branches. Life comes from the sky and enters the Earth. According to René Guénon, this tree grows beyond the cosmic world, reversed, as a reflection in the mirror. What is at the top or above the surface of the water is reflected down and backwards. In Hindu symbolism, the roots of the inversed tree appear as a principle of manifestation, and the branches, as development of these. René Guénon discerns here a different meaning: the tree stands above the reflection plane, that limits the reversed cosmic domain from below; it goes beyond the limits of manifestation entering the sphere of reflection, in which it insert the inspiration (Guénon, 2008). The Hebrew esoterism resumes this idea: *the Tree of Life extends from top to down and the sun illuminates it entirely*. In Islam, the Tree of Happiness plunges its roots into the last sky and spreads its branches over and under the Earth (Guénon., 2008). In Chinese symbolism, this tree has its branches anastomosed so that their ends get together in pairs to reveal the synthesis of opposites, or the resorption of duality in unity. Thus we find either a unique tree whose branches are splitting and joining, either two trees having the same root, but united through their branches (Guénon, 2006).

Fulcanelli emphasizes - before moving to decrypt the proper alchemical symbolism, that in Gothic cathedrals (Fig. 2), there were many elements that transcended the Christian religion, some being downright pagan: *"The bold vaults, the nobility of the vessels, the magnitude of the proportions and the beauty of construction make the cathedral an original work, a unequaled harmony, that*

the sequencing of liturgies fails to fill it entirely. If the silence and the introspection under the spectral and colorful light and of the tall stained glass urge to prayer and drive to meditation, the inner curdling, the structure, the ornaments scatter and reflect as a unprecedented force, some feelings not just pious, a more laic spirit and, to call it by name, almost pagan." (Fulcanelli, 2005)



Fig. 1 - a) – The Walnut Tree reversed, Poitier, sec. XVI, France
(<https://blogostelle.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/daprc3a8s-le-thc3a8me-de-larbre-renversc3a9-enseigne-du-noyer-inversc3a9-poitier-vers-xvie-sic3a8cle-illustration-marsailly-blogostelle.jpg?w=600&h=450>)

b) – The Tree in the mirror
(http://38.media.tumblr.com/4c24e17575eb1bd358427af56386d220/tumblr_mf1ewefGOJ1rlphuqo1_500.gif)



Fig. 2 - a) - Santa Maria dos Jeronimos Church, Lisbon (http://www.madeleine-et-pascal.fr/IMG/jpg/DSC_0462-3.jpg)

b) – The Tree Roots (<https://writervsworld.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/tree-root-photo-1.jpg>)

The forest is an archetypal symbol, associated to the natural temple as exuberance of life, but also to the dangers of fallacies or of death. In the model of specific archaic mentalities, the forest or the wooded mountain occupy an

intermediary role in the triad of *water*, *forest/mountain* and *sky* or between *the here* and *the beyond*. The forest represents the pre-human nature, symbolizing Chaos, being populated by all kinds of monsters or it can be assimilated to the house or to the protective maternal womb (Evseev I., 1994).

The forest can also be interpreted as a sacred space, this valence of sacredness being part of the composition and of the diversity of trees, as symbolic representatives of the vital substance of the universe, endowed with a regenerative capacity of nature. The custom of consecrating forests and groves was quite widespread in antiquity, being attested by archaeological or historical sources in many nations. The Greeks and Romans considered the forests and the meadows from within, patrilized and protected by various deities, as places for holding some sacred rituals of thank-offering. The heart or the center of the forest, represented by the image of openings, indicates the sacred space where the encounter with the divine is manifested.

The Dark Forests symbolizes the disorientation, as an area of the unconscious, in which the man enters only with fear. The wandering in the *labyrinth forest*, as an ambivalent symbol of death and regeneration, it is for the initiated one, only a symbolic stage of his becoming. Thereby *going through the maze* becomes a journey of initiation that becomes harder as the obstacles are more numerous. The transformation of the self in the center of the labyrinth attests at the end of the return journey, at the end of the transition from darkness to light, the victory of the spiritual over the material, of the eternal over the ephemeral, of the intelligence over the instinct.

The light that comes on the path of the legendary characters and that glitters through the tree trunks symbolizes the hope in the existence of a shelter. The forest itself, as wildlife nature, it is seen as being threatening, the imagination inhabiting it with wild beings and spirits, but also with fairies that may be benevolent. *"The metaphor of the forest is significant. A forest is not ordered by some binary separation of paths, but is rather a maze"* (Eco, 2009), whose *center* should be sought. So, without changing the original meaning and function of the maze, it's undoubtedly that it includes the idea of defending this *center*. Not *everyone* could get through the maze and get out of there; entering into the labyrinth can have the value of an initiation. The *center* assumes very diverse figurations; thus the way through the center of the maze can be compared with a ritual of defending a city, a tomb or a shrine, in any case, it defends a magical-religious space that should have been made impenetrable and inviolable to the uninitiated. The military function of the labyrinth was, therefore, just a variant of its essential functions of defense against *"evil"*, hostile spirits and death. In other words, *"the role of the labyrinth was to defend a "center" in the prime and rigorous acceptance of the word, thus representing the initiatory access to the sacredness, to the immortality, to the absolute reality."* (Eliade, 1995)

The sacred architecture synthesized in its forms the characteristics of the forest. While the Romanesque church was considered a refuge for the environment, the Gothic cathedral was gaining subtle signification, its verticality of columns looking like tree trunks, the nervures of the vaults resembling dense branches, the subtle relationship with the filtered light, the sinuous course through the portals to the place of transcendence turn it into a real initiating path of finding the truth search (Fig. 2). The cathedral is a synthesis of opposing ideals. The light filtered through the stained glass windows was the final ingredient in this process. All plastic mediums that could produce these amazing effects, served the symbolic function of the cathedrals that explained visually to the mortals, that the meaning of life on Earth is to prepare you through a pure and full of humility life, for the glowing afterlife. Space, light, sculpture and painting, all worked together to create a mystical atmosphere in this large and complex work of art that that is the Gothic cathedral.



Fig. 3 - The interior of the cathedral Sagrada Familia, Arch. Antonio Gaudi
a) - (http://www.sagradafamilia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Arquitectura_8.jpg);
b) - (http://www.sagradafamilia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Arquitectura_2.jpg);
c) - (http://www.sagradafamilia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Arquitectura_10.jpg)

Starting from the principle of Gothic and Byzantine architecture, Antonio created *Gaudi's Sagrada Familia* Cathedral (Fig. 3), using a personal architectural style, generated by forms and geometries inspired by nature, light and color. His intention was to express the Christian faith through an architecture that involves the symbiosis between natural form and Christian iconography. The multitude of pillars in the central nave recalls the image of a forest, their verticality leading our sight toward heights, where, the pyramidal growth of the structure reminds of foliage that seems to merge with the sky. These structural columns, decorated with grooves, which appear to be made of wood, reflect Gaudi's idea that you are inside a palm forest that leads you to prayer. To reduce the load of the roof and to bring light into the building dormers or skylights between columns, of hyperbolic shape, made of green and gold glass pieces, which reflect daylight inside, were designed. All the stained glass windows of the apse follow a plan of gradual tones in order to create a suitable atmosphere for introspection.

Tucked away in the forests of the Ozark Mountains, *Thorncrown Chapel* (Fig. 4), Eureka Springs, is one of the greatest architectural accomplishments of the twentieth century. Built on a wooden structure that mimics a forest canopy, the church fits perfectly in the American specific landscape due to the perimeter enclosing made solely of glass.



Fig. 4 - Thorncrown Chapel, Eureka Springs, Arkansas, SUA, arh. E. Fay Jones
 a) Thorncrown Chapel, external view (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thorncrown_Chapel);
 b) Thorncrown Chapel, interior view (<http://www.go-arkansas.com/AR-Thorncrown-Chapel>);
 c) Alley in Bruges, Belgia (http://31.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lwnrbylucW1r8fegbo1_500.jpg)

The Italian artist Giovanni Mauri demonstrated by its *Vegetal Cathedral* (Fig. 5) that a space of worship, of contemplation and (re)connection with the divine should not be in competition with nature, it may be nature itself. Therefore the artist builds an entirely cathedral just by using trees. The entire structure is made up of 42 columns with a cage type structure built of vegetal and woody elements (pine, chestnut, hornbeam and hazel), that are expected to degrade in time, while the cathedral trees are developing. These live columns are delimiting the space of a basilica with five naves. In total, 80 hornbeam seedlings are planted

in between these columns-structures, and in time they will exceed the existing temporary structure, forming a veritable living cathedral.

In the United States, New Hampshire, *Cathedral of the Pines*, founded in 1945 by Sibyl and Douglas Sloane, represents a place of interfaith worship. *Cathedral of Pines* was intended to be a memorial to those who lost their lives in the Second World War. The church is open every year, from May to October, and hosts various cultural and religious events, as well as lectures on sustainable development and environmental protection. (Fig. 6)



Fig. 5 - Vegetal Cathedral by Italian artist Giovanni Mauri, Vasugana, Italy
a) <http://virtualsacredspace.blogspot.com/2012/03/giuliano-mauri-cathedral-bergamo-italy.html>
b) <http://www.giulianomauri.com/test/cattedrale-vegetale-orobie/>



Fig. 6 - Cathedral of the Pine, New Hampshire, SUA
a) http://discovermonadnock.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Cathedral_of_the_Pines_-_DSC014861.jpg
b) <http://images.fineartamerica.com/images-medium-large-5/cathedral-of-the-pines-john-poltrack.jpg>

CONCLUSIONS

The sacred spaces represented by churches, places of prayer or commemoration and introversion, etc., though the program that they serve are worship spaces that exists as a ways of mediation between the human dimension

and the high spiritual one, their architecture being primarily designed to have a psycho-emotional influence over those that use them. In addition to the physical ordering, which dependent on rites, liturgy or dogma, such spaces are emphasizing themselves high symbolic and aesthetic values which, through specific plastic encodings and artistic means - shapes, light, materials, iconography, narrate and communicate ideas, stimulate the spiritual experience and the sense of sacredness.

Over time, the universe was enveloped in a sacred perspective, beginning with the rocks and flowers up to wildlife and humans. Desacralizing himself, the man desacralized the cosmos too.

This world, which belongs to man, represents a perpetual motion. The four elements that form the universe, but are also found in humans, are aware of a continuous movement and suffer various transformations. Earth, water, fire and air are mixed and converted mutually. The movement that animates the man is similar to the universe, being assimilated as an echo of it. In this ever-changing state, the matter is not separated from the spirit, it is, as Schelling said, "*a sleep of the mind*" (Clement *et al.*, 2000), that the man wants to awaken.

The four elements, water, fire, air and earth, as essential elements in the creation of the universe, are found in the cosmological myths of the world, setting in motion specific groups of images that help the intimate assimilation of the real dispersed in its forms. Over the time, through different ways of thinking, the humanity has shown its sensitivity, the becoming or existence, aided by sufficient images, drawings, paintings or adjacent poses of those, from the almost mystical desire to bring close in any way the nature, the transcendent, or to explain his being. The Man, being a universe in miniature, he has in himself the four elements: he draws his body from *earth*; *water* is represented by his blood; *air* is his breath; and the *fire* is the heat which animates his existence.

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