Undeadness and the Tree of Life
Ecological Thought of Sovereignty

... perpetual spirals of power and pleasure.

Michel Foucault

Dead trees started to drift into gallery spaces in the late 1960s and they continue to wash up with tidal frequency on gallery shores today. Take, for example, the arresting tree-works of artists Robert Smithson (1969), Zoe Leonard (1997), and Anselm Kiefer (2006) (see Figures 1-2).¹ As I contemplated writ-

¹ For Zoe Leonard’s Tree (1997), view the image at ArtSEENsoHo here: http://www.artseensoho.com/Art/COOPER/leonard97/leonard1.html. My reading of these dead trees is shaped by and also questions the boundary between creaturely life and animal life posed by Eric L. Santner in two books: On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgame of Sovereignty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). I am grateful to Randy
ing this essay on the medieval Tree of Life, I could not help but notice that dead trees began falling into galleries synchronous with the so-called revolution in molecular biology, one which redefined the molar (arboreal root and branch) to the molecular (the spiral and rhizome). In the temporal shadow of sculptures of the DNA spiral, widely exhibited in the late 1950s, Michel Foucault, a seer of this shift from molar to molecular, from classical sovereign power (“to make die and let live”) to modern biopower (“to make live and let die”), construed molecular biopolitics as a question of both power and pleasure: “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure.”


Figure 1. Robert Smithson, Dead Tree (1969). Photograph: Vaga Rights.


Such spirals have become the instigation for important recent studies on vibrant matter and ecological thought by scholars such as Jane Bennett and Timothy Morton. As Foucault envisioned his suggestive image, biotechnology laboratories had just figured out how to cut up spirals of DNA into molecular scraps to be spliced into engineered matter—think of such matter as souvenirs of the undeadness of the classical sovereign who can make die and let live. It is such undeadness, or what Eric Santner has called an archive of creaturely life, that animates, I argue, the undeadness of dead trees in gallery spaces, and, as I shall unfold, the undeadness of historical trees of life.

This chapter therefore returns to the fearful symmetry proposed by Foucault—the classical sovereign who could make die and let live and the modern biopolitical sovereign who can make live and let die—in an effort to think the cut and the spiral together in an untimely way. This essay further asks whether it might be necessary to supplement the notion of homo sacer (the one who can be killed but who may not be sacrificed) with a diffracting notion of res sacra (the thing that can be cut, but may not be sacrificed). Imagined another way: how to think of the undeadness of the tree of life?

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6 For homo sacer as the sign of sovereignty, the one who decides on bare life, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
Since you cannot be my wife, you will be my tree.
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 1, ll. 669–670

Scholars of sovereignty have written much on the becoming-beast of the sovereign, but have little to say about the becoming-tree of sovereignty’s objects, even though dendranthropy has fascinated fabulists such as Ovid. Such muteness may be partially explained by the uncanny misfortunes of scholarly preservation: take, for example, the loss of Aristotle’s book on plants, the companion piece to his well-studied book on animals; the forgetting of Wolfgang Goethe’s amazing treatise on the *Metamorphosis of Plants* (with his exuberant imagining of the leaf as the evolutionary toggle). Likewise, Charles Darwin’s prescient pedagogical immersion in botany is mostly marginalized in favor of his zoological dramas. The animal turn of contemporary critique leaves plants on the verge. Yet, contemporary media rustles with trees, or what students of vibrant matter might call arboreal actants. Take,

10 Graham Harman has now become the arbiter of Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT). See his *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009). Harman on actants, also called objects (not things) by Harman: “No actor, however trivial, will be dismissed as mere noise in comparison with its essence, its context, its physical body, or its conditions of possibility. Everything will be absolutely concrete, all objects and all modes of dealing with objects will now be on the same footing” (13).
for example, the great tree-rhizome, the Home Tree, the star of James Cameron’s recent film, *Avatar* (2009), whose proposed fate was to be bombed to splinters for the sake of colonial mineral extraction (“It is only a goddamn tree” as the sovereigns of the film exclaim). Or consider the mystical dance of Mrs. O’Brien (Jessica Chastain), who levitates around the trunk of the tree of life in Terrence Malick’s film of that same name (see Figure 3). Malick had uprooted this majestic oak (all 30 tons of it), whose trunk, branches, and leaves punctuate *The Tree of Life* (2011), and transported it eight miles to the movie set for transplanting. As I watched the YouTube video of the transport, I understood that Malick wished to assure his viewer that this is the tree of life, not a life of a tree.

*Figure 3. still image from Terrence Malick, dir., Tree of Life (2011)*

These stories of arboreal uprooting trace the anxiety around the differences between life and “a life” closely observed by Jane Bennett: “A life thus names a restless activeness, a destruc-tive-creative force-presence that does not coincide fully

A strong incarnational theology informs this vision. For a differing vision, see Bennett, “Systems and Things.”

11 “Tree of Life” [video], February 16, 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOfKsg7SH8c.
with any specific body.”

It is this non-coincidence of a life, its spectral materialism, that I track in the following four splices.

SPLICE ONE // 2049 BCE, BRONZE CUTS WOOD:
SEAHENGE, NORTH–WEST COAST OF NORFOLK

It is springtime 2049 BCE on the northwest coast of Norfolk, England. The climate is warming; the sea is rising. The oak groves growing behind the shoreline are failing in the wet conditions. Enter a troupe of fifty or so bronze axe-wielding men and women with the aim to fell over 20 oak trees to build a palisade and, also, to uproot the massive trunk (measuring 5 feet across by 5½ feet wide, with an estimated weight of two tons) of a huge century-old oak tree. These armed folk were an elite entourage. Smiths were only just introducing into the Britain the sovereignty of metallurgy (smelting the metals of copper and tin). Just like an iPhone today, bronze axes then were signs of the most avant-garde tool/weapon. In 2049 BCE, local Norfolk inhabitants would have been content with their elegantly knapped flint tools which were capable of murder, butchery, deforestation, and harvesting. Industrial-scale mining in nearby Grimes Grave, Norfolk, furnished an ample supply of flint. So why inaugu-

12 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 54.
14 Here I am thinking of the reflections of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), 404–423, on early metallurgy: how early smiths linked the metal with the weapon to constitute a new assemblage, a constellation that deducts from the flow, thus the notion of a sovereign cut. In their words, “Metal is neither a thing nor an organism, but a body without organs” (411).
rate an exceptional metal ritual of tree-cutting, one that excluded the use of contemporary flint tools (archaeologists have detected not one flint mark on the well-preserved timber from this excavation)?

Let us carry this question forward. Once tree-fellers finished their task, these metal people used honeysuckle ropes to drag the several tons of harvested wood along a timber pathway toward the coastal barrier, a distance of 80 or so feet. They had meticulously stripped the uprooted stump of its bark and relocated it upside down (roots facing upward) within the center of the henge-like palisade. They arranged the unstripped palisade posts with their bark side facing outward. An eight-inch gap in the palisade, barely an entrance-way, was blocked by a post set before the gap. This metal community had thus created an uprooted stripped trunk set within a fabricated trunk-like structure of the palisade and for all intents and purposes sealed it off.

Fast forward to 1998 when the tidal currents exposed the submerged henge and it became the subject of archaeological investigation (see Figure 4). The palisade measured 24-½ feet in diameter and reached an estimated height of 13 feet. Druids and environmentalists protested what they saw as a desecrating excavation, but they lost their legal case. Eventually, earth-moving equipment lifted the central, inverted stump.

No evidence of Bronze Age burial or habitation was found within the wood henge. What to think, then, about this palisade designed by its makers to appear like a tree trunk enclosing the monumental inverted and stripped tree stump? The new life of metal (“we are walking, talking metals”15) collides in this wood henge with the vegetal world.

I like to think of this Seahenge as a chapter in the history of phenomenology before phenomenology. The bronze-axe wielders use the new life of metals to investigate the properties of arboreal life. With their understanding of the “polycrystalline structure of nonorganic matter,”¹⁶ these metal people uprooted and stripped a life of a tree in order to produce an enclosure that captured it as the tree of life and punctuated the undead seam of the organic and the non-

¹⁶ Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 60.
organic—a seam of violence and intensive labor. It is at such a seam that Franz Kafka wrote his short story of trees to remind us not to mistake a life of a tree for the tree of life. “For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie sleekly and a little push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can’t be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only an appearance.”

**SPLICE 2 // 8 CE, TOMIS ON THE BLACK SEA:**

“All That Remains of Her Is a Warm Glow”

My second splice (8 CE) comes from Rome via the flat marshlands that border the Black Sea. There stood the Roman outpost of Tomis (now Constanta, Romania) to which the alleged traitor Ovid (43 BCE-17/18 CE) was exiled by the personal command of his patron and sovereign, Augustus Caesar. Tomis might seem far afield from Britain, yet Ovid nevertheless stood behind the writing desk of the leading British botanist of the late eighteenth century, Erasmus Darwin, just as he also guided Carl Linnaeus on his ethno-botanical tour of Lapland. In the medieval school curriculum,


19 See, for example, Erasmus Darwin’s proem to his “Loves of Plants,” taken here from the second edition of his *Botanic Garden* (London: J. Nichols, 1790), available via Project Gutenberg (http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/10671):

Whereas P. OVIDIUS NASO, a great Necromancer in the famous Court of AUGUSTUS CAESAR, did by art poetic transmute Men, Women, and even Gods and Goddesses, into Trees and Flowers; I have undertaken by similar art to restore some of them to their original animality, after having remained prisoners so long in their respective vegetable mansions; and have here exhibited them before thee. Which thou may’st contemplate as diverse little pictures suspended over the chimney of a Lady’s
the *Metamorphoses* powerfully shape-shifted medieval pedagogy and commentary and spawned a world of medieval talking trees.\(^{20}\)

One strand of the contested publication history of the *Metamorphoses* claims that Ovid put his finishing touches on his work as he went into exile. Ovid, the rhetorical master of becoming-animal and becoming-vegetal (whom, surprisingly, Deleuze and Guattari pass over silently), knew all too well the state of exception, since the sovereign had decided on his treason and exiled him. Bodies, understandably, are up for grabs in the *Metamorphoses*. For the purposes of this splice, I focus on the story of Apollo and Daphne, because it addresses a famous example of the becoming-tree of a human and because her metamorphosis raised for Ovid the pain of the radical exposure to sovereign *jouissance*. The poet rhetorically stages the sovereign cut in his description of Apollo’s pursuit of Daphne. The closer the god gets to the fleeing nymph, the more wolf-like he becomes. Ovid compares Apollo to a Gallic hound, a large canine breed valued by Romans and dressing-room, connected only by a slight festoon of ribbons. And which, though thou may’st not be acquainted with the originals, may amuse thee by the beauty of their persons, their graceful attitudes, or the brilliancy of their dress.

used for animal games in their amphitheaters: “he clings to her, is just about to spring, with his long muzzle straining at her heels, while she, not knowing whether she’s been caught, in one swift burst, eludes those snapping jaws.” At the moment the sovereign Apollo rhetorically metamorphoses into a wolf-like creature, Daphne implores her father, Peneus, the river god, to transform her. She is arrested in mid-air as a thin layer of bark girdles her trunk and her feet turn into the roots of a laurel tree. Her head becomes a canopy: “all that remains of her is a warm glow.” Ovid suggests with “nitor” that her glow, her luster, her brightness is the elusive phenomenal intensity and excess of Daphne’s shape-shifting. Walter Benjamin, a student of aura, helps us to understand how Daphne’s aura belongs to a disjunctive temporality and medium of perception that glows with the biopolitical excitation of her radical exposure to Apollo’s sovereign jouissance. The becoming-tree of Daphne flickers with her sovereign abandonment. For Benjamin there was something human about objects, something vibrant, something non-coincidental with human labor. In a letter (May 7, 1940) written just a few months before his death, Benjamin attempted to explain aura to the skeptical Theodor W. Adorno: “The tree and the shrub vouchsafed to people are not made by them. Thus there must be something human about objects that is not bestowed by the work done.”

21 Metamorphoses, I, 738–742.
22 “Remanet nitor unus in illa”: Metamorphoses, I, 761.
23 The discussion that follows is inspired by the meticulous and radiant essay of Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Benjamin’sAura,” Critical Inquiry 34 (2008): 336–375. Hansen questions the narrow understanding of Benjamin’s notion of aura as articulated in many contemporary studies of the technology of aura. Her excavation of Benjamin’s work offers a rich analysis of the disjunctive temporalities of aura that cannot be contained by any essentialist notion of technological media. See also, Beatrice Hanssen, Walter Benjamin’s Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
The *Dream of the Rood*, an Anglo-Saxon poem about a talking tree, opens with an interjection: Attention! The careful listener can hear the brutal sound of its uprooting at the hands of the enemy. It is then transported to Calvary where it will serve as the cross. Alone, it stands vigil by the corpse of Christ after the echoes of mourners have ceased to ring in the air. The poet plays with the Anglo-Saxon word *stefn*, a homograph, which can mean “root” and also “voice.” This splice pays attention to that homographic toggle as it tacks back and forth between the poem and its neighbor, a famous sculptured talking tree, known as the Ruthwell Cross (see Figure 6, overleaf). These stone trees speak of radical exposure to the state of exception, the scene of the Crucifixion. They were re-excavated by exiled German-Jewish art historians in the 1930s and 1940s (and beyond to Ernst Kantorowicz’s belated intervention in the debate in 1960s). This


splice asks how these talking trees serve as aerials that transmit a trauma, such that it becomes transitive, or what Bracha Ettinger has called “transtraumatic.” Their transmission of the sovereign cut paradoxically opens up a linked border space between talking trees and scholars in exile.

Figure 6. Ruthwell Cross, South face, Dumfriesshire, Scotland. Photograph: Project Woruldord, University of Oxford. © Trustees of the British Museum.

27 Bracha L. Ettinger, The Matrixial Borderspace, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 167. Her revisions of Lacanian psychoanalysis can productively open the boundaries between creaturely life and animal life defended by Santner (see footnote 1). In a post-, trans-traumatic era, the psychic (not the actual) trauma is no longer entirely personal and can only be partially scarred over, and only by borderlinking to others in further transsubjective and sub-subjective transcription and cross-scription.
The Ruthwell Cross brings us again to the beach, this time to the west coast of Scotland. When, in the early 1790s, the pastor of the parish of Ruthwell, Dumfriesshire\textsuperscript{28} prepared his returns for the \textit{Statistical Account of Scotland}, he reported that once upon a time an ancient broken “obelisk” carved with runes and holy images stood at the seashore. According to “tradition,” the obelisk was eventually uprooted and drawn by ox-cart to the churchyard where it stood until the Reformation.\textsuperscript{29} The locals remembered well; archaeologists tell us that sea lapped the shores of early medieval Ruthwell, which lay much closer to the shoreline than the early modern parish.\textsuperscript{30} In 1642, the cross was uprooted again and broken into pieces, one more casualty of sovereignty during the Civil War between King Charles I and his Parliament. In protest of the king’s tyrannical and popish activities, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland had ordered in July 1640 that idols, such as the Ruthwell Cross, be destroyed, and so it was (in July 1642). In 1887, the cross was reconstituted by sovereignty and dubbed an official “national monument.”\textsuperscript{31} Antiquarians and scholars have been putting together the fragments of these sovereign cuts ever since. It is a Humpty Dumpty network of pieces. Seeta Chaganti has already linked up part of the inscriptive network in her wonderful study of the stone, metal, and parchment at stake in the Ruthwell Cross and the \textit{Dream of the Rood}.\textsuperscript{32} My splice

\textsuperscript{28} Map ref. 54.9933163,-3.4084523.
seeks to link to her network other nodes: deathly fleas, ships, Jerusalem, Saracens and the Warburg Institute in exile, in order to get at the performance of enemy, speech and root that intertwine the Tree of Life incised on the Ruthwell Cross and the letters of the text of the *Dream of the Rood*.

The tale of death begins thirty miles to the east of Ruthwell at Bewcastle where, to this day, a sculptured stone cross-shaft stands in the south churchyard. Scholars attribute the Bewcastle and Ruthwell sculptures to the same workshop and reckon them to be close in date. Éamonn Ó Carragáin emphatically dates the Ruthwell Cross between 730-760. The Bewcastle sculptors ingeniously transformed a liturgical aid (known as a *liber vitae*) used for keeping track of the names of the dead to be commemorated during the celebration of the Mass into a solid stone cube sentiently bound on the East face of the shaft by the incised branches of the Tree of Life. The main west face of the Bewcastle shaft features a commemorative panel etched in runes, now faded, on which, it is conjectured, were inscribed the names of the dead. Blank panels on the south and north sides of the Bewcastle Cross await the inscription of more names. These blanks punctuate a network of actants that linked fleas and sputum, the bacillus, *yersina pestis*, brought by ship from the Mediterranean and overland routes to northern Britain. The infected fleabite and the cough devastated the densely occupied Northumbri-


33 Map ref. 35.118979,-90.7234437.

an monasteries in the late seventh century.\textsuperscript{35} This epidemiological catastrophe, archaeologists tell us, resulted in the re-organization of rural and monastic settlement, and I argue, the commemoration of the dead. Fleas and sputum proliferated into a “forest” of sculptured stone crosses in the north of Britain.\textsuperscript{36}

The devastation of plague and the urgency of commemoration inspired a major project of sacred topography undertaken by Adomnán, abbot of Iona, who completed his treatise \textit{De locis sanctis} in the plague ridden years of the 680s. He presented his study to Aldfrith, King of Northumbia (685-704), so that it could be more widely disseminated. The tales of one shipwrecked, Arculf, who had visited the Holy Land (679-682) and washed up at Iona, served as the alibi for Adomnán’s project on Christology and memorial topography.\textsuperscript{37} Scholars have noted with great interest that Adomnán had access to recent information about Jerusalem as he wrote \textit{De locis sanctis}. He mentions the Umayyad Caliph Mu'āwiya and reports that the “Saracens” had built in Jerusalem “a rec-


\textsuperscript{36} In 1927, W.G. Collingwood estimated that there were about 50 such carved crosses and the work of the \textit{Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Sculpture} continues to add to the total: \textit{Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age} (London: Faber, 1927). The University of Durham has now posted online Volume 1 (Durham and Northumberland) of the \textit{Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture} by Rosemary Cramp (British Academy, 1977): http://www/as-corpus.ac.uk. See also Richard N. Bailey, \textit{England’s Earliest Sculptors} (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1996) and the important study, \textit{Fragments of History: Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments}, eds. Fred Orton and Ian Wood, with Clare A. Lees (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

tangular house of prayer,” perhaps the early stages of the construction of the Dome of the Rock, which was completed c. 692 CE. Likewise in Damascus, he observed that there existed a church of the non-believing Saracens. Bede abridged Adomnán’s treatise, which further ensured its popularity. Thus we know that Bede was also apprised that Saracens were occupying the Holy Land. In his other writings, he tracked contemporary Muslim expansion in Europe. When he wrote his Historia ecclesiastica, he described Saracens as a gravissima lues Sarracennorum (“a terrible plague of Saracens”). In sum, an exegetical interest in sacred topography, especially tombs, refined by Adomnán during the plague years of the 680s, collided with new information about the expansions of a people of the desert (deserta Sarracenorum), whose inroad into Christian European space is likened to plague—the biological and the metaphorical here intertwine.

If we listen attentively to the Ruthwell talking tree, does it speak of the “terrible plague of Saracens” voiced by monastic contemporaries? To explore this question, I turn to the projects and publications of German-Jewish scholars and associates of the Warburg Institute, who in 1933 had fled from Nazi Germany to London, where the Warburg was relocated.

38 “quaedam etiam Sarracinorum ecclesia incredulorum”: The Latin text of Adomnán’s De Locis Sanctis may be found in Paul Geyer, Itinera Hiersolymitana saeculi iii-iv, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, Vol. 28 (1898), 296. Also available at: https://archive.org/details/itinerahierosol00geyegoog.


Under pressure to earn its way in its new British home and to prove its Englishness, in 1941, the Warburg organized an exhibit of over 500 photos devoted to the topic “English Art and the Mediterranean.” The exhibit proved to be a huge success and travelled to 18 British cities over a two-year period. Pride of place belonged to freshly taken photographs of the Ruthwell Cross. The re-exposure of the cross launched a spate of publications. But to backtrack for a moment: As early as 1936, Ernst Kitzinger, a German-Jewish art historian in exile at the British Museum, broached the scholarship of the Ruthwell Cross. He treated only the vine scrolls of the tree of life carved into two narrow sides of its shaft. His focus on ornament was exclusive. He ignored the incised runes that ran in a band around the vine scrolls; nor was he interested in the figural sculpture on the main faces of the cross. “Ornament” was what mattered. Through the careful comparison of photographs of different late Antique and Coptic sculptures, Kitzinger crafted an intricate argument that brought the Ruthwell tree of life into direct contact with the mosaic vine scrolls of the Dome of the Rock and the carved vine scrolls on the wooden roof-trusses of the Mosque at Damascus. What networks might have brought together Muslim Jerusalem and Ruthwell were not his concern.

Warburg scholars and associates radically shifted the study of the Ruthwell Cross in the 1940s. Two scholars, Fritz Saxl and Meyer Schapiro, devoted themselves to interpreting the ensemble of figural images carved on the two main faces of the cross. Schapiro mentioned the runic inscriptions only in passing and ignored the tree of life vines on the narrow shafts of the cross. Saxl also took his distance from the tree of life. In his introduction, Saxl claimed to “fight shy” of former discussions of Ruthwell ornament (the tree of life carvings) in order to study the neglected figural program. The exclusions of the Ruthwell tree of life from both these essays had the effect of silencing the nodes of Ruthwell carvers and Muslim Jerusalem. But, as I shall show,

things Islamic would come to haunt Ruthwell scholarship again in 1960.

In debate with the wartime articles of Saxl and Schapiro, Ernst Kantorowicz, the noted author of *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (1957), and himself a German-Jewish exile at Berkeley and Princeton, belatedly turned his attention in 1960 to the figure known as the Ruthwell archer. Saxl had admitted that he was stumped by the figure: “but who is the archer beneath the cross-beam?”\(^4^2\) Schapiro, in contrast, staunchly maintained that the archer was “the oldest medieval example of secular imagery.”\(^4^3\) Kantorowicz offered an uncharacteristic (for him) midrashic reading of the archer. Relying on the scholarship of Louis Ginzberg, a noted Talmudist and author of the multi-volume series, *Legends of the Jews*, Kantorowicz argued that the archer represented Ishmael, son of Hagar, around whom a midrash of a wilderness archer and wild man grew up. Kantorowicz, the scholar of premodern sovereignty extraordinaire, suggests here that the archer marks a sovereign cut on the Ruthwell Cross, meaning that the archer raises the question of the enemy. The talking tree of life, too, murmurs of this sovereign cut when it tell us through its runic inscription that it was “wounded with arrows.” Scholars have wondered why the runes give the plural form of arrow, since in the singular, it might be possible to translate “spear,” which would fit perfectly into the Gospel narrative. Here, I think, the rend of the Ruthwell image comes into play. The shipwrecked Arculf who had recited to Adomnán the stories of his stay in contemporary Muslim Jerusalem might have related how the skilled archers of the seventh-century Rashidun army, with their superior composite bows, struck fear into the hearts of their enemy. The archer of the Ruthwell cross, I argue, may be read as a toggle between a militant and sovereign Christian church and the sons of Hagar, noted and feared archers,


whom Christians would name as the “enemy.” In his article on the Ruthwell archer, published three years before his death, Kantorowicz finally revisited his own (suppressed) ancestral roots, first his genealogy as a grandson of a noted Poznan rabbi (since he uncharacteristically cited Jewish midrash), and, second, his work as a young military attaché in Istanbul during World War I, where he supervised the German work on the Orient Express and went on to write a dissertation on Muslim craft guilds. Kantorowicz was interested in the Tree of Life. It appears as an entry in index of *The King’s Two Bodies*, “Tree, Inverted.”

**SPICE 4: “THE MEN OF YOUR CONFEDERACY HAVE DECEIVED YOU” (CLOISTERS CROSS)**

The story of my fourth tree of life, the Cloisters Cross, a ceremonial cross carved out of walrus ivory, brings us on the beach one more time, now to the ice floes of the White Sea, where the Sami harvested walrus and paid tribute in ivory tusks to Norsemen, or so Ohthere, Norwegian chieftain and merchant, told King Alfred of Wessex (c. 890 CE) as he pre-

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sented him with samples of this highly valued raw material. 46

Figure 7-8. The Cloisters Cross (front and reverse). Photographs: Art Source.

Sometime during the plague years of the late seventh century, Sami hunters felled a walrus (radio carbon date 676-694 CE). Its tusks, an heirloom, would be carved, several centuries later, into a ceremonial cross standing 23 inches high with an arm span of 14-¼ inches (see Figures 7-8). 47


47 For a comprehensive overview and bibliography of scholarly
Shady post-World War II art markets put the Cloisters Cross into modern circulation. Since its “unprovenanced” purchase in 1963 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, debate over the cross has released an excess of historicism, as if historicism could resolve its enigma. Scholars disagree over the basics of geographical provenance—it could have been carved anywhere from England to Sicily and it could date anytime between 1050-1180 CE. I propose in this splice an untimely reading of this tree of life—not to decide its provenance or date—but instead to investigate how the Cloisters tree of life, another talking tree, transmits through its inscriptions a crisis of sovereignty and treason.48


48 My reading engages the work on the transtrumatic developed by Ettinger in The Matrixial Borderspace (see footnote 27). I read the cross as a borderlinking artifact. Judith Butler, in her generous foreward to Ettinger’s book, emphasizes borderlinking: “We have to ask about historical losses, the ones that are transmitted to us without our knowing, at a level where we cannot hope to piece it together, where we are, at a psychic level, left in pieces, pieces that might be linked together in some way, but will not fully ‘bind’ the affect. This is the part of the work of borderlinking that Ettinger writes about, and it is, in her view, prior to identity, prior to any question of construction, a psychic landscape that gives itself as partial object, as grains and crumbs, as she puts it, as remnants that are, on the one hand, the result, the scattered effects of unknowable history of trauma, the trauma that others who precede us have lived through and, on the other hand, the very sites in which a new possibility for visual experience emerges, one that establishes a
The tree of life is carved on the front shaft of the Cloisters Cross. On its back carvers have arranged in niches the busts of thirteen Old Testament prophets, and the evangelist, Matthew. Each bears a scroll engraved with scriptural verses. The Cloisters Cross prophets draw upon and compound a performative tradition of liturgical drama of the Ordo Prophetarum, with its roots in the anti-Semitic Advent liturgy, as well as popular “quasi-liturgical” drama (Jeu D’Adam), sculptural programs embellishing the portals of Romanesque cathedrals, and the genealogies represented in stained-glass windows representing the Tree of Jesse. The performative impulse of the Cloisters Cross with its noisy riot of inscription plunges the cross into complex dramaturgy with an Anti-Semitic genealogy.

The tree of life is carved on the front panel of the Cloisters cross. Running down both of its sides are two engraved Latin couplets that read: “The earth trembles, Death defeated groans with the buried one rising. / Life has been called, Synagogue has collapsed with great foolish effort.” On the nartemporality in which the past is not the past but is not present, in which the present emerges, but from the scattered and animated remains of a continuing, though not continuous, trauma” (in Ettinger, The Matrixial Borderspace, ix).


50 “Terra tremit mors victa gemit surgente sepulto / Vita cluit synagoga ruit molimine stult(o).”
row sides of the shaft two other couplet are inscribed: “Cham
laughs when he sees the uncovered limbs of his parents/The
Jews laughed at the pain of God suffering.”

At the foot of
the trunk of the tree of life, Adam and Eve hold on for dear
life. The tree of life climbs up the shaft of the cross and passes
through a medallion depicting Moses and the Brazen Ser-
pent. Its trunk culminates in an innovative iconographical
scene, which features the gospel story of Pilate and Caiaphas
arguing over the wording of the titulus to be affixed to
Christ’s Cross. Pilate holds a scroll inscribed with the text of
John 19:22: “What I have written, I have written” (Quod
Scripsi Scripsi). The scroll held by Caiaphas features the text
of John 19:21: “Write not the King of the Jews, but that he
said: I am the King of the Jews.”

The carved titulus above
this scene features inscriptions in Latin, Greek and Hebrew;
it is important to note that the titulus contradicts the theolo-
gy of the scene below between Pilate and Caiaphas. Its mis-
transcriptions offer clues to the sovereign cut of this tree of
life. The Hebrew inscription of the titulus is undecipherable
(the carver invented an unreadable Hebrew Script); however,
the Latin and Greek inscription are correct and contradict
the Scripsi Scripsi scene; they inscribe their titulus to read:
Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Confessors (Rex Confessorum)
not King of the Jews (Rex Iudeorum).

The Rex Confessorum titulus concerns me here because its
deliberate unscripting of Scripsi Scripsi links the cross to the
fierce rhetorical and iconographic debate fomented by the
sovereign crisis between King Henry II and his Archbishop
of Canterbury, Thomas Becket. Their battle culminated in
Becket’s assassination in December 1170 (during the liturgi-

51 “Cham ridet dum nuda videt pudibunda parentis / Iudeis risere
dei penam mor(ientis).”

52 Sabrina Langland, “Pilate Answered: What I have Written I have
429. See also Colum Hourihane, Pontius Pilate, Anti-Semitism, and
the Passion in Medieval Art (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
2009), 201–203.
cal season when the anti-Semitic treatises on the *Ordo Prophetarum* were read). By the time of his assassination, Becket was regarded by the royal party as a traitor; his own followers immediately dubbed him with the martyrrial title of Confessor. Henry II had precipitated the crisis when he tried to bully his lay and ecclesiastical barons into accepting the Constitutions of Clarendon in 1164. Infamous among the articles was Article 15, which ruled as follows: “Pleas concerning debts, which are owed on the basis of an oath or in connection with which no oath has been taken, are in the king’s justice.” With Article 15, the king was arrogating to himself sovereign control over oral promises (*nuda pacta*) in cases of debt. Article 15 announced that an oral faith-plight (otherwise known as a bare promise) in a debt transaction could not be the grounds for sending such disputes over moneylending to the church courts where such disputes were traditionally heard. Thus when it came to debt, both faith promise and documentary writing (an early notion of binding contract, *pactum vestitum*—a clothed or veiled pact—depended on written instruments) became the domain of the king’s justice. Henry II thus declared oral promises to be the state of exception when it came to debt litigation and in so doing radically repositioned the sovereignty of written records and the nature of the archive itself.


54 This argument about the over-riding (overwriting) of what came to be known as the “nudum pactum,” the naked pact made on faith between two legal persons, challenges us to rethink arguments about “memory to written record” as a crisis of sovereignty and faith and
to the Constitutions famously resulted in his trial for treason in October 1164. During this trial and after his precipitous flight from London court to exile in France, the Becket circle, a transnational clerical group with broadly based theological, juridical, and artistic connections, polemicized against Henry II by staging him as a Jew. The Becket circle mapped Henry not as some accretion of governmentality. See Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

II and his supporters as members of synagoga. They accused Henry and his baronial henchmen (lay and clerical) as behaving worse than the Jewish High Priests, Annas and Caiaphas, and the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, at the trial of Jesus. They compared the scandal of suffragan bishops judging Becket in the king’s court (October 1164) to Ham (also called Cham), the son of Noah, who laughed at the “the uncovered parts of a father.” By celebrating, on the morning of his trial, the mass of St. Stephen Proto-martyr, whose story of martyrdom had him dying at the hands of Jews, Becket further dramatized this judaization of sovereignty.\footnote{56} Although Becket did not directly compare himself to Moses and the Brazen Serpent (the central medallion on the front of the Cloisters Cross), there are iconographic overtones of that image when he, vested in his liturgical apparel, carried his own archiepiscopal cross (usually a cross-bearer carried the cross in front of the archbishop) into the royal trial-chamber. A fellow juror and royal partisan, the outraged Bishop of London (dubbed the archisynagoga in correspondence among Becket’s friends), reprimanded Becket for coming to court “armed with a cross.” After Becket’s assassination, his circle intensified their judaization of the sovereignty at stake in his trial. They dubbed those clerics who allegedly betrayed Becket as Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate: “Indeed it is believed that his murder was arranged by the disciples who betrayed him, and planned by the chief priests: they outbid Annas and Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod in wickedness, in proportion as they took more pains to see that he was not brought before a judgment seat, was not summoned by accusers, did not appear before the face of a judge.”\footnote{57}

The Pilate and Caiaphas scene of the Cloisters Cross captures, I argue, the state of exception decided on by Henry II with the Constitutions of Clarendon and then uses iconography to judaize the sovereign decision. Sovereignty could be Judaized and Jews could be biopoliticized in this traumatic juncture of sovereignty and biopolitics in the twelfth century. All this could be pinned by sovereignty on the tree of life. The Cloisters Cross speaks of making die and making live, the cut and the spiral.

The undeadness of the Cloisters Cross lives on most notably in the recent and widely travelled installation by Anselm Kiefer entitled Palmsonntag (2006). Kiefer installed a massive palm tree, preserved in resin and fiberglass, on the gallery floor. Large glass-covered panels, displayed like the pages of an ancient text, show dead palm fronds, seedpods and dried roses beautifully arranged upon parched, cracked earth. The words aperiatur terra et germinet salvatorem are scrawled in handwriting against the dusty backdrop. They are the words of Isaiah 45:8: “You heavens above, rain down righteousness; let the clouds shower it down. Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness grow with it; I, the Lord, have created it.” When the artists of the Cloisters Cross invoked Isaiah on the central medallion depicting Moses and the Brazen Serpent, they chose a darker verse: “Why is thy apparel red and thy garments like theirs that tread in the winepress (Isaiah 63:2)”? These moments of arboreal undeadness link the untimeliness of the sovereign cut and biopolitical spiral in the borderspaces of spectral materialism.

Canterbury, Bishop of Poitiers: “Et quidem, ut creditur, necem ipsius traditores procuravere discipuli, sacerdotum principes formaverunt, tanto in malitia, Annam et Caipham, Pilatum et Herodem amplius praecedentes, quanto diligentius praecauerunt ne in iudicium traheretur, ne conveniretur ab accusatoribus, ne appareret ante faciem presidis.”

APPENDIX I

JUDAIZING THE BECKET CONFLICT (some selected references)

Accounts of the Trial, October 1164

a. Cham ridet reference (p. 447):

However, he [Thomas Becket] complained much more about his suffragan bishops than about the judgment and the judging magnates, declaring that it was an innovation and a new procedure to let an archbishop be judges by his suffragans and a father by his sons, adding that it would be a lesser evil to laugh at the uncovered parts of a father than to judge the person of the father himself.

[Veruntamen magis quam de judicio seu proceribus judicantibus, de confratribus suis suffraganeis coepiscopis querebatur, novam dicens formam hanc et ordinem judiciorum novum, ut archipraesul a suis suffraganeis, pater a filius, judicetur. Minus fore malum, adjiciens, verenda patris detecta derider, quam patris ipsius personam judicare.]

b. Thomas and St. Stephen, protomartyr, who dies at the hands of Jews (p. 434):

. . . and on the advice of wise men, he in the morning before going to court, celebrated with great devotion the mass of St. Stephen the proto-martyr, in whose office one reads the phrase: “Princes did sit and speak against me (Ps. Cxix, 23), and he commended his cause to the highest judge of matters, who is God.

[... per consilium cujusdam sapientis, in crastino antequam ipse ad curiam pergeret, cum summa devotione celebravit missam de Sancto Stephano protomartyre, cujus officium tale est: “Etenim sederunt principes et adversum me loquebantur etc.”; et causam suam summo judici, qui Deus ist, commendavit.]

c. Becket’s archiepiscopal cross at the trial, with overtones of Moses and brazen serpent on the cross (p. 452):

As he entered the hall, the archbishop soon took the cross from the cross-bearer who walked in front of him and openly in the sight of everybody carried his cross himself, as the standard-bearer of the Lord carries the standard of the Lord in the battle of the Lord...

[Archipraesul vero, ut aulam ingreditur, a crucis bajulo ante ipsam crucem mox accipit et palam in omnium conspectu crucem ipsemet bajulavit, tanquam in praelio Domini signifier Domini vexilium Domini erigens...]

from Letters of John of Salisbury

a. Synagoga:

about Gilbert Foliot (Bishop of London and opponent of Becket): Archisynagaga

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61 Letter #174 (July 1166) to Bartholomew, Bishop of Exeter; Letter #187 (late 1166) to Baldwin, archdeacon of Totnes.