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Paisley pattern, variation of the cover illustration

# THE CYPRESS AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN ORIENT AND OCCIDENT

Dunja Richter

As a gathering of slender figures, the crowns of the venerable cypresses of Bagh-e Fin<sup>1</sup> emerge from the backdrop of the dusty city of Kashan and its surrounding hills and wastelands: a sand-colored sea of walls, roofs and arid ground. The 400-year-old trees, perpetually clothed in plumes of dark green needles, are the only spots of color to be seen. In such a landscape the walled garden appears, even today, as an image of paradise. In the scorching heat of the day the cypresses promise the relief of shade. In the midst of the city air they exude an aromatic scent. Wherever cypresses are to be found, they say: here is water, here is life.

In this walled garden the cypresses stand as representatives of a highly refined garden art that developed from the simple oasis gardens of nomadic tribes to the elaborate gardens that serve as places of encounter, contemplation and joy in the midst of the hostile desert. People gather in the shade of the cypresses to walk, picnic, and talk among themselves. Those in quiet contemplation might reflect on these very trees, which are deeply rooted in the cultural consciousness of Iranian society.

## Significance as symbol, ornamental tree and source of wood

The origins of the Mediterranean cypress<sup>2</sup> (*Cupressus sempervirens*, سرو or *sarv*) lie in the northern part of today's Iran and the mountains of Asia Minor. The species' appellation, *sempervirens*, refers to an important characteristic: it is ever green. Unchanging, the cypress appears aloof from the change and transience of nature. It is a sturdy tree; neither the wind nor the seasons can undo its elegant and solemn appearance. It grows tall in its youth and slows in old age. Under favorable conditions a cypress might live up to nine hundred years and grow as

1 The walled garden Bagh-e Fin in Kashan was created under Shah Abbas I in the seventeenth century and is one of the oldest preserved gardens in present-day Iran.

2 The cypress family (*Cupressaceae*) comprises 21 genera and 140 species, including the genera *Sequoiadendron*, *Juniperus*, *Calocedrus*, *Taxodium* and *Thuja*.

The strong symbolism of the cypress family is remarkable. *Cryptomeria japonica* is the national tree of Japan and is often planted at Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* serves an important role in Native American ceremonies and rituals. In: Hageneder, Fred: *Die Weisheit der Bäume*, Stuttgart 2006, pp. 72, 77.

tall as 40 meters. One tree in the Iranian city of Abarkūh is estimated to be over 4000 years old, long protected as a piece of natural heritage by the country.

Although certain kinds of cypresses have horizontally protruding branches (such as *Cupressus sempervirens* ‘Horizontalis’), the prevailing image of the cypress is that of the columnar form cultivated since antiquity (*Cupressus sempervirens* ‘Stricta’). Its special feature is that the branches are more densely arranged than almost any other tree with pyramidal form.<sup>3</sup>

Tree cults played an extraordinary role in all strata of Zoroastrian society, in which the cypress held a prominent position. With their upright branches, cypresses were considered a symbol of the holy flame and as such were planted around fire temples. In the *Shahnameh* (the *Book of Kings*), the national epic poem of the Persian-speaking world, the cypress is said to have originated in paradise and was planted on earth by Zarathustra himself. It was seen as being free (*āzād*), slim (*sahī*), shady (*sāye fekan*) and tall (*bālā*).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, although the doctrine in the *Avesta* (the primary collection of Zoroastrian religious texts) explicitly forbade holy worship in places such as enclosed groves, the commandment was quickly broken. The planting of trees was considered a sacred occupation and was part of a good education.<sup>5</sup> On the outside staircases of the palace of King Darius I in Persepolis one can find carved stone reliefs with cypresses arranged at regular intervals. Early palace courtyards and gardens also followed a formal plan. The four-part garden (*chahar bagh*), as it had already been realized in the palace complex of Cyrus II in Pasargadae, flourished in Islamic times. The planting areas were lower than the paths and the trees stood in rows to aid irrigation. In this arid region, water was regarded as a special treasure, first channeled via underground *qanats*, or aqueducts, into the gardens and then into other parts of the city. The cypress was an ideal tree species for Persian gardens because it is robust and can survive long periods of drought. To this day the paths, watercourses

3 Bärtels, Andreas; Schmidt, Peter A. (Ed.): *Enzyklopädie der Gartengehölze*, Stuttgart 2014, pp. 256, 258.

4 Hamidifard-Graber, Fatemeh: *Von Ackerwinde bis*

*Zypresse. Das Pflanzenreich im “Königsbuch” des Ferdousi*, Berlin 2009, p. 103.

5 Gothein, Marie Luise : *Geschichte der Gartenkunst*, vol. 1, Jena 1926 (edition 1988), pp. 40, 416.

and basins of the *chahar baghs* are accompanied by rows of this evergreen tree, forming a counterpoint to the ever-changing lively fruit trees that grow in the beds, such as almond, apricot, plum, cherry and orange, which, in spring transform into a sea of flowers.

Cemetery groves played a significant role in ancient Persian society. The tomb of the poet Saadi (1210–92) in Shiraz attests to this, surrounded by cypresses, pines, shrubs and rose bushes. The cypress also played a prominent role in Persian arts, used in poetry to allude to flawless, slender growth, as a source of ornament in buildings, in miniature painting and in the patterns of carpets and fabrics. Cypresses were so highly valued that felling them or despoiling parks was a popular means of enacting revenge on a particular ruler, as was dealt out to the Phoenicians, who resisted occupation by Persia.<sup>6</sup>

With the Assyrian-Babylonian conquests, the cypress moved further west, first into the territory of present-day Lebanon and Cyprus and later via Crete, the Peloponnese and the Greek mainland to Italy.<sup>7</sup> Another route ran centuries later via North Africa to Spain. The symbolic character of cypresses was not lost in migration; in Greece, sacred cypress groves were planted in honor of the gods Zeus, Rhea and Athena.<sup>8</sup> Such groves were regarded as places where the persecuted were granted political and judicial asylum. Stealing a tree from a sacred grove was punishable by a fine of five pounds of gold.<sup>9</sup>

Not only the cypress tree itself, but also its wood was considered especially valuable, even sacred. Alongside cedar, it was possibly the most important raw material for the emergence of the advanced civilizations of the Eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor. As a strong, durable and insect-resistant wood, it was prized by the Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans for the construction of temples and palaces, as well as in shipbuilding. Precious statues of gods, sarcophagi and temple shrines were also made from fragrant cypress wood.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 40–44.

<sup>7</sup> Hehn, Victor: *Kulturpflanzen und Haustiere in ihrem Übergang aus Asien nach Griechenland und Italien sowie in das übrige Europa*, Berlin 1911, pp. 287–291.

<sup>8</sup> Beuchert, Marianne: *Symbolik der Pflanzen*, Frankfurt a. Main/Leipzig 2004, p. 360.

<sup>9</sup> Hageneder (2006), pp. 72, 76.

<sup>10</sup> Hehn (1911), pp. 287–289.

## A defining design element of Mediterranean landscapes and gardens

In the Roman Empire under Augustus (27 BC–14 AD), the cypress gained a new significance through the importation of the species from Sicily to the mainland via the port of Taranto.<sup>11</sup> From then on, an image of a cultural landscape began to form, which we still think of a typically Italian, and particularly the Tuscan, landscape. More broadly, the cypress became a characteristic feature of the Mediterranean landscape, alongside the umbrella pine (*Pinus pinea*), setting vertical accents in the landscape as solitary figures, in rows, or in groupings. The cypress was quickly absorbed into the culture, as the intensive use of its wood had led to the deforestation of the few naturally existing stocks.

For much of Roman antiquity, agriculture was long an important source of income, and the upper classes were principally based in the country; townhouses were thus only inhabited briefly in winter. Even as a rich urban life developed, the great estates, with their vineyards, olive groves, orchards and vegetable gardens, were still cared for. With increasing prosperity, a refined villa culture emerged, often with magnificent gardens. Roman estates were highly diversified and consisted of many small plots in different locations. Cicero (106–43 BC) owned about twenty villas during his lifetime, a level of ownership not unheard of. The advantage of this strategy of geographic diversification was that weather-related crop losses in one place could be compensated by others and the greatest yield could be achieved with plants adapted to each region.<sup>12</sup> The borders of estates were often planted with cypresses.<sup>13</sup> In finely structured landscapes they accompanied paths as avenues or in rows, made traveling more pleasant, served as wind shelters, provided shade and pointed the way to country estates. The cypress played an important role in both the grounds of the *villa urbana*, the lifestyle country estate, and the *villa rustica* with its working farms. In Pliny the Younger's (62–114) Villa Tuscum, cypresses were appreciated as ornamental trees because of their evergreen foliage.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 290–291.

<sup>12</sup> Gothein (1926), pp. 87–89.

<sup>13</sup> Hehn (1911), p. 291.

<sup>14</sup> Gothein (1926), pp. 108–109.

With the return to styles of antiquity in the Renaissance, villa culture was revived and the villa became the new center of culture. The garden served as a place to spend time, to conduct philosophical conversation and enjoy convivial pleasures. According to Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* (1485), an ornamental garden could not do without ivy-covered cypresses. The virtuoso woodcuts in Francesco Colonna's allegorical novel *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) depict garden and landscape scenes with ancient ruins, grottos, springs, arcades, labyrinths and cypresses that heavily inspired sixteenth-century garden design. Along with walls and water, evergreen plants were essential design elements in Renaissance gardens. Cypresses were planted initially as solitary figures, and paths were bordered with cut myrtles and laurel. From the seventeenth century on, rows and avenues of cypresses bestowed gardens a solemn, serious character, such as one can find in the gardens of Villa d'Este in Tivoli, Villa Montalto in Rome or the Giardino di Boboli in Florence.<sup>15</sup> The gardens of the Villa Medici in Castello have a circular fountain in the middle, once surrounded by a *bosco*, or 'forest' of cypresses, laurel and myrtles.<sup>16</sup> The geometric character of the trees echoed the formality of the garden layout. As was already practiced in antiquity, cypresses (along with yew, juniper and box trees) were trained and cut into artful topiary figures.<sup>17</sup>

Alongside its significant presence in landscapes and gardens, the cypress is still the kind of tree typically found in cemeteries across southern Europe even today. In ancient times, prominent citizens were honored by surrounding their graves with cypress groves. This practice had already spread across Persia, Asia Minor and Egypt, and later spread as far as Greece, Italy and Spain. In these cultures, the tree symbolized perseverance and immortality: having been cut down once before, it would not be driven out again. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Cyparissus is transformed into a graceful cypress—the tree of pain and death. Moreover, the cypress has long been used in funeral rituals. In Rome, the houses in which someone had died were decorated with cypress branches.<sup>18</sup> With its

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 256, 275, 307, 321.

<sup>17</sup> Gothein (1926), p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> Hansmann, Wilfried: *Gartenkunst der Renaissance und des Barock*, Köln 1983, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Beuchert (2004), p. 361.

evergreen foliage and its shape that connects the earth with the sky, it is a symbol of the resurrection both in the Christian Mediterranean and Islamic world.<sup>19</sup>

### The image of the South: Imitation of the cypress north of the Alps

For centuries, the image of the Italian landscape has been characterized by the dark cypresses that stand out against the gentle rolling landscape, punctuated by villages and country estates. Such picturesque charm made a deep impression on travelers from the north on their Grand Tour, creating a lasting memory of Italy as a place people longed to visit and imitate in more northern climes; but the cypress does not tolerate long periods of frost, and can only grow north of the Alps in very mild local climates, such as can be found on the island of Mainau on Lake Constance.

The image of the south was evoked in French and German landscape gardens of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries mainly by Lombardy poplars (*Populus nigra* 'Italica') in place of cypresses. Discovered in Lombardy as a result of natural mutation, the tree reached France in 1745, England in 1758 and Germany around 1765.<sup>20</sup> One treatise emphasizes its advantages: "The tree variety ... grows in a very short time, is easy to reproduce, requires neither much care nor great expense and delivers a considerable product to its master after fifteen years."<sup>21</sup> Its rapid youthful growth was an important advantage when creating or redesigning parks, allowing spatial structures to be fully formed in only a matter of years. Its particular habitus served to accentuate certain garden scenes. From 1766 onwards in Ermenonville, near Paris, the Marquis de Girardin (1735–1808) staged two park panoramas, playing with the contrasting moods between north and south. A flat Nordic landscape in the style of the painter Jacob van Ruisdael (1628–1682), complete with canal, water mills and windmill, was set against an Arcadian landscape in the manner of Claude Lorrain (1600–1682), with a river, waterfall, grotto and a classical temple of

<sup>19</sup> Hageneder 2006, 75.

<sup>20</sup> Wimmer, Clemens Alexander: "Kurze Geschichte der Säulenpappel". In: Zandera, 16 (2001), no. 1. Internet (revised version): <http://historischegaerten.de>, consulted 1.10.19.

<sup>21</sup> Pelée de St-Maurice: *L'art de cultiver le peuplier d'Italie* [...], Paris 1762, p. 8, quoted in: Wimmer (2001).

philosophy. The island tomb of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) was accentuated with poplars reminiscent of Mediterranean cypresses. Already transfigured into a place of pilgrimage in the 18th century, this motif was also imitated in other gardens such those at Wörlitz and Berlin's Tiergarten. Lombardy poplars can frequently be found in the creations of Friedrich Ludwig von Sckell (1750–1823) and in the early works of Peter Joseph Lenné (1789–1866). They were used as windbreaks and in the consolidation and sheltering of embankments as well as on roadsides, especially around Berlin and Potsdam.

The mania for poplars eventually waned, as poplars age prematurely. Avenues were soon thought of as “monotonous and tiring”, and entire sections of avenues were destroyed by a particular caterpillar species. As a result, Prussian roads were later planted with deciduous trees. Over the course of the nineteenth century, landscape gardens increasingly relied on the upright English oak (*Quercus robur* ‘Fastigiata’), despite the tendency of its crown to fall apart and lose its leaves.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, both the poplar and oak are still to be found today as stand-ins for the cypress tree in the parks and landscapes north of the Alps.

Also, north of the Alps, evergreen trees were more suited to the serious character of cemeteries. For a long time, the northern white cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*) has been the most prevalent, and since the middle of the nineteenth century various species of false cypress, (*Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*, but also *C. obtusa*, and *C. pisifera*). These plant genera are characterized by their great variety. Yew (*Taxus baccata*) and juniper (*Juniperus spec.*) have both been used for hedge and topiary since the Baroque period. Cut into cones or other figures, they adorned the magnificent parterres in front of castles and palaces.

In its westward migration from the Orient as far as Italy and Spain, the cypress tree helped expand the relatively limited range of the flora of the Mediterranean region. Over time, it established itself as a defining plant in the region and has, ever since, been an essential figure in the perhaps exoticized image of the south. Its characteristic shape and the profound symbolism it carries, later imitated by more frost-resistant plants in the north, also ensures that the cypress still serves as an archetype in garden and landscape design, both in its origins and in territories north of the Alps.

<sup>22</sup> Wimmer (2001).