5

Forms of Paradise

– *in Images from Mesopotamia to the Middle Ages*

Introduction

In this chapter I shall take a synthesising approach to the viewpoints from chapters 2 and 4. While chapter 2 focussed on the base of the post-Egyptian pre-modern landscape image, the rocks, and investigated those features, fertile and demonic alike, which sprung from their underworld roots, chapter 4 lifted the focus above this base and questioned the work-related activities which evidently glanced off from it: agriculture, roads, mine-work, all kinds of utilitarian apportionment. Chapter 4 also illustrated the gentler activities which were, nonetheless, sanctioned – pastoralism, hunting, fruit picking, and so forth – and described them as symptomatic of a unifying paradigm, the Golden Age paradigm, and a corresponding epistemic *field*, the Golden Age *field*. What I shall now try to do, then, is collate Golden Age paradigmatic surface with underworld-influenced base by focussing sharply on the *image of Paradise* stemming from the epistemic structure of the Golden Age *field* – an image that is found both de-localised in the extensive space of the paradigm (the preparatory domain for iconology) and condensed to specific recurring motifs (iconography's domain).

I will regard all extant depictions of Paradise, both in pictorial art and literature, as partial aspects of the most comprehensive Paradise topos: *the Tree of Life on the Mountain of Life above the Fountain of Life*. This topos can be understood as a condensed image of the wilderness and the life lived there, complete as it is with ground, water, trees and – as we will see – animals eating of the trees and drinking of the water. From this basis we can identify more specialised images of Paradise, such as *the sacred grove* and *locus amoenus*, by zooming-in, as it were, on the Mountain of Life. The sacred grove could thus be said to provide the setting for the Tree of Life, whereas *locus amoenus*, the beautiful natural place, involves grove and spring as well as the source of the spring: the rock cave. In practice, however, the various

images of Paradise will overlap as they are all part of the pastoral domain – the unspoilt wilderness – that existed before civilisation, and which can still be found in its mountainous periphery.

If the Mountain of Life in its original form is an image of an entire cosmos – a cosmos in which heavens and earth are one – in patriarchal culture, Parson's advanced intermediate and feudal stages, it develops with an increasingly sharper distinction between heavens and earth. Determined by the concept of Mother Earth, the original route to Paradise goes through the interior of the mountain body: through the cave, water, underworld and night. But when, following the onset of the advanced intermediate stage, the sun rises undefiled above the underworld, the route to Paradise takes a turn to the top of the Mountain of Life: to that which is vertical, incorporeal and celestial. The paradisiacal mountain top can be seen as an unfolding of the cave interior, as a transformation from the concave to the convex, where the Water of Life is converted into the food of the Paradise tree. The clay wall surrounding *pairidaeza* here changes function from underworld cave ceiling to fence enclosing a raised garden.

This macrohistorical movement means that Paradise gradually rises above the ground of the earth in which it has its origins. If it is not placed directly in the upper celestial spheres, beyond time and place, then it is isolated from the subterranean sphere by means of a purifying wall of fire. At the same time, medieval theorists developed the idea that the original earth had been less undulating than in their own day and that mountains and rocks are chiefly a consequence of the Fall, Cain's fratricide or the Flood. As I shall endeavour to show, this attempt to cleanse Paradise of the later rock chaos can be understood in structuralist homology with the painted landscape images. In the polarisation between celestial and earthly, these can be interpreted, in the most extreme case, as a kind of split-image composed of Paradise's plant growth and the underworld's rocks.

5.1 The essence of the wilderness: the Tree of Life on the Mountain of Life above the Fountain of Life

In its visual form, this most extensive Paradise topos can be traced at least back to Mesopotamia in the third millennium BC, and it lives on in all aspects of the Golden Age paradigm. It is at its most conspicuous in the Eastern and Eastern-influenced offshoot of the Golden Age paradigm in Assyrian, Parthian, Sassanidic, Judaic, Christian and Islamic art, whereas in Greco-Roman art it mainly appears in the form of the more restricted and quasi-aestheticised *locus amoenus*. The topos

Fig. 5.1. *Mountain God (?) Enthroned on Mountain of Life, Flanked by Two Goddesses* (*c.* 2260-2160 BC), Accadian cylinder seal impression, from Mari in Syria.

appears in many variants, but in its full magnitude it consists of a mountain (Mountain of Life or World Mountain), on which there is a tree (Tree of Life plus Twig or Plant), a spring (Fountain of Life) plus two or more animals. An early example is that of an Accadian seal from Susa (*c.* 2700 BC) showing two half-rearing mountain goats on either side of a tree-topped mountain constructed of small peaked rocks (FIG. 1.14). The mountain goats are further flanked by two smaller mountains with trees, and under the goats the ground is constructed by three of the small peaked rocks. The seal is without doubt an image of the mountain's – and, in a wider sense, rocky nature's – fertility: the mountain concentrates the power of growth, which results in the tree; the tree becomes food for the mountain goats. As demonstrated by, for example, another Accadian cylinder seal, from Mari in Syria (2260-2160 BC), the power of growth consists in part of water from the interior of the mountain, as two sources – the Euphrates and the Tigris – flowing from a mountain via two bird heads (FIG. 5.1) give rise to two goddesses of vegetation with plants growing from their bodies. The god enthroned on the peak (the mountain god?) receives gifts from these goddesses: a tree (the Tree of Life) from one, a bowl (with the Water of Life) from the other.[1]

Regardless of the specific version, the topos can be regarded as an image of the paradisiacal earth, the essence of a virgin nature. The topos constitutes a sacred junction: a condensation of boundaries connecting earth with the heavens. The tree extends the mountain's vertical connection between high and low. The spring is the place where the underworld opens up to the upper sphere. And if Paradise – seen from the viewpoint of civilisation – is displaced to the periphery of the world, to the boundary between the beyond and this side, then from its own timeless standpoint it is placed in exactly the opposite location: the centre of the world, *medium mundi*. Eliade thus describes the concept of a mountain or tree at the hub of the world as a fixed cross-cultural ingredient of the Paradise motif.[2] This was exactly how I read the volcanic Paradise lake on the two Near

Eastern bronze bowls from *c.* 800 BC (**FIGS. 2.86-87**). And in the Norse mythology that developed primarily in late antiquity, we encounter a world tree, *Yggdrasil*, stretching from the heavens down into the underworld; an idea that is similarly found in the Babylonian poem *Erra and Ishum*:

> Where is the *mésu*-wood, the flesh of the gods,
> the proper insignia of the King of the World,
> The pure timber, tall youth, who is made into a lord,
> Whose roots reach down into the vast ocean through a hundred miles
> of water, to the base of Arallu [the underworld],
> Whose topknot above rests on the heaven of Anu?[3]

The ingredients of the Mountain of Life topos can, however, be given different emphases in pictorial art. The animals might flank a treeless mountain, or they might flank a tree without a mountain. The animals might be rearing, kneeling, eating or drinking. The tree might have grown large and taken over the whole scene while the animals swarm in its foliate runners, the so-called rinceaux. The mountain might or might not have springs, and it might shrink to a cave-like vase testifying to its role as water container. An example of the latter movement, and at the same time of the swelling up of the tree, is found on a Sassanid silver bowl with bucolic motifs (4th-6th century AD; **FIG. 5.2**).[4] Vines can here be seen shooting up into space from four mountains constructed of drop-like pointed peaks. The vines on two of the mountains are growing out of small vases, while on the other two they would seem to be growing on stalks connected to the rocks. Various animals - a hare, a dog, birds - scamper around among and eat from the vines, while four nymphs play pipes.

Despite the independence of the topos' ingredients, it can be perceived as a display of one and the same force. The mountain carries water, which feeds the tree, which in turn feeds the animals. There is no essential difference whether the animals eat the tree's fruit, drink the fountain's water or merely turn to face the tree-topped mountain. All situations point to an original life force: the paradisiacal. In Latin, this transformation is expressed by the word *abundare* (overflow): as the fountain overflows with water, it creates an abundance for the living creatures. The river gods' attribute can therefore switch effortlessly between water pitcher and cornucopia.

As is suggested by the pipe-playing nymphs on the Sassanid silver bowl, even from very earliest times the topos is linked with pastoral culture. The shepherd leads his flock to the mountain, domicile of the life-giving springs, pastures and trees. As he is not himself corrupted by the lowlands' Fall, he can, like Enkidu in the *Epic*

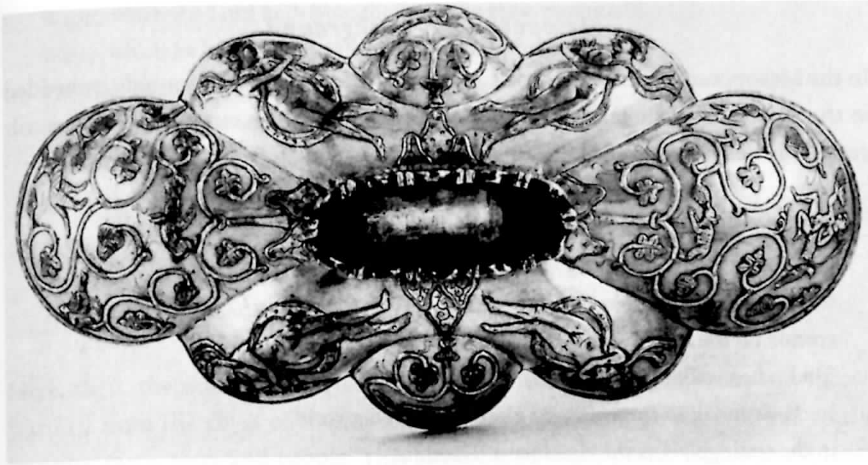


Fig. 5.2. Sassanid silver bowl with mountains, vines and bucolic motifs (4th-6th century AD). Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art.

of Gilgamesh (cf. chapter 4), make close contact with the animals, whose powers he can both pass on and control. As he also makes sure that animals get enough to eat and drink, he is an obvious candidate for the image of the good ruler who protects his people. In the earliest king lists from the Near East, the king is thus referred to as shepherd – a symbolism that continues in Judaism and Christianity.[5] When the God of Israel and, later, Christ are to protect their people, it is in the role of the Good Shepherd on the mountain: "I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel." (Ezekiel 34: 14) In the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna (*c.* 450-500 AD), for example, Christ appears in the role of this kind of redeeming shepherd (PLATE 24). His cross is here converted into a crosier and around him on the grassy rocks the sheep turn their heads towards him as a sign of their trust.

Throughout all its transformations – from mountain, water and vase to animal-studded vines to the Good Shepherd – the Mountain of Life topos can thus be perceived as a condensation of the Golden Age paradigm's ingredients. The outermost tip of the rinceau vine represents, at one and the same time, the limit of timelessness, the limit of self-sufficiency and the limit that prevents the pictorial space from opening out towards infinity.

Mesopotamian background

In the Mesopotamian culture, the Mountain of Life topos was seemingly embedded in the structure of the temples. The model for this was the temple in Eridu, a cult centre of the water-god Enki (Ea):

> In Eridu there is a black kiskanu-tree,
> growing in a pure place,
> its appearance is lapis-lazuli,
> erected on the Apsu.
> Enki, when walking there, filleth Eridu with abundance.
> In the foundation thereof is the place of the underworld,
> in the restingplace is the chamber of Nammu.
> In its holy temple there is a grove, casting its shadow,
> therein no man goeth to enter.
> In the midst are the Sun-god and the Sovereign of heaven,
> in between the river with the two mouths.[6]

In this early phase of the Golden Age *field*, a further image of utter cosmic solidarity is conjured up: the precious-stone-like Tree of Life (the Kishkanu tree) is not only linked with a paradisiacal grove in which the sun-god – the head of the heavens – resides, but is in addition placed on the apsu, the watery abyss, and has its roots in the underworld. In this image, the sacred grove in the temple grows nearby, possibly around the Kishkanu tree, for we read on an inscription to the goddess Nininsina: "Onto Nin-Isin [...] the fine garden, where a plant is growing, the Plant of Life, he gave." Another inscription, to King Warad-Sin, bears out, moreover, that the Tree of Life is set in an architectural framework: "The House of the Plant of Life, the holy dwelling [...] I built for her." A third inscription, however, simply tells us that there was a garden called *gigedia*, plus a vineyard, close to the temple.[7]

In addition to having its base in the underworld, the Mesopotamian Paradise garden is also said to be specifically deep-rooted in the mountain. As we saw in chapter 2, Gilgamesh has to walk through the underworld mountain in order to reach the garden of the gods. And an Assyrian inscription announces: "Assur in view of his priesthood, decreed the celebration of the holy *akit seri* festival, in the garden of fullness, the symbol of the carnelian-mountain."[8] The whole context – mountain, river, apsu and tree-filled garden – is clarified in a ritual text from the *Shurpu* series:

Water, which the Lord hath brought from the great mountain!
Water, which he hath brought from the holy Euphrates!
The clear (water) has proceeded from Apsu with exorcism,
The clear is covered with the ban of Eridu.
The cedar it sprinkleth, the *hašur*-tree it sprinkleth,
above he sprinkleth it on heaven, below God sprinkleth it on earth.
Enki, the king of Apsu, sprinkleth it, the pure,
upon Man, the son of his god, upon his body he sprinkleth it.
He maketh him holy, he maketh him clean.[9]

Here, then, the water is depicted as a life-giving and cleansing element, forced purified from the abyss of the mountain, later to take its power onwards to the heavens, earth, trees and people. This abyss-based water power is also in evidence when Gilgamesh has been in the garden of the gods and crosses the deadly waters in order to seek out Utnapishtim, the Babylonian Noah. Following the flood, Utnapishtim became immortal and lives "far away, where the rivers flow forth". Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that he too can become immortal if he succeeds in finding a certain plant, the secret of the gods. Gilgamesh seeks it out in the depth of the apsu, but unfortunately it is immediately – anticipating the Judeo-Christian Fall – stolen by a snake, so he has to return to Uruk empty-handed.[10] In the poem *Ishtar's Descent to the Underworld* the power of immortality is also attributed to the apsu. In the Sumerian version, the goddess says hopefully of the ruler of the apsu: "Father, Enki, the lord of wisdom, who knows the Plant of Life, who knows the Water of Life, he will surely bring me back to life."[11]

The significance of the Tree of Life topos to the maintenance of the Golden Age *field* is particularly apparent in the way in which its branches made their way into the earthly power: the social hierarchy of the Mesopotamian city-states. By this means, the primitive land occupations – tree culture and pastoralism – were introduced at the top of the social pyramid, at the same time as the more advanced civilising occupation – cereal farming – was displaced to the darkness of the lower classes. The king was the shepherd who led the flock to the Tree of Life. He was its gardener who thus came into possession of the Plant of Life, a shoot from the Tree of Life. And he had access to the Water of Life. A hymn to Ur-Ninurta states that the king's assignment is to "keep open the holy mouth of Tigris and Euphrates". In another poem, King Uttu brings his fruits to Enki: "I am the gardener, I would give thee cucumbers, apples and grapes according to thy wish." Conversely, trees are blessed with water brought by the *apkallus*, the primordial kings in Eridu, linked with the apsu: "Tamarisk, reedbush, tree, grown on the pure heaven and earth. At

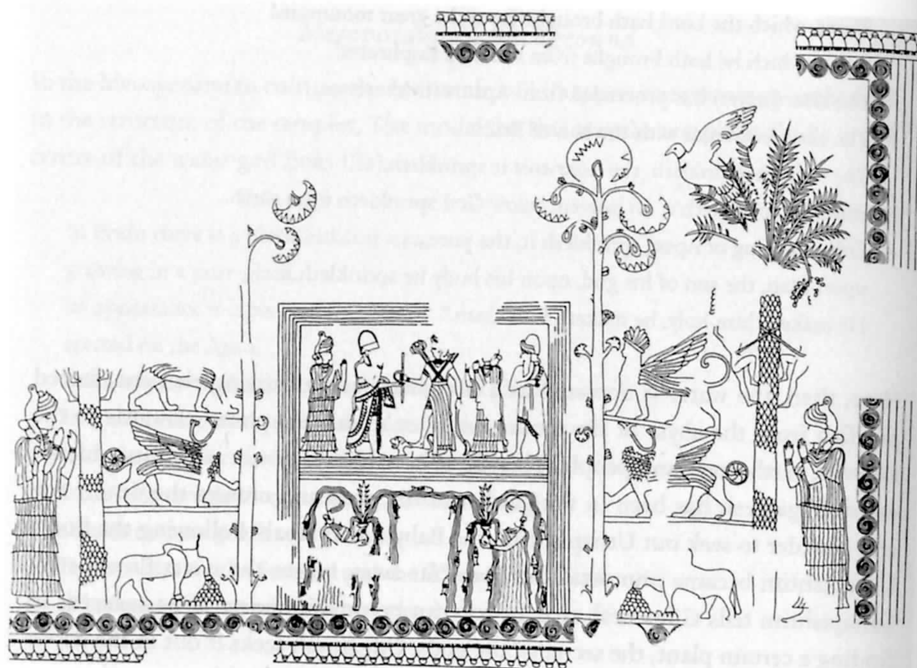


Fig. 5.3. *Investiture Scene* (*c.* 1781-1758 BC), drawing after fresco from the palace at Mari, Syria. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

your holy roots, o cedar, at your foliage, o *hašur*-tree, has the consecrated water for the goddess Ninahakuddu the *apkallu* brought with pure hand."[12]

As the gods' representative on earth, the king himself was also compared with the Tree or Plant of Life. In Sumerian and Accadian hymns he is compared with, for example, the cedar in the temple enclosure, with the date palm by the water ditch or with a forest of shady *hašur*-trees. One hymn states: "Hero, whose body is shining splendour, who in the forest of fragrant cedars is cheered with joy, standing in the oracle-place of Apsu, the adorned, purified with the sparkling lustration."[13]

Even though it is surrounded by a degree of interpretative uncertainty in terms of detailing, this notional sphere is also to be found in Mesopotamian pictorial art. Gods and kings are often portrayed on cylinder seals as the carriers of plants, branches, bowls or vases containing the Water of Life. We have already seen how the goddesses of vegetation on one of the seals offer water and trees to the mountain god (FIG. 5.1), and how the shepherd-god on another, as an extension of the Mountain of

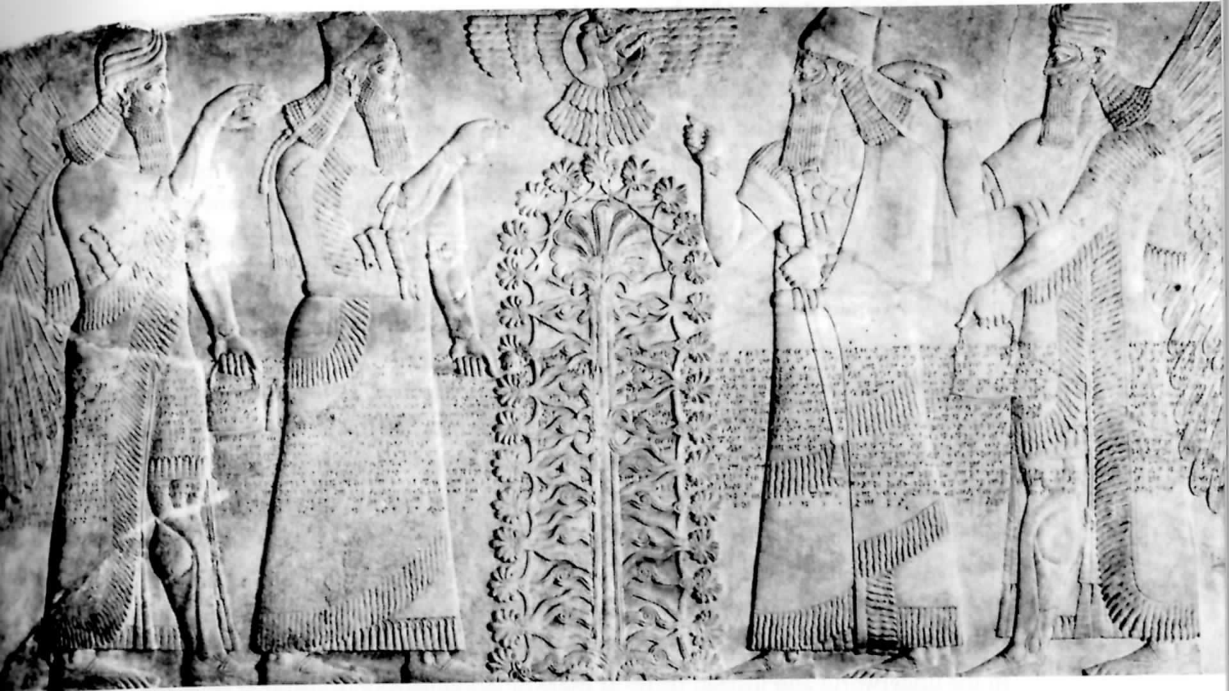


Fig. 5.4. *King and Winged Genies Perform a Ritual at the Sacred Tree in the Presence of God in Winged Clipeus* (reign of Ashurnasirpal II, 883-859 BC), Neo-Assyrian alabaster relief from Nimrud. London, British Museum.

Life, feeds the earth-goddess's rearing sheep with leafy branches (FIG. 4.11).[14] A wall painting in the palace at Mari, Syria (*c.* 1781-1758 BC), invokes the entire span of this wilderness theme in order to endow an investiture scene with suitable authority. Below the area in which the king is being entrusted with his duty, two goddesses hold forth a pair of vases: a tree grows from the centre of each vase neck, flanked by two fountain jets on either side along which fish can be seen swimming. The whole scene is further flanked by trees filled with birds, two rows of griffins and two of the customary animals each ascending their Mountain of Life (FIG. 5.3).[15] The later Assyrian monumental reliefs also depict the way in which various personages perform rituals at the Tree of Life: winged goddesses, eagle-gods or the king himself in the role of gardener (FIG. 5.4).[16]

All in all, this outline of the early manifestation of the Mountain of Life topos thus corroborates my assumption from chapter 4: that the Golden Age *field* and its pictorial imprint, the Golden Age paradigm, develop substantially in Mesopotamia,

the mythology and pictorial culture of which approach tree culture and pastoralism in a strikingly different way from its Egyptian parallels, as these typical mountain occupations are primitivised and used as instruments of the urban cult and the power elite. Through this fusing with primordial powers, the tree cult is perceived as being linked to the cosmos in its totality, including the underworld with its water reservoir, the apsu.

Judaism and Christianity

Even though the Greco-Roman culture is, like the Judeo-Christian, an offshoot of the Golden Age *field*, the Judeo-Christian culture relates, as mentioned, to the Mesopotamian topos, the Mountain of Life, in a more tangible sense than its Greco-Roman companion. As a consequence of its proscriptive attitude to images, however, the Judaic culture is largely limited to the literary and political tradition, whereas the Christian culture also carries on the Mesopotamian pictorial culture.

That the biblical tradition has taken us further in the evolution of the Golden Age *field* and thereby into a more polarised earth-heaven division, is apparent from the fact that the Tree of Life and its surroundings are now detached from their earlier base in the underworld and instead thrive at more or less conspicuous distance from the earthly sphere. The Tree is now chiefly worshipped in a symbolic form, as representative of a post- or pre-civilising beyond, whereas its Mesopotamian physical setting, the well-rooted presence in a temple garden or sacred grove, is rejected as being idolatrous. The immortality which was connected with the Tree of Life, but was lost when Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of Knowledge (Genesis 3: 12), is thus only regained in the church of faith and later in the Christian hereafter (Book of Revelation 2: 7). Accordingly, the Tree of Life is – like a celestial counterpart of the Mesopotamian Kishkanu tree – solidly enclosed in the urbanised reappearance of Paradise, the New Jerusalem:

> Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. (Book of Revelation 22: 1-2)

This divine tree culture is, however, no more celestial than it makes its way – as in Mesopotamia – into the earthly hierarchy of power. In the Judaic tradition, the king's sceptre was a branch from the Tree of Life, be it date palm, olive, fig or vine. Moses was believed to have a branch from this tree, and Ezekiel (19: 10-11) tells a prince of Israel:

> Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard transplanted by the water, fruitful and full of branches by reason of abundant water. Its strongest stem became a ruler's sceptre; it towered aloft among the thick boughs; it was seen in its height with the mass of its branches.

In the medieval Christian culture this Paradise twig – *virga* – is held by the Virgin Mary, the king and the bishop. The latter supplements it with *baculus*, the pastoral staff, which similarly comes from the paradisiacal domain.[17]

As in Mesopotamia, Judaic culture also turns to concrete similarities between humankind and the Tree of Life. The chosen, the saviour or simply the powerful are frequently compared to the magnificent tree; a comparison which is heightened by the fact that in cases where someone has achieved power by wrongful means it can promptly be turned into its opposite: the tree that is felled, withers or burns. Just to give a few random extracts: "I am like an evergreen cypress, from me comes your fruit" (Hosea 14: 8); "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches" (Psalms 80: 8-11); "He [the righteous] is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither" (Psalms 1: 3).

Particularly magnificent, but also risking hubris, is the image of the Mesopotamian arch enemy, Assyria, as told to the Egyptian Pharaoh (Ezekiel 31: 2-9):

> Whom are you like in your greatness? Behold, I will liken you to a cedar in Lebanon, with fair branches and forest shade, and of great height, its top among the clouds. The waters nourished it, the deep made it grow tall, making its rivers flow round the place of its planting, sending forth its streams to all the trees of the forest. [...] All the birds of the air made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the beasts of the field brought forth their young; and under its shadow dwelt all great nations. [...] The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it, nor the fir trees equal its boughs; the plane trees were as nothing compared with its branches; no tree in the garden of God was like it in beauty. I made it beautiful in the mass of its branches, and all the trees of Eden envied it, that were in the garden of God.[18]

In Judaic, Christian and also Greco-Roman art this fundamental concept is thus reflected every single time a rinceau spreads its foliage across the pictorial field, be it on vases, sarcophagi or mosaics. The rinceau is a Tree of Life in the branches of which birds, animals and human beings find protective shelter and nourishment. But, again, the branches do not only encircle the special iconographic case. They have a wider range, encompassing the Golden Age paradigm in broad generality.

Fig. 5.5. *Grazing Deer* (6th century AD), Coptic relief. Detroit, Institute of Arts.

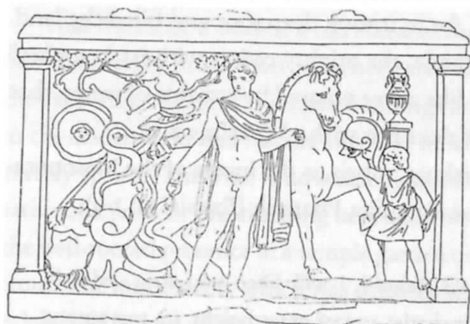


Fig. 5.6. *Heroised Ephebe* (2nd century BC?), relief from Thyrea (Loukou). Athens, National Archaeological Museum.

The haziness of the borders between the paradigm and its iconographic condensation can be seen, for example, in a 6th-century Coptic relief of two grazing deer (FIG. 5.5). The dense grape-laden lattice of branches surrounding the deer is obviously meant as an ornamental representation of the Tree of Life, but at the same time it also – and more paradigmatically – functions as an illusionistic thicket designating 'landscape'.

As regards the more specific image of the Paradise tree with serpent, however, it is not only a feature of Christian art, but also of its Greco-Roman forerunner, which gives a clear impression of its cultic links. In a Hellenistic relief of a *Heroised Ephebe*, for example, the hero and his horse are seen in front of such a tree in which there is a pair of birds (FIG. 5.6). He has placed his weapons – armour, shield, spear, arrow quiver – by its trunk and in its branches, and the huge snake wound around the tree is feeding him with a sacrificial fruit.[19]

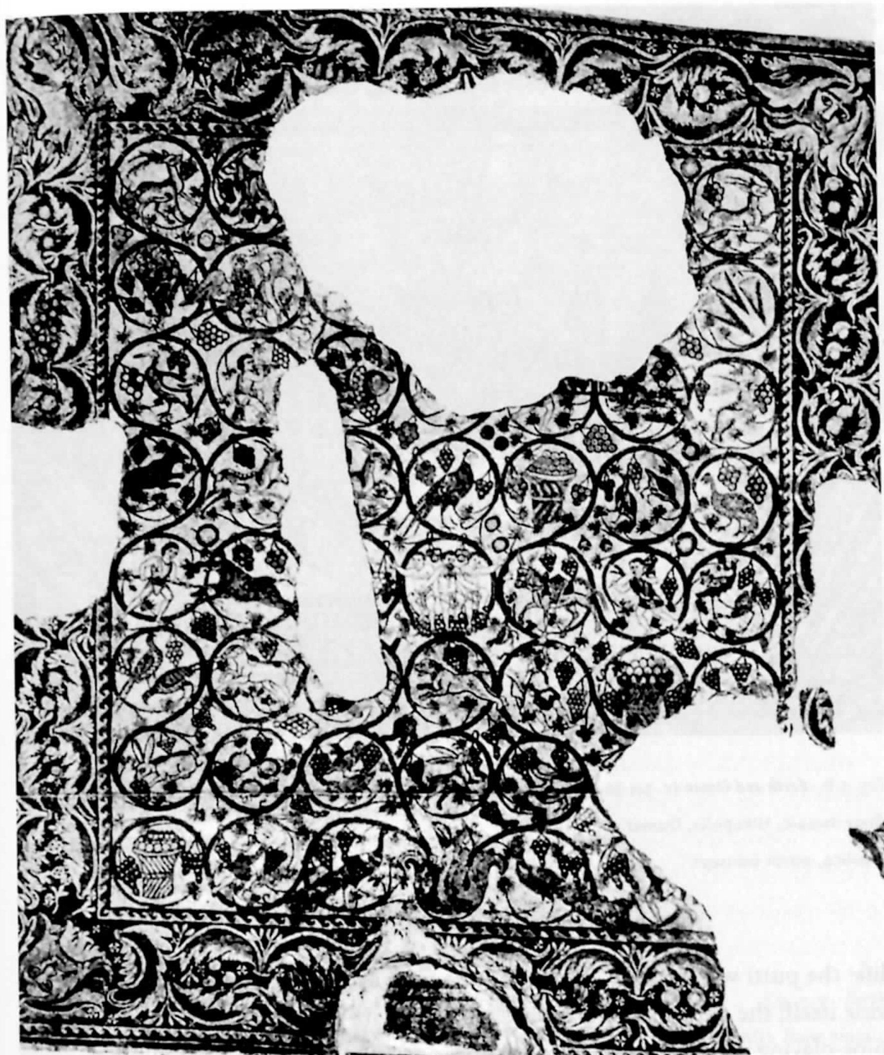


Fig. 5.7. *Rinceau with Bucolic Motifs* (*c.* 570?), floor mosaic from Beisan, El Hammam.

An extensive Judeo-Christian forum for the Tree of Life motif is found in 5th-6th-century Middle Eastern floor mosaics in synagogues and churches; for example, El Hammam, Beisan (*c.* 570?; **FIG.** 5.7).[20] The fifty-five compartments of the vine are here the setting for such varied ingredients as fruit baskets, grape-pressing and wine-carrying putti, various birds, rabbits, goats, a pack ass, a lion being impaled by a putto and a pipe-playing putto on a hillock. The motifs all relate to the paradisiacal

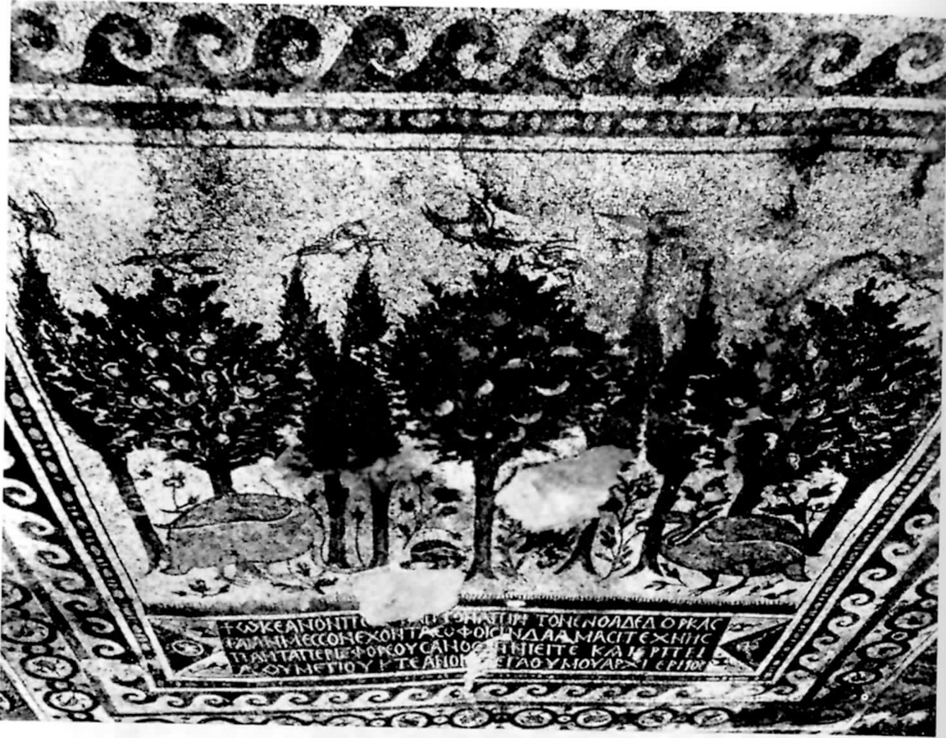


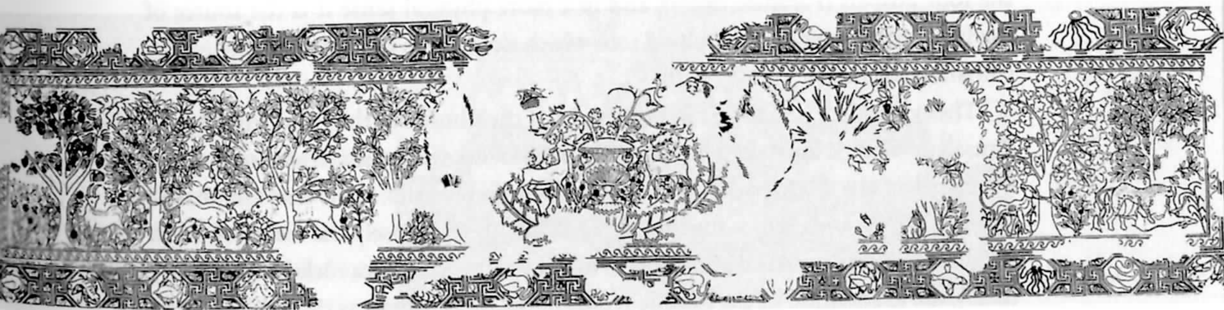
Fig. 5.8. *Earth and Ocean* (*c.* 525-50 AD), floor mosaic. Nikopolis, Dumetios Basilica, north transept.

life: the putti working the grapes and the pack ass are cultivating the yield of the vine itself; the animals and fruit baskets incarnate the paradisiacal profusion; the pipe-playing putto strikes a bucolic tone.

In many of the early Byzantine floor mosaics – the Dumetios Basilica at Nikopolis (*c.* 525-50), the large basilica in Heraklea Lynkestis, the church in Khalde south of Beirut (*c.* 450-500), for example – the Tree of Life is also expanded via its subterranean sources: an inner sphere full of plants and animals – *Earth* – is encircled by a frieze with sea- and river-creatures – *Ocean* (FIGS. 5.8-5.10).[21] There is no doubt that the expansion brings the image closer to the lower world: we are not looking at just Paradise, but also the earth right to the ends of the ocean. As Eusebius said: "In the middle, like a core, He [God] laid out the earth, and then encircled this with Ocean to embellish its outline with dark-blue color."[22] In the floor of the Dumetios Basilica, an inscription specifies:

Fig. 5.9. *Earth and Ocean* (*c.* 400-450 AD), floor mosaic. Khalde, Basilica, nave.

Fig. 5.10. *Earth and Ocean* (*c.* 500 AD), floor mosaic. Heraklea Lynkestis, Large Basilica, narthex.



> Here you see the famous and boundless ocean
> Containing in its midst the earth
> Bearing round about in the skilful images of art everything
> that breathes and creeps
> The foundation of Dumetios, the great-hearted archpriest.[23]

As we will see in chapter 7, this immediacy to the world is elaborated by the mosaics also occasionally containing elements of seasons and labours of the months. And yet the content remains essentially paradisiacal. The unifying core in Heraklea Lynkestis' extensive frieze of various trees, animals and birds is a paradisiacal vase with vines flanked by deer (FIG. 5.10).[24] And in the two cases where the iconography would seem to have become too materially sumptuous and have required a clarifying 'restoration', this has been achieved by means of unambiguous Paradise motifs such as birds pecking at the vines and a fountain flanked by deer and birds.[25] The mosaics' *terra* is thus a Paradise which spreads throughout the good earth and is nourished by the encircling ocean. That the mosaics' field of vision thus allows Paradise to extend to the whole circumference of the world again corresponds with the way in which the pre-modern landscape image is generally controlled by the Golden Age paradigm: the wilderness might indeed be depicted in its entirety, but at its centre there is a Paradise whose radius of effect cannot be avoided.

As suggested by the above quotation from the Book of Revelation in which the Tree of Life was neighbour to the throne of the sacrificial lamb, in Christianity the Tree, Fountain and Mountain of Life are inseparable from the Passion of Christ. If Paradise was lost in the Fall, it is regained in the Passion as the crucified Christ on Golgotha can be understood as a new Tree of Life on the Mountain of Life. The symbolism depends on the symbiosis between the tormented man and the tree to which he is nailed, and it is nourished by legends of the derivation of the cross from the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise. Therefore, the rock-hewn tomb in the paradisiacal Garden of Golgotha can also be interpreted as the cave from which the Fountain of Life pours forth. On an allegorical level, the Fountain divides into the four gospels (Paradise rivers), and in a more physical sense it is the source of the baptismal water and the blood into which the wine is transformed during the Christian Eucharist.

The symbolism is manifest in the atrium of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where a bowl ornamented with foliage marks the position of the cross and the centre of the world, *medium mundi*. The bowl represents, all in one, Omphalos, baptismal font and chalice for the Water of Life.[26] How closely the forces of death and life are interwoven is demonstrated by the nearby Al Sakhra rock ('the hovering rock'), the foundation of the Islamic Dome of the Rock. This was thought to be the

Fig. 5.11. *Parousia* (early 4th century; restored before 1292 by Jacopo Torrito and Jacopo da Camerino, and again in 1878 by J. Wilpert), apse mosaic. Rome, San Giovanni in Laterano.

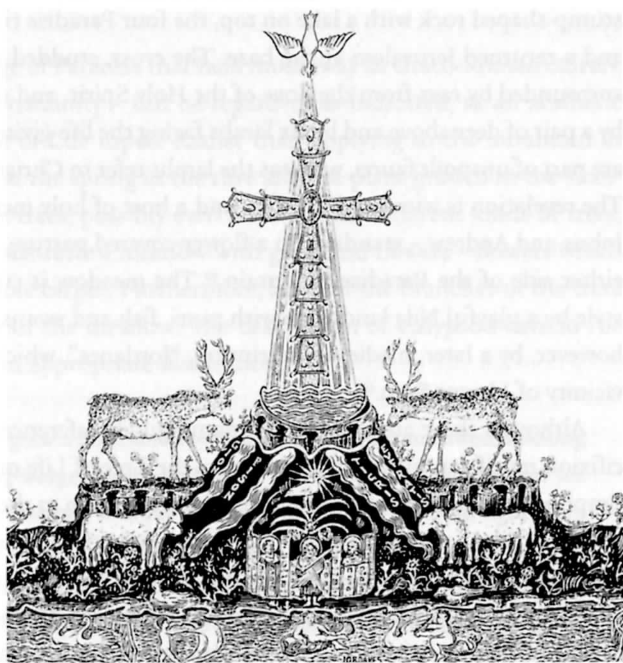


Fig. 5.11a *The Symbol of the Son of Man Is Revealed above the Paradise Mountain* (drawing of detail of *Parousia*, fig. 5.11).

site where Isaac was to be sacrificed and where Solomon later built his temple. To Muslims this rock has the status of the centre of the world: a Paradise mountain whence the prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven and where Allah, come the Day of Judgement, will sit in state, hovering above the Well of Souls, an underlying cave. To Christians, meanwhile, at an early stage this same cave was considered to be an entrance to hell.[27] Exactly as in Azerbaijan, here we thus encounter two neighbouring mountains shifting between the roles of the gates of Paradise and the gates of hell.

Like Muslims, Christians also see the Tree of Life topos as including eschatological expectations. Christ's Second Coming on earth (*Parousia*) is the return of Paradise too. According to the Gospel of Matthew and the Book of Revelation, the Kingdom of Heaven will be established when Christ descends from the World Mountain and restores the connection between heaven and earth.[28] As we see from medieval art, not least Early Christian images, this motif has great interpretive potential: Christ can feature as a man, as a lamb, as the Tree of Life, as the Chi-Rho symbol, as a cross; the World Mountain can appear as Paradise mountain, as Mount Sion, as Golgotha or, perhaps most commonly, as a synthesis of them all.[29]

An illustrative example is the apse mosaic in San Giovanni in Laterano, Rome, previously the Archbasilica of the Holy Saviour (early 4th century, restored; FIGS. 5.11-5.11A). While the bust of Christ is being revealed among the reddish-brown clouds and angels, the cross is also appearing on the Paradise mountain – a stump-shaped rock with a lake on top, the four Paradise rivers bubbling alongside and a returned Jerusalem at the base. The cross, studded with precious stones, is surrounded by rays from the dove of the Holy Spirit, and the mountain is flanked by a pair of deer above and by six lambs facing the life-giving rivers below. The deer are part of unspoilt fauna, whereas the lambs refer to Christ as the Good Shepherd. The revelation is witnessed by Mary and a host of holy men – Peter, Paul, the two Johns and Andrew – standing on a flower-covered pasture, which stretches out on either side of the Paradise mountain.[30] The meadow is cut short in usual abyss-style by a playful Nile landscape with putti, fish and swans. Orthodoxy is ensured, however, by a later, medieval inscription, "Jordanes", which places the river in the vicinity of Mount Sion.[31]

Although there are not always unambiguous references to the topos, the crucifixion motif can most often be read as the Tree of Life on the Mountain of Life. Emphasis on the Mountain of Life aspect can be seen in the many enamel and copper crucifixions made in France and Germany in the 12th and early-13th centuries. On one example from the later period, the crucifixion takes place on a Golgotha Hill constructed of small double-outlined peaks: exactly the same shapes we saw a couple of millennia earlier in Mesopotamian and Aegean art (FIG. 5.12).[32] That the

Fig. 5.12. *Crucifixion* (*c.* 1200-10), enamel on copper plate, from Germany. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

shapes keep their distinctive character across such large temporal and cultural spans must indicate a certain undiminished identity: one that deals with the fertility of the mountain.[33]

5.2 *Locus amoenus*

Locus amoenus – the image of Paradise that held most sway in Greco-Roman culture and its offshoots in Christianity – can be regarded, as indicated, as an aesthetic zooming-in on the Tree of Life topos. Rather than applying to the mountain in its entirety, it focusses on the spring in the cave and the plant growth in the vicinity. Besides one or more trees, possibly even a forest with different kinds of trees, this vegetation might constitute a meadow with grass and flowers – flowers which might spread into a whole carpet. Furthermore, birds in the branches of the trees and bees in the flowers of the meadow. The description of Calypso's cave in the *Odyssey* would serve as an appropriate illustration:

> Round about the cave grew a luxuriant wood, alder and poplar and sweet-smelling cypress, in which long-winged birds made their nests, owls and falcons and sea crows with chattering tongues, who ply their business on the sea. And right there about the hollow cave ran trailing a garden vine, in pride of its prime, richly laden with clusters. And four springs in a row were flowing with bright water close by one another, turned one this way, one that, and around about soft meadows of violets and celery were blooming.[34]

Literature has so many variations of this image of Paradise – according to the literary historian E.R. Curtius, it is nothing less than the most usual topos in literary descriptions of nature between the Roman imperial period and the 16th century – that since Isidore of Seville it has been referred to by its special name of *locus amoenus* (the beautiful place).[35] The term is attributable to the Virgil commentator Servius, who explains of *loci amoeni*: it is those that "only bring pleasure [...], that are not cultivated with use in mind."[36] So Servius exempts them from utilitarian cultivation, but not necessarily from cultivation as such. *Loci amoeni* can just as well be virgin settings in the wilderness as settings that have been cultivated for *pleasure purposes*, i.e. garden-like environments. We are therefore again dealing with a condensation in the Golden Age *field*, an area in which the impact of culture is no more intrusive than to render laborious work, or the idea of it, superfluous.

Like the Mountain of Life topos in its entirety, *locus amoenus* has its origin in the sacred and fertile natural settings; a genesis that is emphasised when accompanied by objects such as statues and votive offerings. But, as its title avows, it stems from a time when the pleasurable features of nature began to detach themselves from the numinous aspect, and it is therefore remembered chiefly for its enjoyment appeal. *Locus amoenus* is thus a celebration for the senses.[37] The sense of touch is soothed by the gentleness of the meadow and the cool shade of the trees. Sight is intoxicated by the colours of the flowers, smell by their fragrance. The sense of taste is satisfied by fruit and honey, hearing by birdsong and the babbling of springs.

The satyric cave and the garden

To illuminate the *loci amoeni* of pictorial art and their literary parallels, it would be appropriate to bring in two Roman wall paintings: on the one hand, the two satyric caves from cubiculum M in the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale (*c.* 50-40 BC; PLATE 14); on the other hand, the previously mentioned garden thicket from the House of Livia on via Flaminia near Prima Porta in Rome (*c.* 20 BC; PLATE 5). Both focus on the paradisiacal life around the mouth of the grotto, but from the one image to the other the angle has changed 180 degrees.

In the Boscoreale image we are looking *from the outside in*. The composition – the reading of which is complicated by a window to the left of the centre, possibly put in later – shows two caves positioned symmetrically around a middle section flanked by columns. In this middle section, behind a fruit bowl and a monochrome ochre landscape vignette, we can possibly just make out the mouth of another cave. The rock wall above each of the outer caves is crowned by a vine-clad pergola, and their angular entrances are half-filled with ivy leaves and birds. Jets of water splash down

into rectangular basins on the floors of the caves, and at the foot of the basin on the right we can faintly see a votive statuette.

In the literature of antiquity there are countless references to similar foliage-clad spring-caves, sometimes with trees growing nearby. I have already mentioned Calypso's cave in Homer, richly hung with garden vine. When Polyphemus pays court to the nymph Galatea in *Idyll 11* by Theocritus (*c.* 300-260 BC), he, too, highlights his cave in its setting of ivy, grapes, cypress and laurel. And when, conversely, the love-struck goatherd in *Idyll 3* expounds upon the virtues of the nymph Amaryllis, he declares with a sexual double entendre that he would like to "come into thy cave through the ivy and the fern that hides thee."[38] In images and literature alike, the situation here can be said to be *enfolded*: the stress is put on the place of origin, the cavity from which plant life obtains its vigour, rather than on the plant life itself.

In Livia's garden fresco we are looking *from the inside out*. Rather than looking through the foliage towards darkness, we look out from the darkness towards a dense thicket of paradisiacal vegetation. The viewing situation is not only suggested by the fact that the fresco has been taken from what was presumably a nymphaeum in the basement of the Prima Porta villa; the upper, discreetly placed, row of stalactites covered in plant growth and encircled by birds, shows quite explicitly that we are inside a cave – a cave as described in the *Aeneid*: "Under the brow of the fronting cliffs a cave of hanging rocks; within are fresh waters and seats in the living stone, a haunt of Nymphs."[39]

The roof of the cave seems strangely suspended as at no point is it supported from the ground. The whole width of the space – apart from a small arched entrance door – looks out onto the same uninterrupted panorama: at the front, a narrow lawn with bushes bordered by two low walls, the front one of wickerwork, the far one of marble with niches for a sequence of trees, a spruce, an oak, a pine; in the middle ground, a dense thicket with lots of birds, various types of plant growth including, at the front, trees participating in the rhythm of the trees in the niches; in the background, below the stalactites, a smooth blue strip of sky. Two openings in the short sides of the wickerwork wall allow access to the lawn and the trees in the marble niches, but the thicket itself is shut off – as accentuated by its density, which at most allows for a view of a misty-green middle distance. This self-enclosing thicket contains a marvellous vegetation growing in blissful ignorance of the seasons – spruce, pine, cypress, palm, oak trees, pomegranates, quince, cherry, laurel, myrtle, oleander, box, viburnum, besides roses, lavender, poppy, blue iris, ivy, acanthus, chrysanthemum[40] – and the just as varied bird life teeming among its leaves and fruit therefore has the benefit of a nourishing and safe habitat. The paradisiacal grace is contrasted, however, with a single bird cage balancing discreetly on the marble wall: the border between here and there.

This kind of thicket calls to mind the flora of the *locus amoenus* topos that spread alongside the meadow beyond the cave: the forest with mixed types of trees and a carpet of flowers. Seneca mentions a forest with eight different types of trees, Statius one with thirteen, Claudian one with nine.[41] Ovid is particularly lavish in letting Orpheus coax forth a total of twenty-six trees on the originally shadeless hill where he is playing the lyre.[42] Even though the flower carpet in Livia's garden fresco merges with the forest, it often appears separately in the literary images of *locus amoenus*. Persephone is, for example, picking flowers (roses, lilies, irises, crocuses, hyacinths and narcissi) when the earth suddenly opens up and Hades abducts her through the cleft. And in Virgil's *Eclogues* the nymphs fill their baskets with eight types of flower.[43]

The garden fresco and its literary counterparts, then, in complementarity to the satyric caves, present an *unfolded* plant life – in the fresco even a vegetation which, with agoraphobic consequence, has risen above its environment. The earth from which it must originate is only suggested by the row of stalactites, for in the actual garden the ground would seem to be almost sealed up by the lawn, one of the few in Roman painting. The result is that the garden becomes strangely celestial: a heavenly vision appearing before the earthly world in the cave. This kind of ethereal feeling is conjured up by the modern commentator in Helbig's Roman guide when he – admittedly in somewhat romantic terms – declares that the park is like a vision of a Paradise garden, "that from a wonderful remoteness grows into the reality of life".[44] But despite the elevation of this vegetation towards the ethereal realm, there is no doubt about the complementarity of the satyric caves and garden fresco; that, in a way, they depict the same image: a paradisiacal plant life with birds, encompassed by this life's place of origin, the mouth of a cave.

The place of immortality: from the sacred grove to the wilderness

The area where nature discharges its life forces is sacred, i.e. secluded. Strictly speaking, Paradise is therefore isolated from and protected against wild nature. This concept of Paradise presumably developed from experience of *the sacred grove*: the consecrated area in the wilderness. Like rocks, chasms, caves and springs – and often in connection with them – trees and sacred groves were the places where deities revealed themselves. As such they were to be found all over the pre-Christian world and presumably had precursors all the way back to the Palaeolithic period.[45] In the Mesopotamian inscriptions we learnt about temple gardens with sacred trees and springs rising from the apsu, and, correspondingly, in Greek culture nymph springs were often to be found within the confines of sacred fencing, as in, for

example, Arcadia where the shrine of the Great Goddess at the Hagno spring was surrounded by a cypress grove.[46]

However closely the concept of Paradise might be seen as connected to the cult around the sacred groves, large numbers of the groves were felled by Jews and Christians who regarded them as the abodes of idols. The Judeo-Christian Paradise thus appears as a sacred grove drained of its chthonic powers. Of Paradise, Philo of Alexandria therefore merely states that "it is a dense place full of all kinds of trees"; Gregory of Nyssa (4th century), that it is "a wood planted with dense trees"; and Honorius of Autun (d. *c.* 1145) that it is "a very beautiful place in the East where trees of diverse kinds [...] were planted."[47]

From sacred grove to garden is a somewhat hazy transition.[48] The garden might very well organise nature, but unlike farming it does so more for pleasure than for use. If its vegetation, apart from being beautiful, is also nutritious, then it is so in an unforced and spontaneous way. Cultivation can be conspicuous, and yet it is not inhibiting like the square cornfield. Moreover, to be enjoyed the fruit does not have to be ground and baked, but at most trodden and fermented. The beauty of the garden depends on sorting out and accentuating that which already fills nature. It thereby demarcates a recreational zone far away from organised work. This observation is completely in harmony with Servius' definition of *loci amoeni* as places that "only bring pleasure [...], that are not cultivated with use in mind."

Locus amoenus can thus be encountered in the wilderness and the man-made garden alike. A telling example of this is Nausicaa in the *Odyssey*: "You will find a handsome grove of Athene close to the road, a grove of poplar trees. In it a spring wells up, and round about is a meadow. There is my father's estate and fruitful vineyard, as far from the city as a man's voice carries when he shouts."[49] And in Virgil's seventh *Ecloge* Thyrsis sings: "Fairest is the ash in the woodlands, the pine in the gardens, the poplar by rivers, the fir on mountaintops."[50] The wilderness is seen as an extension of Paradise because it offers healthy and unspoilt food that ensures a longer, possibly immortal, life. A recurring figure in medieval culture, the wild man, is usually portrayed as being particularly strong and resilient because he lives on acorns and fruit: the food of the Golden Age.[51] Conversely, the orchard is also an area with associations to immortality. In the *Odyssey*, the fruit in Alcinous' palace garden – pomegranates, apples, figs, pears, olives, grapes – consists solely of fruit that ripens rather than perishes, and the flower beds are always in bloom.[52] This is again in direct contrast with the cornfield, immersed as it is in the changing seasons; eating its crop leads to the apex of time: death.

The haziness of the transition between *locus amoenus* and the wilderness in its entirety is demonstrated, for example, in the scenery of the Tiber in the *Aeneid*:

> At this moment Aeneas, looking from the sea, beholds a mighty forest. Through its midst the Tiber's lovely stream leaps forth to sea in swirling eddies with his burden of golden sand. Around and above, birds of many a kind that haunt the river's banks and channel were thrilling heaven with their song and flying in the grove.[53]

And it is not for nothing that the concept of the origin of Paradise, *pairidaeza*, is a hunting park: a place where the produce is obtained via heroic subjugation in a wilderness rather than via calm gathering in a garden. But this subjugation is still voluntary and not comparable with work. The activities undertaken in the paradisiacal area might be enjoyable, reflective, heroic, cultic, possibly ascetic, but never laborious.

That this Paradise concept also has a bearing on the representation of space in post-Egyptian pre-modern pictorial art can be corroborated by a reassessment of a genre I touched on in chapter 1: landscape images devoid of human presence. One of the first of these, an early Mesopotamian cylinder seal, shows a meandering river brimming with big fish and flanked by trees (FIG. 5.13). Later, in the spatially more far-sighted Aegean art, we encounter reliefs of growing rocks, frescoes of rocks with animals or trees and rocky labyrinths with birds, monkeys and all sorts of flora (FIGS. 2.2, 2.10, 2.58-2.59 and 2.75-2.76). This same tradition is found in a quasi-perspectival version in Roman art, in the frescoes of abundant garden vegetation (PLATE 5) and in the mosaics of wild beasts in the mountains (FIGS. 2.89 and 2.93-2.95), marine fauna (PLATE 20), and so forth. I have earlier explained the legitimacy for these pre-modern openings towards a pictorial depth devoid of human presence – whether it be an actual lesser or potential greater depth of field – with a constant anchorage in *numen*, nature's bodily force. In the paradiasical perspective, then, the compensating *numen* should not just be seen as material concentrations in the form of plant life or animals, but as an unfolding of the Mountain of Life topos, where the accent is displaced from the nutritional aspect of mountain and water to the flora and fauna into which this nutrition is paradisiacally – i.e. without the intervention of work – converted. Again: within the horizons of the Golden Age paradigm, the depth of field stretches to the tips of the fauna-filled rinceaux.

The influence of the Golden Age paradigm on post-Egyptian pre-modern pictorial art can also be seen, as already mentioned, in the design of the trees: they are always flowering and the occasional sharp edge to the branches might indicate a gardener's pruning. Beyond these observations, however, I shall refrain from closer analysis of the plant life in pre-modern images. A considerable number of tree and plant types – falling into fictitious and naturalistic categories – are represented, and a detailed study of these does not come within the sphere of this study. One trend, however, is immediately noticeable: plants drawn out in ornamental borders

Fig. 5.13. *River between Trees* (3000-2900 BC), drawing after seal impression. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

(FIGS. 2.13, 2.41, 2.45, 3.12 and 4.35) would more often seem to refer to species that can be classified naturalistically than plants spotted in the landscape. At the distance of landscape, the requirement of motif is not so pressing, so imagination or mere vagueness can take over. As is to be expected, the fiction culminates in the Middle Ages, when the rocks overflow with the most bizarre plant life: exotic fruit trees (FIG. 2.4); trees with enormous leaves (PLATE 16 and FIG. 2.32); or trees with layer upon layer of umbels, which are strangely reminiscent of modernity's concepts of primordial times (FIGS. 2.104, 3.22 and PLATE 4).

5.3 The quantum leap between Paradise and underworld

Ambivalence of the wilderness

Before the idyll completely takes over my description of the paradisiacal topoi, however, I must return to my observation in chapter 2: the material that forms Paradise is the same material that forms what gradually becomes its opposite, the underworld. Paradise and underworld are not placed in two different corners of the world, but circumscribe Western culture's ambivalent feelings towards the same domain: wild nature.

Regardless of the reciprocal tension, Paradise and the underworld are characterised by their distance from culture, by the dominance of non-human forces: an unspoilt state which leads towards primordial unity. Yet, as I also noted in

chapter 2, even this very unity is influenced by our split point of view, for whereas the Babylonians and the Greeks saw order emerging from chaos, the Jews and the Christians regarded the spirit to be the root of everything.

But just as difficult it is to assemble the origin from its splintered descendants, so it is to keep these parties separate in their later manifestation. The underworld is a cave set in rock. And this is what Paradise continues to be, for the Fountain of Life that waters its plants stems from the underground.[54] Far into the Greco-Roman and Christian traditions, therefore, we encounter examples of a Paradise which is still, as in Mesopotamia, placed in the underworld. This applies not only to Virgil's Elysian Fields in the *Aeneid*, but also to Paradise in the Byzantine tradition: "Eden (Paradise) Bethlehem has taken. Come, let us view! Abundance we find there in the hidden. Come, let us take the Paradise world there in the cave!"[55] Goethe sums up the concept in *Faust*, albeit now, in secularised modernity, the chorus remarks with mischievous scepticism of the rock caves: "One might think that these enclosures harbored worlds of space within them,/ Wood and meadow, lakes and freshets; truly, fairy yarns you spin!"[56]

Because *locus amoenus* can never escape its origins in the cave, its idyll can also shift to the demonic. In the *Aeneid* we come upon, for example, this dark Paradise:

> There is a place in the heart of Italy, beneath high hills, renowned and famed in many lands, the Vale of Amsanctus. On either hand a fringe of forest, dark with dense leafage, hems it in, and in the centre a roaring torrent resounds over the rocks in swirling eddies. Here is shown an awful cavern, and a breathing place of savage Dis; and a vast gorge, from which Acheron bursts forth, opens its pestilential jaws.[57]

Here the *locus amoenus* cave has turned into an infernal mouth, which spews out one of the underworld's rivers. This ambivalence is again not restricted to the spring and its surroundings, but would seem to influence the pre-modern attitude to everything uncultivated. As John Ruskin remarked when writing about Dante in *Modern Painters*, at both the entrance to the inferno and in the Paradise at the top of the Mountain of Purgatory we encounter a thicket of plants, but whereas the former is a "fencelessness and thicket of sin", the latter is, on the contrary, a "fencelessness and thicket of the free virtue".[58]

The ambiguity of the wild and unspoilt forest is a fundamental feature right back to Mesopotamian time. The Cedar Mountain, which Gilgamesh has to travel so far to reach, might indeed be a forest with a dense growth of coveted trees, but it is also a wilderness guarded by the monstrous giant Humbaba. Humbaba suggests the same as the serpent of Paradise: that *locus amoenus* is never completely de-demonised. In classical times, Lucretius makes the corresponding statement that the world is

full of deficiencies because "a greedy part is possessed by mountains and forests full of wild beasts". Nevertheless, the same writer tells us that "every animal that ranges wild everywhere over the great mountains" had been conceived in the first and ideal period of the earth, before she lost her spontaneous fertility. Similarly, Lucretius rejoices in the shepherds' sunlit leisure time, spent as it is among groves, glades and thickets – all places about which he had initially been sarcastic.[59]

And yet, when the ingredients of *locus amoenus* – spring, meadow, trees – are considered individually, they would seem in themselves to be immune to demonism. If they do not actually become dark, as in Virgil's abovementioned *locus horribilis*, then a hissing dragon has to be brought in to highlight the ambiguity. It would seem we have to reach the Middle Ages before suspicion is cast on the beauty of *locus amoenus* in itself as illusory and seductive; whereby is laid the foundation for that levelling of values in nature which in modernity makes it suitable for subjective contemplation.

The split landscape image

It is because wild nature will always be under threat from the demonic forces of chaos that a wedge has to be driven between Paradise and the underworld. The underworld is the reverse of Paradise: the mountainous wilds behind – or underneath – the farmed plains. Whether we are dealing with the Christian Paradise or Greco-Roman concepts of Elysium, these dream places are therefore to be found beyond this wilderness, on the edge of the material world. Of the Asphodel Meadow, to which Odysseus sends Penelope's suitors, we learn for instance: "Past the streams of Oceanus they went, past the rock Leucas, past the gates of the sun and the land of dreams, and quickly came to the meadow of Asphodel, where the ghosts dwell, phantoms of men who have done with toils."[60]

Paradise, then, is a strangely ambiguous entity. It has its foundations in the mountain, and we have to penetrate the wilderness in order to reach it. At the same time, it consists of ingredients such as beautiful trees, flowers, meadows, grass and springs, and in many of the variants of the myth, especially the Christian one, these are screened off from the underlying and surrounding wilderness, not least the mountain. Paradise gathers the mountain's flora, but excludes the foundation of the mountain itself. An illustrative depiction of this state of affairs is found in, for example, the Limbourg brothers' *The Fall and the Expulsion from Paradise* (*c.* 1410-16), in which Adam and Eve move from a walled garden to a mountainous wilderness (FIG. 5.14).

It is now tempting to compare this image of Paradise with the general agoraphobia characteristic of the stretches of meadowland in post-Egyptian pre-modern landscape images. As discussed in the introduction to chapter 2, these landscape images are, on the whole, dominated by rocks. Plants grow happily in all sorts of

Fig. 5.14. Limbourg brothers, *The Fall and the Expulsion from Paradise* (*c.* 1410-16), miniature from *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. Chantilly, Musée Condé, f. 25v.

contexts, but if the ground is shown as more than a two-dimensional line then it is in the form of rock. It is only in situations where the depth of field is potential rather than actual - agoraphobically dense thickets or local planes - that the plants find a soft and level grass pasture without the presence of rocks. Besides the previously mentioned grass pastures in Sant'Apollinare in Classe (FIG. 2.5A), we find just such a meadow in an illustration for the third book of the *Georgics* in the *Vergilius Romanus* illuminated manuscript (*c.* 450; FIG. 5.15); here the solitary rock seat under the pipe-playing shepherd again looks more like an outline of a detachable piece placed *on top of* the brownish-green stretch of meadow than an outcrop jutting from

Fig. 5.15. *Bucolic Scene* (*c.* 450 AD), miniature from Virgil's *Georgica* 3 in *Vergilius Romanus* manuscript. Rome, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms Vat. lat. 3867, f. 44v.

the stony ground *under* it. On the other hand, the meadow is devoid of concrete spatiality and its mini-bushes grow out of an abstract surface, which only potentially points towards the 'deconstructed' quasi-perspective of the Middle Ages. In comparison with this, even the unusual green cladding of the ground under the almost contemporaneous *Christ as the Good Shepherd* in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna is a counter-example (**PLATE 24**); since the depth of field in this mosaic stretches from foreground to middle distance, then the whole carpet of plant growth around Christ and the sheep – trees, bushes and grass-green – has to be solidly based on Byzantine terraced rocks.

If we compare this landscape paradigm with the above outlined Paradise image, it could be interpreted as being controlled by the magnetic field between heaven and underworld. Plant life in the landscape image stems, as it were, from Paradise and its jurisdiction, but as soon as we approach the ground, the gaze is forced, as if in a quantum leap, towards the underworld, where the rocks take over with their ambiguous fertile-demonic associations. The result is a blind spot in the gap between Paradise trees and inferno rocks: a spot that precludes broader meadows, plains and gentle hills. As shown in chapter 4, this more levelled-off terrain has been marginalised by the Golden Age *field* to a specific image genre and a specific pictorial gaze: the topographical map of a domain now bearing traces of cultivation and its accompanying diagrammatic gaze, the mapping gaze. If this flatter terrain is going to be manifested in the monumental pictorial art and under this art's dominating pictorial gaze – the panoramic gaze – it can thus only do so in a restricted outward view and without references of measurement: in brief, in topoi which in structural homology with Paradise close themselves off agoraphobically from the surrounding environment. As soon as the landscape image is opened up, the rocks abruptly jut forward and oust tendencies to a more outspread soft and flat ground. In its later phases – the phases from Greco-Roman time to the Late Middle Ages, during which the endeavour is to surgically remove matter from the heavens – the post-Egyptian landscape image could thus almost be interpreted as a cinematic split screen: a montage compiled of the plant life of an elevated Paradise and the rocks of a fallen underworld.

The complex of ideas that determines this pictorial view is intensified in step with the polarisation of the world picture, which turns the celestial sphere into a place of perfection. Here the growth of the plant puts its upper part at a distance from the level of its roots and the reptiles, and takes it up in the direction of the quadrupeds, the upright human being and, ultimately, the heavens.[61] The notion is strikingly expressed in the *Iliad*:

> At that the son of Cronos clasped his wife in his arms, and beneath them the bright earth made fresh-sprung grass to grow, and dewy lotus, and crocus, and hyacinth thick and soft that kept them from the ground. On this they lay, and were clothed about with a cloud, fair and golden, from which fell drops of glistening dew.

The passage shows evocatively that the paradisiacal is identical to the elevated, with that which rises above matter.[62]

If a ground was nevertheless to feature in a representation of Paradise, it had to be an earth of a particularly unblemished kind. This earth could be promised, as in Tertullian: "Jesus Christ introduces the second people, this being we who are

born in the desert of centuries, to the promised earth which flows with milk and honey, that is to the possession of eternal life [...]."[63] The earth could also simply be *terra*, the unspoilt earth as in Origen:

> Adam was expelled, after the Fall, to this world which is called the Barrenness. Thus Paradise is not situated on the Barrenness, but on Earth. What the Lord promises the saved in the Gospel, is thus in this way not the Barrenness, but Earth, which is that which belongs to the living.[64]

Whether this earth, which had once been situated towards the east, still existed in the current desert and barrenness, or if it had been shifted exclusively to the heavens, was the subject of intense discussion during the Middle Ages. At all events, it was generally thought that somewhere in heaven there was a Paradise region (cf. chapter 3); the question was just whether this region was Paradise's exclusive domain or if it still had a more earthly outlet, *paradisus terrestris*. Division into these two types of Paradise are heard about in, for example, the *Assumption of Moses*. After Adam's corpse has been lain in Paradise's earthly department, the angels fetch oils with which to treat it from a higher Paradise: the one in the third celestial sphere, which later Paul also beheld.[65]

Tertullian and Origen both believed that the earthly Paradise still existed, but separated it from the fallen earth by a wall of fire.[66] As an indication of this separation, Origen stated that after Christ's death his body went to the tomb, his psyche to Paradise and his pneuma into the hands of God.[67] Isidore located Paradise in Asia, and Thomas Aquinas placed it far from the estuary of the Euphrates and Tigris, beyond mountains, seas and wild forests.[68] In the opinion of writers still seeking Paradise on earth, it had obviously survived the Flood. In explanation of this, Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) stated that the Flood only went as far as the lower reaches of the mountains, while Walafrid Strabo was of the opinion that Paradise was located so far beyond the ocean and the backmost mountains that it reached the lunar sphere.[69]

Ephrem the Syrian and Walafrid Strabo thereby represent a theory that saw earthly Paradise itself growing more or less into the heavens. According to Ephrem's account, Paradise comprised a whole world hierarchy consisting of: at the bottom, Gehenna and Abyssus, then the lower reaches of mountains with the exile of Adam and his descendants and, finally, Paradise itself with the saints' area at the bottom and, at the top, gardens with the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life.[70] The same kind of gradation is found in the Late Middle Ages in Dante, where Paradise is located on the summit of the Mountain of Purgatory and again screened from the rock by a surrounding wall of fire.

However, these many variations do not change the fundamental picture: Paradise as an area which, in one way or other, is disengaged from the fallen matter. In time, this picture is doomed to break with its all-inclusive source, the Mountain of Life. This tendency, which gradually removes Paradise from the soil, cannot just be read from the homology with the polarised landscape paradigm, it can also be linked with a homology of iconographies. If we thus compare three chronologically scattered images of Paradise – the aforementioned *Monkey Fresco* in Knossus (*c.* 1500 BC; **FIG. 2.58**), the garden fresco from the House of Livia (*c.* 20 BC; **PLATE 5**) and finally the *Earth and Ocean* mosaic in the Dumetios Basilica in Nikopolis (*c.* 525-50; **FIG. 5.8**) – we are indeed, in all of them, looking towards a luxuriant and dense Paradise nature with trees, flowers and animals. But, as we move on in time, the ground is drained from the gaze. The *Monkey Fresco* is sunk in a subterranean cave complex, but in Livia's garden fresco 1,500 years later all we see of the ground is the discreet row of stalactites along the upper edge. Moving on another 500 years, to the Dumetios Basilica, and the plants are floating in thin air. The portrait is of the *Earth*, but the Earth is nowhere to be seen. In this early medieval image, Earth is no longer to be understood as the chthonic ground, but solely as its products. Paradise has left the cave.

This sequence of images confirms the Hegelian dictum that Western cultural evolution is characterised by the disengagement of spirit from matter, of Paradise from underworld. The perspectival pictorial view is first rendered possible when Paradise is so far removed from the cave that it has become a point in the distance – the vanishing point, with which the modern subject has to be confronted in order to find spatial equivalence with its similarly punctiform self-consciousness separated from matter.

The dream of a mountainless earth

But the emancipation of Paradise from the rocks did not occur simply by displacing its earthly ground. Alternatively, the ground could be looked in the eye and called level. This is what Plato did, for example, in *Phaedrus*: "Now the reason wherefore the souls are fain and eager to behold the *plain of Truth*, and discover it, lies herein – to wit, that the pasturage that is proper to their noblest part comes from that meadow, and the plumage by which they are borne aloft is nourished thereby."[71] [my italics] Even though we have by now realised that the best pastures are found in the mountains, they are here isolated from their surroundings and have become plains. Pliny turns the problem around and emphasises what is defective with the current profile of the earth: "Nor yet in fact do all these lofty mountains and widely spreading plains comprise the outline of a perfect sphere, but a figure whose circuit

would produce a perfect sphere if the ends of all the lines were enclosed in a circumference."[72] The Apollonian gaze here wants to subjugate the chaotic earth with its ideal form, the closed sphere.

These reflections culminate again in the Judeo-Christian culture. In the Judaic legends and later among the Church Fathers there was broad agreement that the existing undulation of the earth was a manifestation of its fallen and aged state, and that earlier it must have been more or less mountainless, if not completely level. Louis Ginzberg notes in *The Legends of the Jews*: "The conception that the mountains did not originally belong to earth's form is prevalent in legend".[73] The emergence of mountains was usually in response to human sin, by means of which nature, just as in the Greek Golden Age myth, became infested synchronously with its residents.[74] Conversely, the distinction between the first Garden of Eden and its surroundings were leveled out. If the original earth in its entirety was unblemished by mountains, then why isolate the paradisiacal in the garden? The garden's enclosure is here to be understood as a time warp: a preventive response to the wilderness which later sprouted up around it.

Many thought that the earth bulged immediately after the Fall. According to a number of legends, the earth was punished along with Adam, Eve and the serpent; here it was divided into mountains and valleys so that one day it would "wax old like a garment".[75] In Marjorie Hope Nicolson's words, the mountains then became "symbols of human sin, monstrous excrescences on the original smooth face of Nature." The curse that struck the earth not only resulted in hard undulations, but also in the impoverishment of the loose soil of the plains, as according to Genesis (3: 17) the ground will only yield food if it is cultivated with pain. The Church Fathers were often in doubt, however, as to whether Genesis' reference to the curse of the ground was aimed at the ground underfoot or the earth as a whole. Saint Jerome chose a perfect ambiguous solution in his "maledicta terra in opera tuo" (cursed is the earth in your work) rather than the more literal "maledicta humus propter te" (the soil will be cursed for your sake). As the Middle Ages proceeded, then, *terra* became increasingly associated with the whole earth, the fate of which thus became intertwined with that of humankind.[76] A pictorial example of the concept could appropriately be found in the already discussed Carolingian *Grandval Bible* (*c.* 835; PLATE 21). While scenes within the boundaries of Paradise take place on a gently curving ground, turbulent rocks pour forth as soon as Adam and Eve have been expelled and Adam has to get down to wielding the hoe. The change of scene is also felt, as mentioned in chapter 3, in the heavens, which change from striped to an ominous dark brown.

Alternatively, cracks appear in the earth after Cain's crime – the second Fall, which marks the transition from pastoralism to agriculture. Following the fratricide,

God decrees (Genesis 4: 11): "And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand." Several Jewish commentators construed this in the following way: earth, which originally consisted of a level surface, became mountainous as punishment for having received Abel's blood, and the earth will not be level again until the Messianic Age.[77] This myth was so widespread that it recurred in references to the Revelation on Mount Sinai and the death of the Egyptians in the Red Sea. In the latter, both land and sea refused to receive the bodies of the dead – earth because it remembered "with terror the curse that had been pronounced upon it for having sucked up Abel's blood."[78]

Whatever we might think of these early options for the formation of mountains, there was general agreement that it proceeded apace with the Flood.[79] From later sources, especially 17th-century natural histories, we get the impression that the Flood was regarded as a disaster that completely ruined what had originally been a level and smooth earth. Sir Walter Raleigh, who devotes a long section of his *History of the World* to Genesis, writes, for example:

> Whereas it is supposed by Aug. Chrysamensis that the Flood hath altered, deformed, or rather annihilated this place, in such sort, as no man can find any mark or memory thereof (of which opinion there were others also), ascribing to the Flood the cause of those high Mountains, which are found on all the Earth over, with many other strange effects.[80]

However, although Raleigh agrees that "the face of Paradise was after the Flood withered, and grown old, in respect of the first beauty",[81] he cannot believe that it was washed away completely, because Moses later describes it. Again, Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681-89) states that Jews and Christians regarded the earth as mountainless until the Flood. Among his sources, Burnet names Walafrid Strabo, Petrus Comestor, Bede, Alcuin and Hrabanus Maurus.

Even though a reading of Genesis commentators does indeed give the impression of an early theory of the Flood as creator of mountains, very few of the commentators believe, however, that the earth was totally smooth before that time. The judicious writer whom all build upon is Augustine. In *Enerratio in Psalmum LXXXIX* he suggests that the mountains were formed before the Flood, presumably of the third day of Creation, but in *De Genesi ad Litteram* he adopts an intermediate solution. On the one hand, the Flood rose above Mount Olympus and dissolved the first heaven, so there must have been mountains at an earlier stage; on the other hand, he is concerned about how the one Paradise spring was meant to supply the whole surface of the earth with water if this surface was undulating. The solution is a system of subterranean channels and caves and a relatively mountainless earth:

"it is highly likely that in the early days of the earth most, but not all areas were flat, so that there could be a further distribution and expansion of the water, as it burst forth."[82] Later commentators read from this passage that there had probably been mountains, but that the mountains were few and less rugged than those of the present day.

Augustine's opinion is repeated by Bede in *Expositio super Epistolas Catholicas* and perhaps also, if he actually wrote it, in *De Sex Dierum Creatione Liber*. The commentary to 2Pet. 2: 5 states:

> *And he did not spare the original world:* The world which the human race now inhabits is the same as the one occupied by people before the flood. Nevertheless, it is truly original, using the term as if it meant 'different,' as appears from later statements in this epistle. The world of that time perished, overwhelmed in a deluge of water. The former skies, in other words the tracts of turbulent air, were removed by the height of the accumulated waters and the earth took on a different appearance as the waters receded. It is believed that some mountains and valleys were originally created but not to the extent that they are now found on the earth's surface. It might be possible to deny this if it were not for the fact that we are able to observe changes every year brought about on the earth by the action of water. Thus it is all the more credible that such changes took place at that time, when the action of the waters attacking the earth was more powerful and of longer duration.[83]

In the Judeo-Christian and to some extent the Greco-Roman literary traditions, we thus encounter a clear tendency to split the Mountain of Life in two, so that Paradise is isolated in its own heaven separated from the underground, while its historically original foundation, the rocks, are identified with the unambiguous evil. This incision seems so conspicuous that in its Judeo-Christian variant it largely eliminates the mountains from primordial Paradise, a now only slightly undulating stretch of meadow land, whereas the epoch of the Fall – from the expulsion, to Cain murdering Abel, to the Flood and onwards – is marked by the spread of mountain formation. The distance from Paradise becomes, thereby, straightforwardly proportional to the quantity of rock masses that jut up in the course of time and block the view back to the lost age of innocence.

If we carry out a structuralistic comparison between the literary and pictorial paradigms, this charged attitude to the mountains again finds a visual homology in the abrupt change from a landscape image dominated by rocks to one in which these are conspicuously displaced. For if the Golden Age paradigm prevents any temporal states beyond the paradisiacal blossoming, then the rocks make this situation conditional: as long as the landscape image unfolds with broader spatial

panoramic gaze – an actual depth of field – it takes place on a foundation of rocks, the underside of Paradise, which alternates ambivalently between paradisiacal and infernal and is therefore marginalised as the unequivocal opposite of Paradise. If a more unconditionally undefiled situation – the homology to the mountainless primordial age of Paradise – is to take over, it can therefore only be realised in the screened environments of the potential depth of field, enclosures which agoraphobically displace the infernal rocks.

But, on the other hand, do we have to go all the way up to Messianic times before the dream of a level Paradise landscape is realised in pictorial form? The level landscape, in unimpeded shape, is actually what broke through in painting after 1420, the beginning of the modernity paradigm. The yearning can be fulfilled by simple acceptance that it is being realised on a new foundation – the cultivated plain – which has dissolved the tension between Paradise and the underworld. Paradise slides down, as it were, in the perspective's homogenised space, the changing seasons and the work-marked everyday, and then is gradually dissolved by them. When level Paradise is realised on earth in pictorial form – when secularised – it is unrecognisable.

Jacob Wamberg

Landscape as World Picture

Tracing Cultural Evolution in Images

VOLUME I

From the Palaeolithic Period to the Middle Ages

Translated by Gaye Kynoch

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