

Hughie Jones – Jan. 2003

Cedrus libani
Cedar of Lebanon



Among all conifers, the cedar of Lebanon is one of the most majestic. *Cedrus libani* is native to Lebanon and to the Taurus Mountains of Syria and Southern Turkey.

Forests of cedar used to cover large areas in the mountains of the Near East. Lebanon, Turkey and Corsica had great coniferous forests. Writers such as Homer and Plato, along with the Old Testament, provide the modern world with documented descriptions of the once richly forested mountains of Lebanon.

The perennial springs of higher Lebanon used to be fuller and more constant, the lower slopes green and moist. There was a greater annual rainfall and the forest and its animals were thought to be inexhaustible. However, deforestation continued until the wooded areas of Lebanon almost disappeared.

The first procurement and subsequent deforestation originates from the site where civilization first emerged, the Fertile Crescent. 4,700 years ago, Gilgamesh was ruler of Uruk, a city kingdom in Mesopotamia. He sought to ensure his immortality through the material greatness of his city. He wanted large amounts of timber to accomplish his plan and he set his sights on the cedars of Lebanon.

An almost unbroken forest flourished near southern Mesopotamia, in the hills and mountains surrounding the Fertile Crescent. The forest was so dense the sun's light barely penetrated through its foliage. Gilgamesh's war against the forest – a

war in which there are only losers – has been repeated for generations in every corner of the globe.

The cedar of Lebanon is cited many times in religion and mythology. In addition to its significant role in the Epic of Gilgamesh, it is regarded as a world tree in several mythological passages. The cutting of the cedar is seen as the destruction of world empires – really as the end of history.

Gilgamesh was succeeded by numerous other rulers in southern Mesopotamia – this ongoing deforestation resulted in the decline of the Sumerian Civilization. Once large quantities of trees were felled near the banks of the upper courses of the Euphrates, Tigris and Karun rivers and tributaries, salt and silt as well as timber filled the waters, and threatened to clog up the irrigation canals. Deforestation also exposed salt-rich sedimentary rocks to erosion.

After 1,500 years of successful farming, a serious salinity problem suddenly developed. Declining food production due to salinity was one of the factors contributing to the fall of Sumerian civilization. The building schemes to strengthen the empire brought on its very destruction.

The cedar of Lebanon was the basis of numerous economies for ancient civilizations. For almost four centuries, the Phoenicians controlled trade on the Mediterranean and Aegean Sea. The cedar was used for construction of temples, palaces and boats. The export of cedar wood to Egypt was an important factor in the growth of Phoenician prosperity and provided capital to launch ambitious enterprises in international trading, navigation, and arts and crafts.

Around the time of Plato, the local forests of Greece were denuded, so the Athenians imported an extensive amount of timber from Phoenicia. The Assyrians, Nebuchadnezzar, the Romans, King David, King of Babylonia, Herod the Great and the Turks and the Ottoman Empire all exploited the cedar. During World War I, most of the remaining stands were destroyed for railroad fuel.

Medicinally, the cedar of Lebanon also made its mark. The pitch of the cedar was used for easing the pain of toothaches. The sawdust of the cedar put snakes to flight, making sleep under the shade of a cedar a relatively safe siesta. In addition, cedar was used in the preservation of the corpses in Egypt.

Both the religious and mythological recordings and the medicinal use reflect the importance of the cedar of Lebanon, making it one of the most significant tree species in history. But being key to a successful economy in the ancient world led to its destruction.

Sources: almashriq.hiof.no/Lebanon/300/360/363/363.7/transcript.html
www.american.edu/TED/cedars.htm