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Finns, Forests and Trees

By

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Finns share a close bond with forests and trees both in practical terms and mythology. Hence, they say “Forest is the church of a Finn.” However, extensive urbanization of Finland after the second world war has left youngsters bereft of attachment with the forests which their elders had preserved and enjoyed.

In Finnish mythology, the personified spirit of the forest was called Tapio. He was the guardian of the woods and the King of the Forest as well. He ruled over wild game and was called upon to give good luck in hunting. Tapio's wife was called Mielikki, and they had sons and daughters who took care of the forest. Besides Tapio and his folk, the elder Finns also saw the forest as being populated by the so called “metsänväki” (the forest folk), elves, gnomes, goblins, and fairies. These were not altogether benevolent spirit folk, but there were also malevolent forest spirits that could cause illness or lead one astray in the woods into an upside-down world. The forest also included so called “witches circles” which is a concept that probably derives from the nature of poisonous mushrooms. So closely related was Tapio and Finland in ancient times that Finland was sometimes called Tapiola.

The tree itself has been seen worldwide as a symbol of a world axis that unites the heavens, earth and the lower world, and the Finns were no exception. In Kalevala there is the story of the great oak. So important was the tree as a symbol to Finns that there exists a whole mythos of different trees with their unique characteristics and Gods and Goddesses of the trees, for some trees were seen as masculine and some as feminine. The most important trees to elder Finns were the pine, the fir, and the birch, but other trees also held a sacred importance. So called sacrificial trees were large and old trees under which shade the Finns practiced folk magic all the way to the modern age, and the the sacred grove was an important cultic place in the Pre-Christian times.

The Christmas tree in modern times still reflects this perennial tradition of the sacred tree.



The practical importance of the forest to elder folk was in its role as a source of income and food. It was also seen as an ideal hiding place from enemies. There are also stories from the modern age about artists and cultural people who saw the forest as a place to run away from the chaotic life of modern cities. According to scientific research, only 15 minutes in the forest is enough to calm nerves and lower blood pressure, so the significance of the forest cannot be undermined.

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