



NEW APPROACHES TO  
BYZANTINE HISTORY AND CULTURE

# Byzantine Tree Life

Christianity and the  
Arboreal Imagination

Thomas Arentzen · Virginia Burrus  
Glenn Peers



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# New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture

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ISSN 2730-9363

ISSN 2730-9371 (electronic)

New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture

ISBN 978-3-030-75901-8

ISBN 978-3-030-75902-5 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75902-5>

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Cover illustration: skaman306

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*For LARCeNY,  
where these thoughts first took root*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to the “Late Ancient Religion in Central New York” collectivity, also known as LARCeNY, an extraordinary group of scholars who have nurtured our tree-thinking with their conversation and friendship. In particular, Glenn and Virginia are grateful to Rachel Carpenter, Georgia Frank, Jennifer Glancy, Kim Haines-Eitzen, Karmen MacKendrick, Patricia Cox Miller, and Matthew Westermayer, for their stimulating engagement, and also to the Central New York Humanities Corridor for a grant that allowed LARCeNY to host a symposium, “Trees and More: Ecological Thinking and the Ancient Christian Imagination” (6 April 2019). On that occasion, Thomas was our keynote speaker, and all three of us presented arboreal papers that formed the seeds for this book. Thomas is grateful too.

Glenn and Virginia thank The Clark Art Institute of Williamstown, MA, and Dean Karin Ruhlandt of the College of Arts and Sciences at Syracuse University for their support of our sabbaticals during the academic year 2020–21. When we arrived in Williamstown, we were pleased to discover two wonderful works of tree art on the Clark grounds that sparked our imaginations: Giuseppe Penone’s “Le foglie delle radici (The Leaves of the Roots),” 2011, and Kelly Akashi’s “A Device to See the World Twice,” 2020; both of these are discussed in the pages of this book. We are also grateful to the Clark Research and Academic Program and Library staff, who kept us supplied with books even during a pandemic, to Associate Curator Robert Wiesenberger’s kind consultation regarding trees in contemporary art, and to Williams College Art History MA student Elisama Llera, who did a wonderful job of tracking down images for us.

Thomas wishes to extend his gratitude to Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection. A year as Fellow of Byzantine Studies in 2018–19 yielded numerous arboreal encounters in the magnificent, mysterious garden of Dumbarton Oaks. The other fellows generously shared and inspired plant thoughts as this project was in its budding phase, while Alice-Mary Talbot and Annemarie Weyl Carr both contributed to the cultivation of new arboreal ideas. Thomas’s contribution to the present volume is part of the research project, generously funded by the Swedish Research Council, titled *Beyond the Garden: An Ecocritical Approach to Early Byzantine Christianity* (2018-01130), which he conducts in Uppsala. He is deeply grateful to colleagues in the Greek seminar at Department of Linguistics and Philology in Uppsala, Christian Høgel, Ingela Nilsson, Antonios Pontoropoulos, Fredrik Sixtensson, Myrto Veiko, and David Westberg, for conversations and encouragements.

Virginia is grateful to Marco Formisano for inviting her to participate in the interdisciplinary round table “‘Listen. There’s something you need to hear.’ A conversation about trees, ancient and modern,” sponsored by the Ghent Institute of Classical Studies. Glenn and Thomas both enjoyed the chance to speak about dendrite saints at the conference “The Reception of Stylites: Rereadings and Recastings of Late Ancient Syrian Super-Heroes,” which took place at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul; Thomas co-organized the conference with funding from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond. Thomas would like to thank Helena Bodin for inviting him to give a presentation on trees as the Annual Lecture in Memory of Lennart Rydén in 2019. Thanks also to Andreas Nordlander, Andreas Westergren, and other church historians who participated in the seminar “Ancient Ecotheologies” in Lund.

We are of course most of all grateful to the trees that have nurtured each of us with their quiet presence, ever-changing beauty, and sustaining breath, during what has been an extraordinarily challenging year of pandemic, social crisis, and personal loss. They have inspired us, comforted us, and taught us so much, not least about the importance of connections and emergences. In a time of most difficult isolation, they brought the three of us together to share reading and writing, conversation and companionship, mournfulness and hope. That was a great gift indeed.

And yet we are also aware not only of the privilege that marks our very access to treed spaces but also of the histories of colonialism, racism, and genocide complicit in that privilege. Virginia and Glenn live and work in Syracuse, New York, on the ancestral lands of the Onondaga Nation,



where Lake Onondaga and its forested environs, sacred to the Onondaga Nation and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, were first taken illegally from the Nation by European settlers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and then severely polluted in the twentieth. We are aware too that in our own moment, in both Europe and North America, exclusive claims to the cultural artifacts of antiquity and the Middle Ages, including their ecological insights and practices, have been made on behalf of specific racial, ethnic, and religious groups. This book on Byzantine tree life should by no means be understood to collude even indirectly with the identity politics of a racist or ethnocentric environmentalism. Ecological thought, whatever its origins or forms, is necessarily radically inclusive. No doubt our work has many limitations and blind spots, but our intention is to render Byzantine Christian thought, literature, and art as capacious and generous as possible.

We should all be able to breathe freely with the trees. We should all be able to breathe.

## Praise for *Byzantine Tree Life*

“Byzantine thought comes to life in this fabulous book. The authors’ lively writing style and astounding erudition brush away the dust of centuries, revitalizing the texts and images from what they call the ‘long Byzantium.’ And the lives that come to light here are not only human. With care and precision, Arentzen, Burrus, and Peers enable trees to come to the fore as the agents of intellectual, aesthetic, and religious history in their own right.”

—Michael Marder, *University of the Basque Country, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain*

“The quest in this three-faceted book is to give voice to the postmodern tree and its cult, while also discovering and enunciating its Byzantine equivalent. Our awe of the tree, majestic, romanticized, and endangered, is so steeped in the threats of our own era that it claims overweening urgency over every other, yet we know that the premodern era preceded many factors of denaturalization that we are now combatting. That is the book’s challenge.”

—Annemarie Weyl Carr, Professor Emerita, *Southern Methodist University, USA*

“This is a remarkable book that should be of great interest to many scholars and theologians, not only Byzantinists, as it ranges chronologically from the Minoans in the second millennium BC to philosophers at the beginning of the third millennium AD. The entire book propels one into ideas of human-arboreal relations that one had never before contemplated: no reader will turn the last page unchanged in attitude to the natural world.”

—A. R. Littlewood, Professor Emeritus, *University of Western Ontario, Canada*

“An intriguing, innovative and sympathetic approach to the role of trees—as symbol, metaphor and perceived reality—in late antique and Byzantine Christian thought, this volume turns over a new leaf to tap into a powerful and exciting new current in cultural- and literary-historical research. No longer is the ‘natural’ environment—whether floral or faunal—to be taken at face value.”

—John Haldon, Professor Emeritus, *Princeton University, USA*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (series)
DOML	Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library
Ep.	Epistle
FC	Fathers of the Church (series)
GCS	Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller (series)
Hex.	Hexaemeron
<i>J ECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LSJ	Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon
NH	Natural History (Pliny the Elder)
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (series)
PG	Patrologia Graeca (series, ed. J. P. Migne)
SC	Sources Chrétiennes (series)
Symp.	Symposium
<i>VChr</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>VChr</i> Supp	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i> , Supplements

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

Byzantine Christians,<sup>1</sup> like most humans, lived with and among trees, both urban and rural, cultivated and wild. They enjoyed trees' hospitality, generosity, and beauty. They saw themselves mirrored in trees as well—their erect stance and reaching branches, rooted constancy, vibrant fecundity, and above all, perhaps, their yearning for the light. Sometimes they even took on the challenge of entering into close and active relationships with trees: engaging tree-being and -thinking, they became a little more tree-like in the encounter with arboreal others. Indeed, trees beckoned with the possibility of transformation, given their dramatic cycles of death and regeneration, the adaptability of their growth, and their capacity to give and receive one another as grafts. Trees were constantly becoming other than themselves, if only through the remarkable variety of their seasonal appearance, or the magic of the change from seed to sapling and flower to fruit.<sup>2</sup> Might humans not hope to transform themselves too, especially with trees for teachers?

<sup>1</sup>We use the term Byzantine Christians to describe those Christians nourished by both classical Greek and biblical cultures; ours is a long Byzantium, reaching from late antiquity to the fifteenth century.

<sup>2</sup>Luce Irigaray frames the seasonal variation of trees as a kind of subjective multiplicity or non-identity: "Now we designate a birch with the same name in the spring, the summer, the autumn and the winter, although this name refers to forms, colors, and even to sounds and to odors, which are absolutely different according to the time of the year, not to say that of

The themes of tree-hospitality, tree-affinity, and tree-transformation will unfurl in the chapters that follow, as we explore literary and artistic artifacts of human-tree encounters in the late ancient and medieval Mediterranean. To be sure, these cultural remains, all of which are inflected (if never entirely determined) by distinctly Christian practices and beliefs, reveal much more about how humans understood and imagined trees than about their actual interactions with them. Moreover, they might seem to have precious little to say about the life and agency of trees themselves. And yet it is precisely the life of trees that engages us here and incites our interpretations and reflections, even if it remains inevitably elusive. “Trees ... define a specific way of *making the world* and *making communities*.”<sup>3</sup>

We are not botanists or dendrologists, but historians. Thus, our approach to the life of trees will be made in the company of our historical subjects, Byzantine Christians who are themselves in many ways as strange to us as trees. It is that very strangeness that gives us our opening. Tree life leaves its imprint on Byzantine thought and imagination differently than on ours. We wager that this difference has something to teach us. Yet the difference is also never absolute, and what we learn inevitably comes at least in part in the form of recognition—a recollection of what has been forgotten or ignored, rather than a completely novel revelation.

Paradoxically, although we here propose to engage the life of trees through the mediation of Byzantine literature and art, trees themselves already mediate our engagement with those other humans we call Byzantine. Like plants, more generally, they “not only augment and

the day. Using the same name to allude to the birch at any time, we remove it from its living presence and deprive ourselves of our sensory perceptions to enter into presence with it” (Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2016], 49). Michael Marder suggests that “the *morphé* of plant-soul is extremely elastic, to the point of indefiniteness” and suggests that plants’ “freedom” is expressed in the exuberant and unpredictable efflorescence of their “spatial forms” (Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2013], 121, 129). Emanuele Coccia notes, with regard to plant life, “where no movement, no action, no choice are possible, meeting someone or something is possible exclusively through a metamorphosis of the self” (*The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, translated by Dylan J. Montanari [Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019], 99).

<sup>3</sup> Emanuele Coccia, “Experiencing the World,” in *Trees*, ed. Bruce Albert, Hervé Chandès, and Isabelle Gaudefroy (Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, 2019), 27.



transform how we perceive, but also change and undo what we are.”<sup>4</sup> For starters, they play a strong role in fixing and orienting time and place. Indeed, trees’ relationship to, and determination of, time and place have been deeply formative for Mediterranean cultures since antiquity, and trees continue to mediate our own relationship to the past that we study. “Stationary and visible, they may serve as spatial markers within a physical, tangible territory; stationary and long-lived, they may also be temporal markers, in that they relate a particular moment in the past, as one point in the whole passage of time, to the present.”<sup>5</sup> If we are to grant trees ages and dates (and clonal trees defy linear, finite dating that we apply to measurement of our lifetimes), then some have had extraordinary spans of life. On Mount Smolikas, in the Pindos range in northwestern Greece, a Bosnian pine tree named Adonis is calculated to be more than 1075 years old. Trees in the Americas have been discovered to have lived twice or even four times that long (the oldest being the bristle cone pine Prometheus in Nevada, who was cut down in 1964 at age 4862),<sup>6</sup> and similar (if less scientific) claims have been made for so-called heritage trees, including a yew tree in the Black Sea region of Turkey thought to be 4112 years old.<sup>7</sup> Trees thus exceed our limits as humans, even as we move and pass before them. The men and women discussed here have long since died, but some of the trees alive when they were living are with us still. They provide bridges across times and places.

Trees also mediate our engagement with Byzantine Christians more concretely through the materiality of our sources. The Greek *biblos* refers both to a book and to the bark of the papyrus plant, while the Greek *papyrus* gives its name to paper in English and Latin-based languages; in Latin, *codex* means tree trunk, wood, or book; in Swedish and other Germanic languages including English, the words for book and beech are the same

<sup>4</sup>Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari, *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 172.

<sup>5</sup>Darice Birge, “Trees in the Landscape of Pausanias’ *Periegesis*,” in *Placing the Gods: Sanctuaries and Sacred Space in Ancient Greece*, ed. Susan E. Alcock and Robin Osborne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 231–45, here 232. See also Christina G. Williamson, “Mountain, Myth, and Territory: Teuthrania as Focal Point in the Landscape of Pergamon,” in *Valuing Landscape in Classical Antiquity: Natural Environment and Cultural Imagination*, ed. Jeremy McInerney and Ineke Sluiter, Mnemosyne Supplements, vol. 393 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 70–99.

<sup>6</sup>Valerie Trouet, *Tree Story: The History of the World Written in Rings* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 29–40.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/oldest-yew-tree-found-in-turkeys-north-100428>

or similar. In modernity, of course, literary works are inscribed not on papyrus but on wood-based paper. Icons are traditionally painted on wooden panels. Thus, trees not only frequently live longer than we humans; they also allow our words and images to extend their lives longer still, often at the expense of their own longevity. They lend our human expression their own *longue durée*. This tree-materiality matters.

Indeed, at the most basic level, for ancient and medieval Greek-speakers, trees convey materiality itself: the term *hyle* can be translated either “forest,” “wood,” or “matter.” If this layering of meaning implies a distinctly instrumental view of trees (and it certainly can), it also points to a power and mystery at the heart of tree-being. The potentiality conveyed by materiality—Aristotle’s *hyle*, but also Plato’s *khora*—could never be exhausted by human ends or goals. *Hyle* could always become something else, something more. And while it might be formed and animated by the needs and desires of other beings, most forcefully by the needs and desires of humans, it was also imbued with an intentionality and animacy of its own. In other words, the semantic range of *hyle* points to the potential reduction of trees to mere matter, but it also points to the endowment of matter with the liveliness and agency not only of a single tree but also of an entire forest of possibility.

What do we mean when we appeal to the liveliness and agency of trees, or more simply to *tree life*? We might say that the appeal invites a comparison. It invites us to encounter trees in their likeness to us, as living, acting beings. It also invites us to attend to their difference and distinctiveness as living, acting beings. And finally, it invites us to discover some of that very difference in ourselves as well. As plant philosopher Michael Marder puts it, “The gap separating humans from plants may dwindle—though not altogether disappear—thanks to the discovery of traces of the latter in the former, and vice versa.”<sup>8</sup> Trees, perhaps more than any other plants, allow us to perceive our own vegetal natures.

Such an insight is reflected in the earliest Christian Gospel, whose author considers it unremarkable that trees would provide a visual baseline for humanity in the eyes of a newly sighted man: “I see humans, for I behold [something] like trees [ὡς δένδρα] walking around” (Mark 8:24). The unusual syntax of this verse, together with its enigmatic sense, puts any translation on wobbly footing. The text may indicate that the formerly blind man is looking at humans, whose visual appearance is not familiar to

<sup>8</sup>Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 9.

him, and comparing them to walking trees, whose visual appearance he somehow recognizes. But why is he able to recognize trees more easily than humans? Perhaps he experiences an affinity even more basic with arboreal figures; as Emanuele Coccia puts it (and Genesis before him), “The world begins with trees.”<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, the text may indicate that the man is looking at trees, not humans, since he and Jesus have evidently withdrawn from others; on this reading, the appearance of the trees gives him some idea of the appearance of humans, either because their own swaying suggests walking or because the man can form a mental picture of humans by imagining the trees as ambulatory rather than rooted in place. Finally, it is possible to read the phrase “like trees” as referring to the man himself: like trees, he stands still, observing (other) humans walking around. The instability of the passage has a dizzying effect that amplifies the unsettling insight running across all the possible interpretations: sometimes humans and trees are so much alike as to be almost indistinguishable.

Artists and novelists have explored this sense of continuity between trees and humans with insight, pathos, and humor. As a character in Michael Christie’s 2019 novel *Greenwood* muses regarding the human spine, “What else could it be, he thinks—with its gently curving trunk of bone, its limbs and branches and tributaries of nerve tissue, its flexibility and delicacy and elegant perfection—other than a kind of tree, buried in our backs, standing us up?”<sup>10</sup> Giuseppe Penone likewise plays with the rhyming forms of trees and humans in a number of his art works, including “Le foglie delle radici (The Leaves of the Roots)” (2011), a thirty-foot-tall sculpture of an inverted tree, resting on its branches with a live eastern red cedar sapling growing on top of its roots. One of the effects of the inversion is to make the tree form distinctly humanlike, with its branching “arms” and “legs” reaching downward.<sup>11</sup> However, instead of either the humanlike “head” or the extended root system that we might expect on top, the base of the trunk—itsself a very elongated “neck”—cradles a tiny living tree that is right side up, growing toward the sky. A whimsical

<sup>9</sup> Coccia, “Experiencing the World,” 28.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Christie, *Greenwood: A Novel* (London: Hogarth, 2019), 425.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.clarkart.edu/exhibition/detail/penone>. Another Penone sculpture, “Pantaloni” (1987, Magazzino Italian Art, Cold Spring, NY), dresses a tree branch in an inverted pair of linen pants partially printed with a barklike pattern, playing on a smaller scale with the same resemblance of human legs to tree branches.

figure, the little cedar hints at a fragile triumph of tree nature over human art, while also suggesting the possibility of a kind of tree-thinking.<sup>12</sup>

Trees thus prompt humans to ask: are we too *hyle*? The question is itself a multitude. Morphological affinities tempt us to project an all-too-human sense of autonomous individuality onto trees, but they also promise to disturb that same sensibility: every comparison potentially runs in two directions. Trees like all plants are deeply and ineradicably enmeshed in the life of the places that sustain them. Thinking and growing most vigorously as a collectivity—*hyle*—trees are also utterly dependent on their non-arboreal others—light, air, water, and earth, to name only the most obvious and elemental. They cannot but remember what we footloose humans are often inclined to forget, even when our forgetfulness ultimately cuts against our own survival. Life *is* co-emergence, growth with interconnection.<sup>13</sup>

The Greek philosopher Plato famously proposes a tripartite soul for humans, consisting of the *logistikon* (rational, head-based, distinctly human), the *thumetikon* (passionate, heart-based, shared with animals), and the *epithumetikon* (appetitive, stomach-based, shared with plants). In his dialogue *Timaeus*, Plato associates the third kind of soul with cultivated “trees and plants and seeds,” while seemingly wanting to distance humans from the exuberance of spontaneous, unregulated plant growth (*Timaeus* 77a). Plato’s successor Aristotle further develops and canonizes this hierarchy of life, which is mapped onto every human, body-and-soul.

<sup>12</sup>Penone’s sculpture, on exhibit at the Clark Museum in Williamstown, MA, in 2020, echoes another tree sculpture just down the road at MASS MoCA. Natalie Jeremijenko’s “Tree Logic” (1999) is an ongoing, dynamic work in which six live sugar maple trees are inverted and suspended; as they grow, they gradually bend themselves toward the sky. The first trees, when they grew too big for the exhibit, were planted on the grounds of the Clark; initially bent, they gradually re-straightened their trunks. Trees and plants more generally have increasingly entered western museums and galleries, and have challenged our museological discretion. For example, see these recent exhibitions: *Allora & Calzadilla: Specters of Noon*, The Menil Collection, Houston, TX, 26 September 2020–20 June 2021; *Among the Trees*, Hayward Gallery, London, UK, 1 August–31 October 2020; *The Botanical Mind: Art, Mysticism and The Cosmic Tree*, Camden Art Centre, London, UK, 24 September–23 December 2020; and *Trees of Life: Stories for a Damaged Planet*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, Germany, 10 October 2019–16 February 2020. See also “Plants,” a recent issue of the art magazine *Spike* 65 (Autumn 2020).

<sup>13</sup>The interconnectedness that makes a forest so very much more than the sum of its individual tree-parts is brought out especially well by Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World*, trans. Jane Billinghurst (Vancouver/Berkeley: Greystone Books, 2015).

The problematic nature of the hierarchy is easy to spot and widely acknowledged: plants (especially “wild” plants) are demeaned as the “lowest” life form, humans exalted as the “highest,” leaving animals somewhere in between. Recently philosophers have come to recognize that it is not so much the animal as the (uncultivated) plant that is the human’s excluded “other” in western thought.<sup>14</sup> However, we should not miss the inclusivity that is also implied in the positing of the vegetal soul as the basis of all life, animal as well as plant. Plato suggests playfully that humans are upside-down plants, rooted by their rational souls in the realm of ideas and thereby kept upright, in a kind of inverted grounding (*Timaeus* 90a-b).<sup>15</sup> (We are reminded of Penone’s “The Leaves of the Roots.”) Aristotle offers an earthier comparison: soil is an external stomach for plants, whereas humans and other animals carry both soil and roots within them in their digestive and circulatory systems. “Our locomotion is made possible by such a portable earth, which is to say a vegetable soul or power of growth that moves along with us,” as Jeffrey Nealon frames the Aristotelian thought. “Likewise, Aristotle is very clear that our circulatory systems are plantlike. In short, for Aristotle we are not only rational animals; we are also walking plants”<sup>16</sup>—or more specifically, walking trees, as the gospel writer has it. For Plato as well as Aristotle, despite their differences, humans are not only a kind of animal—a view in harmony with our own thought—but also (like other animals) a kind of plant.

The vegetal soul, a concept discarded by modern philosophy and science alike, has been taken up again by recent plant theorists. For Michael Marder, the very concept of plant-soul challenges the (transcendentalizing, human-centered) premises of western metaphysics: “the plant confirms the ‘truth’ of the soul as something, in large part, non-ideal, embodied, mortal, and this-worldly, while the soul, shared with other living entities and construed as the very figure for sharing, corroborates the vivacity of the plant in excess of a reductively conceptual grasp.” Plant-soul thus becomes a productive way of thinking life itself—“its precariousness, violability, and, at the same time, its astonishing tenacity, its capacity for survival.”<sup>17</sup> It provides a grounding for what Marder calls “vegetal

<sup>14</sup> See Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetal Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), and Coccia, *Life of Plants*.

<sup>15</sup> See Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 56–57; J. B. Skemp, “Plants in Plato’s *Timaeus*,” *Classical Quarterly* 41 (1947): 53–60, here 55.

<sup>16</sup> Nealon, *Plant Theory*, 36. See also Coccia, *Life of Plants*, 78–9.

<sup>17</sup> Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 19.