

What the Trees Saw is a look at humankind through the eyes of the trees that have always lived amongst us, a species much older and wiser, than ourselves. The book explores our ancestry, what we have become and, perhaps, where we are going.

**What the Trees Saw:
An Intimate, Irreverent, Look at Human Evolution**
By Thomas R Miller

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WHAT THE TREES SAW

An Intimate, Irreverent, Look at Human Evolution

THOMAS R MILLER

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The views of historical figures, as well as those views presumed common to the societies in which they lived, especially toward women, do not necessarily reflect the views of the author.

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Khudufu says, "Mama, we screwed up big time lettin' you all into this brotherhood. You nuthin' but a power drain."

Lastly, Khudufu says to his brother, "C'mon big man, let's get to solvin' this worker problem. Maybe we'd best approach it as a general commoner problem. They all been real uppity lately."

Fig, date, and pomegranate trees in Memphis watch the Pharaoh and his priests collaborate to create a state religion. To inspire awe, the handmaiden of fear, they make its beliefs and practices so complicated that neither the trees, nor the common people, nor even its authors can understand it. It's essence, however, is this. Each human has a ka, a soul or life-force, that leaves the body when it dies. Since in life the ka was sustained by food and drink, it must receive these after death. Each human also has a ba, a set of qualities unique to that individual. If the deceased has led a good life, as defined by the priests, his ba and ka will be reunited at his funeral, and he'll live an afterlife much like his beforelife but without the nasty bits. If he's led a bad life, his family will have wasted a lot of milk and cookies keeping his ka alive till the funeral, and their loved one will cease to be. This notion of "ceasing to be" scares the shit out of the commoners and keeps most of them in line, trying to lead a good life.

The trees think it's all a right and proper load of kaka.

What they don't think is a load of kaka is the Egyptian written language, because it allows history to be written.

The trees presume that humans intelligent enough to invent such a tool will use it to record, accurately and precisely, their lives and times. Then they watch each pharaoh write his story.

What they see, time and again, is a tale intended to make him appear more powerful, wise, generous, godly, and good-looking than he ever was in life. Each pharaoh has his story inscribed on temple walls throughout the kingdom. Then his successor erases all these inscriptions and inscribes his story to replace them. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Now and then, trees see a scribe receive his pharaoh's permission to write a more general history of their times, knowing that, if his words contradict anything in the big man's story, he'll be taken for a short walk along the Nile by one of the pharaoh's hominid bodyguards.

Thus, 5000 years back, are the first human histories written and so they continue to be written, first by scribes who write what they're told. Then, later, by historians who sometimes must still write what they're told, but also by others who are seeking the truth. Wherever, whenever, and by whom these histories are written, the trees see that they're written by the victors, for the vanquished haven't time for writing, being either too busy doing slave labor, living their afterlife, or ceasing to be.

Big elms living in Harvard Yard send back a story from the middle of the 20th century, a tale about the great philosopher, George Santayana. It's a warm spring day. Young couples stroll across the Yard or sit on the grass beneath the trees.

Santayana's teaching a philosophy course in a building that faces the Yard, and he's got a view of it from his lectern, and what he sees there inspires him more than the lecture he's giving. Particularly the young women.

The subject of his lecture is the connection between history and philosophy. A student whose questions annoy Santayana asks him what history is. He replies without hesitation, "A pack of lies about things that never happened told by people who weren't there." Then he walks out of the classroom, never to return.

Whether it's called history or his story or a pack of lies, Egypt, though her fortunes wax and wane, is the big kahuna during the first half of human history. It's the first great empire and, during its heyday, extends from the Nile across the Eastern Desert to the Red Sea, across the Western Desert to Libya, north to the Mediterranean, and south into the kingdoms of Nubia and Kush.

When Christ is born, the Egyptian Empire is 3000 years old and will endure hundreds more, far longer than any other empire in the ancient world or since.

Money

Pistachio trees growing on the Anatolian Plateau see people in the Kingdom of Lydia exchanging small round discs of shiny metal for houses, farms, food, and other goods. The Lydians call these pieces of metal money. The trees are puzzled because this stuff's worthless. It can't be eaten, lived in, or worn. Yet, if a man has enough of it, he can buy a house, a farm, anything. Lydians with lots of money are honored and respected, though many are stupid, violent brutes who kick their dogs, beat their wives and girlfriends, and cheat at backgammon. Lydians with little money are considered poor and thought to be ne'er-do-wells, though some are great artists and thinkers. The trees struggle with this concept of wealth. Finally, they decide that, if they had lots of money, they'd spend it fast and buy all they could before they were turned to paupers when their countrymen came to their senses, agreed that money's worthless, and went back to bartering things of value for things of value. But this never happens. Quite the contrary. As human history unfolds, trees see more and more kingdoms round the Mediterranean accept money as a medium of exchange. Twentieth century trees send word back that humans in nations round the world there have begun accepting both metal and paper money in exchange for goods that are worth something.

Croesus, the king of Lydia, is very rich. His subjects think he inherited his money from his father. Lydian trees see him mint most of it in the basement of the big vacation home he's built on the shore of the Med to show off how much money he's got.

The trees hear him tell his children repeatedly that money doesn't grow on trees.

Lydians think wealth makes a person happy. Over the centuries, Lydian trees see that it doesn't. The riches of Croesus bring him nothing but stress and unhappiness. He has trouble sleeping and worries constant about losing his gold and needs to hire a squad of Neanderthal knee-breakers to protect him from thieves and assassins wherever he goes. Then he has to hire another squad of them to guard the mint in the basement of his house on the coast. Still afraid, he builds a high stone wall topped with broken glass all around the house and keeps a trio of big wolfdogs to guard the yard it encloses. They're so vicious that he's afraid of them. Olives outside the wall see a servant forget to feed them one night, and they eat the king's youngest son. And, if this isn't enough, his insurance premiums are sky high, and he's never sure if his wife, family, and friends love him or his money.

Croesus sends his army to defeat the Greek settlements on the coast, brings them under control, and exacts tribute from them.

Some old cypress trees growing there hypothesize that, from this time forward, all human wars will be about money. Their relatives living in the 21st century report back to them that their hypothesis has been corroborated countless times by the countless wars fought in the 25 plus centuries that separate them, wars in which millions die fighting over something of no value. The cypresses call upon their sisters, the winds, to help them flail their branches and wail.

Pines outside his holiday home watch Croesus mint piles of gold and silver coins. They see his Money Minister, Karnak, a hominid immaculately disguised in a matching blue silk robe and turban, advise him that this increase in the money supply is causing an inflationary spiral that's reducing the value of every coin in his kingdom. Karnak recommends that the king buy real estate as a hedge against this devaluation, advice based upon the notion that something with no value can be devalued still further. Trees far in the future communicate back to the trees of Lydia that this minister's counsel has put him in competition for two prominent places in human history. One is in the history of mathematics as the father of negative and imaginary numbers, the other in the history of economics as the father of modern economic theory, a complex mix of science and superstition that usually fails in practice and that even some economists don't quite understand.

Croesus has hominid spies disguised as soldiers in the Persian army. They report back to him that Cyrus the Great, king of the mighty Persian Empire, is eyeing the Lydian king's gold, his vacation home, and the whole of western Anatolia that's his empire. If Cyrus can defeat the Lydian army and absorb all this into his own empire, he'll become a much richer rich man. Croesus knows he's got to do something but is worried about going to war with the powerful Persian leader.

He soothes his fears by seeing a soothsayer, the Oracle at Delphi. She advises him to seek out the most powerful city state in Greece and form an alliance with it.

He allies Lydia with Sparta on the Peloponnese, because her menfolk live to fight and fight to live and have a rep for being very bad dudes who will attack anything within their field of vision that looks foreign and moves.

When he asks the oracle if he should pursue a campaign against the Persians, she replies vaguely in true oracular fashion that, if he does, he will destroy a great empire. Croesus thinks she means the Persian Empire, goes to war with Cyrus, is defeated, and destroys his own empire which most trees in Lydia think isn't big enough to be an empire.

Bloody soothsayers.

Cyrus orders Croesus to be burned alive on a great funeral pyre. Flames are licking the Lydian's chops when Cyrus changes his mind and lets him live. Cyrus has come to believe that he and Croesus have much in common and can be of mutual benefit. He relieves Croesus of all his wealth and makes him his advisor. The Lydian lives out the rest of his life counseling Cyrus about his worries but having few of his own now that he's been stripped of all his gold and property. Lydian trees see him pass his last years a happy man with no worries but, of course, for the usual one about death and what'll happen to him after it.

Greece

It's the sixth century BC. Olive trees growing on hillsides round the Mediterranean see Lydia fall as Greek city states on the mainland rise. Prominent amongst these are Athens and Sparta. Sparta's a mixed bag. It's a militarist state but is also the only one that grants women formal education. Emphasis upon physical fitness for boys begins at birth. At death, only soldiers who died in a victorious campaign and women who died in childbirth get marked headstones. Trees round Sparta note that Spartan males are born and bred for battle and are real fuckers in a fight but no fun in the pub on a Saturday night where they're churlish, ill-tempered, and mean-spirited because of all the heavy discipline that's been laid upon them.

Sparta is created when the Spartans invade and occupy the tribal states of Laconia and Messenia on the Peloponnese at the south end of the Balkans. They enslave the entire population of both states. Spartan oaks observe that the Laconians are a quiet people known for their economy with words and the Messenians are untidy, many of them hominids who manage to camouflage themselves through their messiness. The Spartans call their slaves helots and are outnumbered by them seven to one. Thucydides, the Athenian historian, writes that Spartan institutions are designed for maximum security against a helot uprising. Spartan trees see evidence to support his assertion when they note that what Spartan males do consider fun on a Saturday night is to go out in groups, rampage over the countryside, and slaughter helots.

The helots are abused constantly, but when the Spartans find themselves in danger of losing one of their constant wars, they ask the helots to fight alongside them. Those who do and survive are freed. There aren't many of these however, because the Spartans don't give the helots proper military training, fearing they'll wake up one night outnumbered seven to one by people who've no love for Sparta or Spartans but can fight just as well as they can.

Spartan law requires that all babies born puny or malformed, be killed. Boys begin military training at seven and live in communal messes. They're fed enough to give them strength but no more, lest they become full and sluggish. The idea is that they fight better knowing what it's like to not have enough. They do hard physical exercise and weapons training and study reading, writing, music and dancing. Fig trees outside their barracks note that rhythm and blues, rock and roll, the tango, the boogie, and the jitterbug are excluded from these last two areas of study.

Spartan boys are encouraged to take an older male mentor, usually a young bachelor, to act as a sort of substitute father and role model. The old plane trees that shade the courtyards of the military schools scattered round the Spartan countryside watch these attachments unleash a fusillade of brotherly buggery. Then they realize that one of the reasons these mentorships are encouraged is to produce soldiers who can stay away from home on long military campaigns without being distracted by their need for women.

At 20 a Spartan male becomes a soldier and is encouraged to marry. He's on active military duty till he's 30, when he's allowed to hold public office and to live with his family but is still a soldier and must be ready to fight and die for his country if necessary. When he's 60, if he's still alive, he ceases to be a soldier. Thucydides writes that when a Spartan goes to war, his wife presents him with his shield and tells him to return with it or upon it, meaning that a true Spartan can only return to Sparta victorious or dead. When trees across the Peloponnese get wind of this, all agree that the Spartans should lighten up.

Athens begins her life on the peninsula of Attica at the southeastern end of the Balkan Peninsula, a fortress town atop a tall hill that'll be the Acropolis.

She's named for Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and war. Sacred Morea trees growing on the Acropolis see this as a contradiction. War is, from where they stand, unwise for humans who are killed by it in great numbers and suffer much psychological damage from the horrors of battle that include seeing friends and family members slain. Turns out war affects the trees much as it does the humans, for many lose their lives when they are cut down and hewn into the spears and shields that are shattered endlessly in the endless wars Athens fights with her neighbors.

Her rise to power coincides with Sparta's. Athens is the largest and richest city state on the mainland, an oligarchy of nobles that denies common people access to political office, causing widespread civil unrest.

This oligarchy, fearing revolt, commissions Draco, a statesman and lawmaker who is one of their own, to draft a strict code of laws to hold the hoi polloi firmly in their place. It fails because it's too draconian.

The job falls next to Solon, a statesman, lawmaker and noble like Draco, but also a poet. Athenian trees see that he's got a gentle, intuitive side that Draco lacks. So much so that the code of laws he drafts, in many respects, is the opposite of Draco's.

It reduces the power of the nobility and increases the rights of the rest, abolishes the practice of making slaves of Athenians who are in debt, breaks up the nobles' large land holdings, and loosens their grip on trade and commerce. His laws lay the foundation for the Athenian democracy.

Trees across the city are encouraged by this. It looks like real human progress. Then, just as the Athenians are getting their act together, they get into a tangle with the Persians. It begins when they aggravate Darius the Great by allying themselves with their Ionian cousins living in western Anatolia who are rebelling against Persia's empire. The Persians retaliate with two invasions of the Greek mainland 10 years apart. The first is led by Darius the Great. The Athenians ask for aid from the Spartans who refuse, saying they're tied up with a religious festival. This goes down badly on the Acropolis. The Athenian army led by Miltiades not only repels but crushes the Persians in the Battle of Marathon, much thanks to their leader's tactic of forcing his foes to fight on marshy terrain that prevents them from using their cavalry.

The second Persian invasion is led by Darius's son Xerxes. Greek troops hear his soldiers refer to him as Darius the Ungreat. A small Greek force, including 300 Spartans, holds off Xerxes's massive Persian army at the pass of Thermopylae.

After seven days of valiant resistance, they're betrayed by a local who shows the Persians a secret route by which the Spartans can be outflanked. The Greeks are annihilated.

While the battle of Thermopylae is being fought on land, the battle of Artemisium is being fought on the sea. The Persian navy prevails in this battle, and the Greek navy books to the island of Salamis, while the Persian army overruns the mainland. The Persians are having a great time, looting, raping, and pillaging on land, but Xerxes wants to avoid their being trapped there and, for this, he needs a decisive sea battle.

Toward this end, he sends his big navy to block each end of the straits of Salamis where the smaller Greek navy is sheltered. Themistocles, the Athenian Admiral, allows the Persian navy to occupy the cramped narrow straits then uses their superior numbers against them. They cannot maneuver, become disorganized, and are soundly defeated by his smaller, more mobile, Greek fleet. Xerxes flees to Asia with most of his army. The following year, the remainder are trapped in their fortified camp near the town of Plataea and slaughtered by a force of Athenians and Spartans.

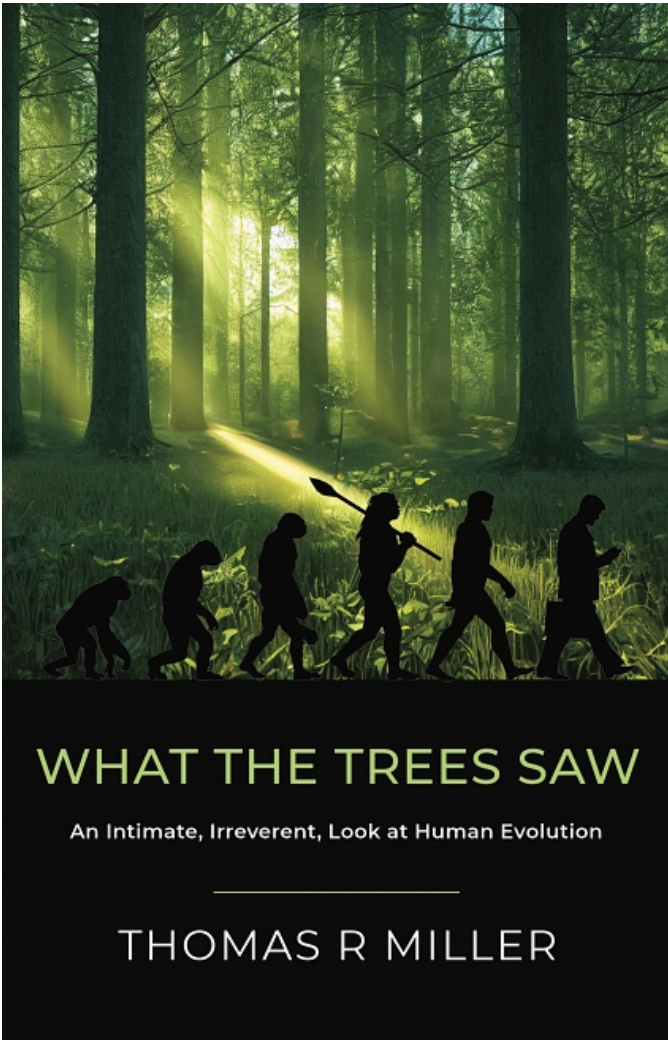
The Persians are gone from Greece for good.

Athens is now the big power on the Mediterranean. It's the middle of the fifth century BC, and she's entering her Golden Age, half a century or so of peace that Greek olive trees note is only marred, now and then, when some garrison commander in a minor state is unable to repress his bloodlust and murders a passel of slaves.

During this time, Athens is the political and cultural leader of the ancient world. Pericles, a prominent statesman and the general who commands her army, promotes the arts and sciences, and Athens becomes a center of learning. She forms a league with states that are her allies. Soon she dominates this league and begins pursuing policies that favor herself over her partners. Then she begins treating them not as partners, but as subjects. They feel her domination and long to be free of it. Such is the fuel that fires the Peloponnesian War.

The olives see the beginning of the end of the Golden Age of Athens when the Spartan army attacks Athenian ground forces on Attica. Athens sends her superior naval forces to attack the Spartans on the Peloponnesian. The fighting lasts 10 years. The peace treaty that ends it lasts five years more till fighting breaks out again on the Peloponnesian, and Athens attacks Syracuse, an ally of Sparta, on Sicily. The entire Athenian force is destroyed.

This is followed by a period of intrigue during which Sparta and Persia support rebellions by some of Athens's dissatisfied allies. These undermine Athens's naval supremacy and eventually result in the destruction of her entire navy. Thus is the Peloponnesian War extinguished.



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