

The elm, tree of milk and wine

Hans M. Heybroek

Abstract

Elm has played an important role in European culture for thousands of years, in many roles, with regional variation. In material culture, its wood has assisted in hunting and warfare for over seven thousand years; but more importantly, its leaves and bark were semi-indispensable for the production of milk and meat, and served as an emergency food for humans. In the Mediterranean, elm was the main tool for the production of a good quality wine by providing support for the grapevine, and it helped feeding the cattle. These functions sometimes found an echo in the non-material culture. The fact that in Germanic genesis stories the first woman was created out of an elm (the man out of an ash), as well as a severe local taboo on the use of elm wood for skis, threatening the offender with a place in hell, seem both connected to the superior feeding value of this tree. In England and in parts of continental Europe most sacred trees were elms, sometimes performing female functions such as the production of babies. In the Mediterranean, however, the elm was seen as the male partner in the “marriage of the vine to the elm”, which was the celebrated system of viticulture. That image has been used by poets and politicians over the ages to praise the effects of human marriage, cooperation and interdependence. It even forms the core of the apocryphal Bible book “The Shepherd”, where it is seen as a symbol and example for a kind of symbiosis between the rich and the poor. - In conclusion, the ultimate origin of the English elm or ‘Atinia’, as well as its discovery is discussed; that appears to be a question of milk and wine.