

Book Review

Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*. Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2010, pp. 310 + x, ISBN 978-1-84383-565-3.

This is very much a specialist volume, with appeal not only to those interested in religion, mythology and folklore, but also history and geography. Despite an apparently narrow focus on trees in Anglo-Saxon England, there is not much about these trees which Hooke does not cover—her chapters address tree symbolism across both pre-Christian and Christian belief and literature, descriptions of the distribution and agricultural use of the trees and more detailed notes on use and understandings of individual tree species.

I was attracted to this book for its generous chapters on tree symbolism, which account for one third of the book, not including further information contained amongst the details of individual trees. The first chapter is a very comprehensive overview of pre-Christian tree symbolism including from Roman, Norse and Irish sources, and the archaeological record. Hooke also summarises the main concepts associated with trees, such as the notion of the world tree, and their counterparts in India. She is, however, unable to deal with any of this material in detail, although she does take the time to note possible bias in her sources.

Hooke's assessment of Christian tree symbolism is ten pages longer than the pre-Christian material, suggesting a possible bias towards Christian religion as more legitimate or relevant. Her occasional use of scare quotes around the words 'holy' and 'sacred' when describing pre-Christian religion is troubling (i.e. pp. 22-23), as is her choice of the word 'man' to represent 'humanity' (i.e. p. 26). Similarly, Hooke's placing of the word 'neo-paganism' in scare quotes (and lacking capitals—p. 105) is an indication that this is not a book written by someone with a religious studies background and who thus has an objective approach to all religions.

Hooke's approach to her sources is occasionally not as rigorous as it could be. For example, she quotes Hippolytus of Rome but takes this quotation from D. Davies, a secondary source. Similarly, many texts Hooke uses are from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, such as the 1909 reference she gives for *Hywel Dda*. While some early texts have had little work done on them since this era, this is not the case for *Hywel Dda*, and a range of more contemporary sources may have been able to add something to Hooke's argument. More troubling is the occasional presence of James Frazer, and the frequent presence of Robert Graves and *The White Goddess*, especially as a source for the Triads (p. 45), Graves's interpretation of which is not sound. This is a subject on which much excellent work has been done more recently. Hooke would also have benefited from looking at some more recent research into the *Cad Goddau*, rather than limiting herself to Graves's notoriously dodgy version.

There is a lot of excellent information in this volume, but Hooke's odd approach to sources—a mix of primary sources, primary sources quoted in secondary sources and some discredited secondary sources such as Graves—means that this book is best handled by the religious studies scholar who already knows something of the territory.

The book's great advantages lie in what Hooke gleans from a detailed foray into charters, her substantial knowledge of how trees were used agriculturally and as landmarks and what appears to be a very comprehensive and useful list of place names relating to trees. This is the kind of material it would take someone who did not know the territory a great deal of time to track down, and Hooke's expertise and care in doing so adds to the field considerably.

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