Mythical Trees: Crash Course World Mythology #34

Crash Course: World Mythology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=iNw7RIOY7SA
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/iNw7RIOY7SA

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology and today we're continuing our 'round the world tour of mythical features of the natural world. Today, we behold trees.

And yes, technically trees do appear in gardens like the ones in the Garden of Eden, but trees have a mythological richness all their own. Also, they're so nice and shady! They deserve an episode all to themselves.

Right Thoth? So tranquil. Don't worry, we'l fix that.

===== Intro (0:27-0:36) =====

So if you've been watching this series closely, you'll remember some of the trees we've already met like the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil from Eden. That was the one tree Yahweh told Adam and Eve not to eat from. And then they did.

It's the one that hosted a serpent that told Eve to eat the knowledge apple, which might have actually been a quince, a fig, or a pomegranate, and which filled Eve and Adam both with the knowledge that they were naked.

As you may recall, that didn't work out very well and it's the reason that we now have pain in childbirth and infinite weeding. But the Tree of Knowledge is hardly the only mythicly significant tree.

We've also met Yggdrasil and we're about to encounter Ashvattha, two trees which contain the whole of cosmology in their roots and branches.

We've talked a bit before about Yggdrasil, the great ash tree where Odin hangs himself to learn the secret of runes. Between the tips of its branches and its branches exists the entire cosmos. From the beginning to teh end of time.

Yggdrasil has three great roots: one reaching to Asgard where the Aesir and light elves live; one to Jotunheim, the home of men, dark elves, dwarfs, and giants; and the last to Niflheim, where Hel the person rules over the land of the dead, Hel the place.

Yggdrasil is both a tree of knowledge and a tree of life, connecting and sustaining all the planes of the Norse universe. It's foretold to be one of teh few things to survive Ragnarok, and from its bark mankind will be renewed.

Fittingly, Yggdrasil teems with life and activity. On its top branches lives and eagle. And on top of that eagle, a hawk. Down at the base of the tree lives Níðhöggr, a dragon who gnaws on the roots of the tree and baddies on their way to hell.

A naughty squirrel named Ratatoskr lives among the branches, carrying insults back and forth between the eagle and the dragon, making them even more insulting along the way.

Indian mythology also features a tree that represents the entire cosmos. In the Vedas and the Upanishads, we find a giant, inverted tree whose roots reach to the sky and whose branches cover the earth.

This cosmic tree, Ashvattha, often called a Bodhi tree, represents Brahman, the supreme cosmic spirit in full and glorious bloom.

Ashvattha is further described in the mahabharata, which explains, "Sprung from the un-manifested, arising from it only as support, [the tree's] trunk is Bodhi (enlightenment or awakening), it's inward cavities the channels of the sense, the great elements its branches, the objects of teh senses its leaves, its fair flowers good and evil, pleasure and pain the consequent fruits. This eternal Brahma-tree is the source of life for all beings."

Whether upside-down or right-side up, these trees have particular structures which can be interpreted as containing the entire universe while also providing delicious and occasionally dangerous snacks.

Sometimes though, these trees represent far less than the whole world or universe. Trees are also often involved in myths about personal transformation. And it makes sense, trees have an annual cycle of change and many even seem to die and come back to life each year.

We've already seen one tree transformation myth in the story of Thoth's pal Osiris, although that one is complicated because Osiris is entombed in a coffin which is then enclosed in a tree... For another tree's formation, we're heading to Greece for Daphne and Apollo.

The myth of Daphne and Apollo begins with Apollo making fun of Eros, who you may know better as Cupid. Here's a tip though, don't make fun of babies with a bow and an arrow. Because babies with a bow and and arrow are dangerous.

In revenge, Eros looses two magic arrows. One of gold and one of lead. The gold one is for Apollo and it makes him fall in love with the nymph, Daphne. So far, so cute. But then, he shoots Daphne with the lead arrow and as soon as Daphne sees Apollo, she is deeply and madly disgusted by him.

Apollo pursues Daphne and Daphne rejects him. Apollo is persistent and Daphne keeps shooting him down. Mortal men might take the hint, but Apollo is a god and gods do not take hints. Before you know it, Apollo is literally chasing Daphne across Greece.

Not especially interested in the advances of a god she despises, Daphne cries out to her father, Pineios, the River God, for help, asking him to make the earth swallow her up or transform her into something else.

Both are preferable to sex with Apollo.

Her dad goes for the transformation option, turning Daphne into a laurel tree. Apollo looks at the tree and realizes he loves this tree. After some rather uncomfortable and unfortunate tree molesting, he decrees that the laurel will forever be his symbol.

And Daphne... well we don't know how Daphne feels about it. She's a tree now. But my guess is that she is not super thrilled with this outcome.

A different tree transformation myth takes us to a part of the world we haven't visited yet: Vietnam. Here, the story of Tan, Lang, and Tao is both a transformation story and an etiological story, explaining the traditional Vietnamese marriage custom.

Tan and Lang are two brothers. They're not twins, but they're very very similar, almost no one can tell them apart from their friend, Tao, the daughter of the village teacher. She learns which brother is which by staring deeply into their eyes.

She knows the older brother, Tan, is the extroverted one, while the younger, Lang, is compliant and thoughtful. One day, Tao realizes that Tan is in love with her. Before she knows what to do, Tan's parents have come to ask for Tao's hand.

She and her parents agree. Tan and Tao are married. And Tao travels to live with her new husband's family. Tan is happily married, but still loves his younger brother, so he tries to include Lang.

Tan asks Lang to come on walks with him and Tao, but the younger brother always refuses. Tao is sensitive to the emotions of the two brothers and one day, she realizes that, despite his quiet exterior, Lang is deeply in love with her.

Eventually, his desires become too much to bear, so he moves to a remote mountain to garden and to write. And I mean, hey, we've all been there.

After ten days without his brother, Tan is beside himself with worry and goes to search for him, leaving Tao behind. After another ten days, Tao becomes worried and goes to search for the brothers.

She heads to the mountains, up a treacherous path to a river that's too fast and wide to cross. There's no ferry and the weather is starting to turn. So she knocks on the door of a nearby hut.

Let's find out what happens next in the Thought Bubble.

===== Thought Bubble (7:21) =====

Isnide the hut, Tao meets a kindly old couple. She asks them if they've seen two men, one dressed in white and the other in green.

"Yes!" The old man says, "About a month ago my wife found a man dressed all in white, sitting by the river. He was weeping and acting as if he were embracing someone, but it was only the air. It began to rain, so she came back to the house to fetch a rain jacket for him."

"I brought the rain jacket," the old woman says, "And asked the man to put it on and join us in the house. He said nothing, so I laid the jacket down beside him. The next day, the man in white wasn't there! But where he had been sitting, there was a strange white rock."

"Ten days later, another man, this one dressed in green, came by. And asked if they'd seen a man dressed in white. We showed him the rock and told him the story." The old man says, "The man in green cried that his brother had turned to stone. He embraced the rock and wept bitterly. And when another storm came through, he, like his brother, refused to leave the spot.

"The next day, the man in green was also gone. And by the rock stood a new tree that had not been there before. The tree seemed to be protecting the rock."

The next morning, Tao goes down to the river. She kneels by the rock and embraces the tree, crying into its leaves. When the couple wakes up, Tao is nowhere to be found, but they do find a new vine with its roots deep in the ground, twisting up the tree as if embracing and supporting it.

And when the old couple pluck a leaf from the vine, its smell reminds them of the young woman who had spent the night in their hut.

Thanks Thought Bubble!

===== End Thought Bubble (8:56) =====

This sweet but tragic story of love and devotion doesn't end there, though. One summer afternoon, the king comes to the river and sits on the strange rock under the strange tree supported by the strange vine. He asks his attendant, "What sort of tree is it?" And orders him to pick one of its fruits.

Another attendant tells the king the story of Lang, Tan, and Tao, explaining the white rock represents Lang's pure heart. The tree represents Tan's attempt to protect his brother. And the vine shows Tao's love for her husband.

The king tastes the fruit wrapped in the leaf of the vine mixed with a bit of the rock and finds the taste most agreeable. Strange that he enjoyed eating rocks, but afterward he declares that the love of these two brothers and the married couple is so strong that it has produced a lovely fruit.

And from that point, the fruit and the leave and teh rock would be used at marriage proposals and weddings a symbol of both love and fidelity.

Mythological trees vary in size and meaning. Some are large enough to contain the whole world, others are splendor plants meant to represent a single young woman or man.

Decidiuous trees, with their cycles of birth and death, lend themselves to metaphor, as does their shape with branches reaching toward teh sky and roots burrowing into the ground.

Trees can live for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Much longer than humans.

So it makes sense that they might come to represent something greater than the relatively frail human form. But poignantly, they also serve as a retreat for humanity. When the sorrows of unrequited love or the threat of abuse become too much to endure.

Thanks for watching, see you next time. We're going to talk about mythical cities.

===== Credits (10:38) =====

Check out our Crash Course Mythology Thoth tote bag and poster, available now at dftba.com.

Crash Course Mythology is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholtz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana. It is produced with the help o fall of these very nice people. Our animation team is Thought Cafe.

Crash Course exists thanks to generous support from our patrons at Patreon. Patreon is a voluntary subscription service where you can support the content you love through a monthly donation to help keep Crash Course free for everyone forever.

Crash Course is made with Adobe Creative Cloud. Check the description for a link to a free trial.

Thanks for watching and if crushing despair turned me into a tree, I'd want to be Groot.