

Modern Paganism in World Cultures

Comparative Perspectives

Edited by
MICHAEL F. STRMISKA

A B C  C L I O

Santa Barbara, California Denver, Colorado Oxford, England

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Preface

This book is a collaboration between a large number of people both in and out of academia who contributed their knowledge, time, and energy toward the shared goal of providing a three-dimensional picture of modern Pagan religions as they now exist in Europe, the British Isles, and North America. Many of the authors are themselves personally involved in the Pagan religions they write about, and they consulted extensively with Pagan religious leaders and practitioners whom they know in a personal way. It is hoped that this gives the book an intimate feeling and an insider perspective that accurately reflects the living reality of the Pagan traditions discussed in its pages. The editor and contributing authors have endeavored to ensure that the information presented in these pages is as accurate and reliable as possible at the time of writing.

Those who come to a book on this subject hoping to find a fierce denunciation of weird and dangerous cults will likely leave disappointed, but those who come seeking a glimpse into new religious movements with very old roots will, it is hoped, find these essays to be a valuable introduction.

Chapter One

Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives

MICHAEL F. STRMISKA

An Overview

Modern Paganism is among the fastest-growing religions in the United States. According to the American Religious Identity Survey (ARIS) carried out by sociologists at the City University of New York in 2001, an estimated 307,000 Americans identify their religious affiliation as “Wicca, Pagan, or Druid,” making this one of the twenty largest religious categories in the United States, anticipated at the time of the survey to grow to some 433,000 by 2004. A similar survey carried out in 1990 did not even mention Wiccans, Pagans, or Druids, which underlines how fast modern Paganism, in its different forms, has been growing in recent years. (See Adherents.com *Top Twenty Religions in the United States*, 2001.)

This volume of essays addresses the development in both Europe and North America of religious movements dedicated to reviving the polytheistic, nature-worshipping Pagan religions of pre-Christian Europe and adapting them for the use of people in modern societies. It should be understood that Europe and North America are by no means the only regions in which such Pagan revivals are taking place. Lynne Hume (1997) and Douglas Ezzy (2003) have published important works on Neopaganism and modern Witchcraft in Australia, for example. The current volume is organized around a European-American axis in the belief that this regional focus provides a coherent frame of discussion with a number of intriguing commonalities and contrasts without degenerating into a global encyclopedia.

Efforts to revive traditional, indigenous, or native religions are occurring around the world; modern European-based Paganism is but one variant of a much larger phenomenon.

The revived Paganism of modern times has sometimes been referred to as *Neopaganism* or *Neo-paganism*, with *neo* denoting the new and contemporary nature of these religious movements and *paganism* identifying the past religious traditions that the modern movements see themselves as building on. In the title of this volume and several of the essays, the simpler term *Paganism* will be used, in keeping with the wishes of some modern followers of such religions to be known as Pagans rather than Neopagans. To distinguish contemporary Paganism from that of the distant past, the prefix *modern* is applied to describe contemporary Paganism in some of the chapters in this book, but in others, the reader will find the prefix *neo* is used. Modern-day Pagans' turning to the past is grounded in the conviction that the religious beliefs and practices developed by the European Pagans of previous times possess continuing value for us in our own time, even after centuries of suppression and neglect.

The most well-known modern Pagan or Neopagan religious movement is Wicca, which has gained considerable popularity in the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere (Crowley 1989, 1994; Pearson 2002c). As Wicca has received a greater amount of scholarly attention than have other modern Pagan movements, providing a further discussion of Wicca will not be the main purpose of this book. The focus will instead fall on other varieties of modern Paganism in a wide swath of European countries as well as in Canada and the United States. This emphasis on a broad range of nations and peoples is intended to correct the tendency to focus almost exclusively on U.S. and British Paganism in previous survey volumes, such as those of Graham Harvey (2000), Joanne Pearson (2002c), and Shelley Rabinovitch and James Lewis (2002).

In the pages ahead, the authors discuss modern Pagan movements in Ukraine and Lithuania; in Britain, Ireland, and Iceland; and in the United States and Canada. If we divide these lands into geographic zones, the map shows us Eastern European, Western European, Northern European, and transatlantic forms of modern Paganism. Other divisions are also important: between the highly industrialized, wealthy, and ethnically diverse states of Western Europe and North America and the less industrialized, poorer, and more ethnically homogeneous states of the former USSR. It will be seen that the economically disadvantaged Eastern European states, dominated for much of the twentieth century by officially atheistic Soviet Communist governments, are by no means lacking in spiritual wealth. The tenacious preservation of premodern customs and folklore in Eastern



Europe has provided a secure foundation and an enduring wellspring of inspiration for a profusion of vibrant Pagan movements.

The Terms *Pagan* and *Neopagan*

The etymology of the term *Pagan* is an intriguing subject. Modern dictionaries of the English language typically define *Pagan* with any or all of the following terms: “pantheist,” “polytheist,” “non-Christian,” “non-Jew,” “non-Muslim,” “nonreligious person,” “nonbeliever,” “atheist,” “hedonist,” and “heathen.” It is notable that many of these definitions present a Pagan as someone who is either lacking in or opposed to religion (“nonreligious person,” “nonbeliever,” “atheist”). Two definitions indicate particular types of religiosity (“pantheist” or “polytheist”), but the term *hedonist* is itself defined as “lacking in morality or self-restraint.” Most of the definitions are therefore negative and pejorative.

The American Heritage Dictionary (2001) defines *Pagan* as “one who is not a Christian, Muslim or Jew,” noting the word’s derivation from the Latin term *paganus*, meaning “country dweller.” *The Scribner-Bantam English Dictionary* (1991) provides the four following definitions: “1. heathen; 2. idolator or worshipper of many gods; 3. one who is not a Christian, Jew or Muslim; 4. one who has no religious beliefs.” On the one hand, the Pagan is depicted in a nonreligious light, as a person who is not Christian, not Muslim, and not Jewish or who possesses no religious beliefs whatsoever. On the other hand, the Pagan is depicted as someone who is *differently* religious; a worshipper of *other* gods. Clearly, the two senses are related. The person who does not worship the *right* god, the god of the monotheistic religions, is assumed to be either nonreligious or wrongly and badly religious.

The Oxford Concise Dictionary of English Etymology (1996) derives *Pagan* from “Latin *paganus*, rustic, peasant, citizen, civilian, non-Christian (in Christian literature), non-Jewish, from *pagus* (rural) district, the country, originally landmark fixed in the earth, from Indo-European **pag-* as in Latin *pangere* fix . . . The sense ‘heathen’ of Latin *paganus* is of uncertain origin.” The term *Heathen* is then defined from Christian usages of an original Gothic-Germanic term meaning “inhabiting open country, savage.” Because of its Germanic origins and in spite of its pejorative associations, the word *Heathen* is popular with many modern Pagans involved with revivals and re-creations of pre-Christian Germanic and Scandinavian religious traditions (Harvey 2000; Blain 2001; Strmiska 2000).

It is difficult to come away from most modern dictionaries with a positive impression of Pagans or Heathens, who seem aberrant, misguided, and possibly dangerous. This exercise in negative classification is rooted in ear-

lier periods of religious wars and persecution in European history, when the difference between officially sanctioned belief and officially condemned heresy could sometimes mean the difference between life and death for persons charged with religious crimes by state-supported religious authorities.

For even earlier origins of this animosity toward the unorthodox believer, we must go back to the Bible to contemplate one of the terms often given as a synonym for *Pagan: idolator*. In the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, those who worshipped deities other than Yahweh, the God of the monotheistic Hebrew tribes, were seen as foolish worshippers of empty idols, a practice that was condemned in the strongest terms. According to the book of Exodus, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the stone tablets containing the ordinances supposedly given him by God, he found some of his Hebrew compatriots worshipping not the God of Abraham and Isaac but a Golden Calf, in the manner of other Near Eastern peoples of the time. The Hebrews who would not renounce the worship of this “idol” were put to death at Moses’s command, the text giving the figure of 3,000 as the number of idol worshippers slain by the followers of Moses (Exodus 32:28).

From such biblical foundations, the term *idolatry* became synonymous with evil and perversion. The biblical injunction against the “idolatrous” worship of non-Hebrew deities carried over into Christianity, with certain exceptions made for images of Jesus, Mary, and the saints. The prohibition against religious images was carried over with more thoroughgoing rigor into Islam, with calligraphic illustration of passages from the Qur’an providing an alternative form of nonfigurative religious art in mosques and elsewhere. Islamic opposition to artistic representations of the divine caught the attention of the world community in the spring of 2002, when renowned Buddhist statues at Bamiya, Afghanistan, were detonated by agents of the fundamentalist Islamic Taliban government.

When Christianity spread across Europe and beyond, Christian leaders tended to view the worship of non-Christian deities as an abomination to be corrected by all necessary means. It was a cause of great consternation to Christian authorities that many people who converted to Christianity continued to worship the so-called idols representing the spirits and gods of their local, pre-Christian religions. This phenomenon has been described as “dual faith” by George Fedotov (1960, 10), with reference to the simultaneous worship of Christian and other deities in Russian folk religion. To give but one example (which could easily be multiplied), consider the following sermon of Maximus, the bishop of Turin in the early fifth century, in which he berated his landowner parishioners for tolerating idolatry among their farmhands and workers: “You should remove all pollution of idols from your

properties and cast out the whole error of paganism from your fields. For it is not right that you, who have Christ in your hearts, should have Antichrist in your houses, that your men should honour the devil in his shrines while you pray to God in his church” (quoted in Fletcher 1997, 39).

This attitude of automatic revulsion toward any non-Christian or non-biblical form of deity is the historical basis of the pejorative definition of *Pagan* and *Heathen* in modern dictionaries. The negativity with which the dictionaries imbue these terms is an accurate reflection of the attitudes of many Christians across European and American history toward non-Christians, a hostility that continues in some quarters even today.

As noted, the English term *Pagan* derives from the Latin *pagus*, which originally denoted a rural area in ancient Rome. A “paganus” was therefore simply a person who dwelled in a district away from the city—essentially, a peasant (Chuvin 1990, 7–13; Fox 1986, 30–31). Scholars are thus agreed that *Paganism* did not originally serve as a religious designation in ancient Rome; this only came later, after the Christianization of the Roman Empire and the progressive prohibition of all other religions.

The majority of Roman citizens practiced a traditional but continually evolving polytheistic religion, which included worship of ancestors and the emperor. In addition to this common religious tradition, there was a vast profusion of religious sects, some native, some imported, such as the worship of the Egyptian deities Isis and Osiris. It was in fact this religious diversity that allowed Christianity to establish a foothold in the Roman world and gradually grow in popularity despite occasional periods of persecution (Drake 2000, 94).

Pagan only became a term of religious definition in the fourth century, after Christianity had been established as the dominant religion in the Roman Empire following the 312 CE battlefield conversion of the Emperor Constantine and the relocation of the imperial capital from Rome to Constantinople. With Christians receiving imperial support for establishing churches and communities in Constantinople, Rome, and other urban areas, it was the outlying areas, the *pagus* districts, that became associated with continued fidelity to the traditional polytheistic religion of the Roman Empire. The “Pagan” Romans of these regions were therefore seen as adversaries to the newly ascendant religion of Christianity, and their religion, formerly the common religious tradition of the Roman Empire, was reframed in negative terms in keeping with biblical hostility toward all non-biblical faiths. In this way, an originally nonreligious term became a religious definition with negative and derogatory connotations, to be used ever after by Christian authorities in defining and defaming religious traditions that they wished to replace with their own religion, which they considered the One True Faith (Platinga 1999).

Considering the unhappy history of the word *Pagan*, it may well seem puzzling that modern Pagans would willingly choose this label for their religious beliefs, activities, and organizations. Why embrace as a badge of identity the very term of abuse that one's critics and opponents have traditionally deployed as a rhetorical weapon of mass defamation? Why not seek out some new designation that would be free of all such negative connotations? Multiple factors and motivations account for the survival of the term *Pagan*—and its transformation from a term of abuse to a title of respect.

Many people join or develop modern Pagan associations out of a deep disappointment with Christianity—a disappointment that leads them to renounce the religion of their childhood and family and seek out an alternative religious community with a spiritual perspective more in keeping with their personal values (Salomonsen 2002, 5, 111). A similar motivation applies to Jews, Muslims, or others who decide to reject Judaism, Islam, or other faiths in favor of a Pagan religion. However, the majority of Neopagans with a previous religious affiliation have to this point tended to be former Christians. This fact was borne out in the 1991 research of J. G. Melton (1991), who found 78.5 percent of contemporary Pagans in the United States were former Christians, with 25.8 percent formerly Catholic and 42.7 percent formerly Protestant. Four years later, Loretta Orion (1995) found 85 percent of modern Pagans in the United States were former Christians, with this figure breaking down into 26 percent formerly Catholic and 59 percent formerly Protestant.

Modern Pagans may therefore find the term *Pagan* an appealing marker of their shift in religious orientation because it signifies something so distinctly non-Christian, something rejected and reviled by Christian authorities. Identifying oneself as a Pagan allows a person to summarize in a single word his or her definitive break with Christianity.

A second reason for the popularity of the term *Pagan* is the positive image of European Pagan religion and mythology promoted in nineteenth-century Romantic literature and the writings of certain anthropologists, folklorists, and historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Ronald Hutton has eloquently described with reference to the development of modern forms of Paganism and Witchcraft in the British Isles, such works as James Frazer's compendium of global folklore and ethnography, *The Golden Bough*, and Margaret Murray's purported history of European Witchcraft, *The God of the Witches*, enjoyed a wide readership and stimulated a positive curiosity about pre-Christian European religions, including, for some readers, a desire to re-create the Pagan religious practices imaginatively evoked in these works (Hutton 1999, 114–127, 194–201). Similar books appeared in other parts of Europe as well as North America, imbuing Pagan religions with a certain mystery and allure and

stimulating nationalistic pride in the folklore, mythology, and religious traditions of the Pagan past. The influence of such scholarly and semischolarly works among the general public did not diminish even when, as with the works of Frazer and Murray, the facts and findings of these books were disputed or discredited by later generations of scholars (Hutton 1999, 272–276, 381–383).

In more recent times, popular, semischolarly books such as *The Spiral Dance*, written by Starhawk (also known as Miriam Simos, a devout follower of Judaism in her childhood) and first published in 1989 and republished many times since, have continued to generate new interest in the Pagan past and in the evolving varieties of modern Paganism. As with the earlier works, scholarly criticism or rejection of these popular writings does not dampen popular enthusiasm but may even stimulate it by stirring debate about Pagan history and its modern interpretations and inspiring occasional discussions in the mass media. Neopaganism has, to some extent, become an established cultural commodity, with large American bookstore chains devoting an expanding portion of shelf space to books on Pagan topics, not to mention an ever-increasing amount of information being available through the Internet.

A growing number of books written by Christian authors condemn the rising popularity of modern Paganism as an insidious threat to morality and civilization. For example, *Spirit Wars: Pagan Revival in Christian America*, written by Peter Jones and published in 1997, makes clear with its title alone that some Christian theologians see the new Paganism as a form of religion that cannot be tolerated but must be fought and defeated. Such works may serve the inadvertent purpose of stimulating curiosity regarding modern Paganism among disgruntled or wavering Christians.

Awareness of how the Christian authorities of earlier times suppressed Pagan religions and persecuted their believers—and how some contemporary Christians seem ready to do the same—stimulates a sympathetic response among many readers of Pagan-related literature and brings us to a third major reason for modern Pagans preferring the term *Pagan* to other possibly less contentious labels. By accepting for themselves a name taken from a word that had for so long functioned as a term of condemnation and abuse, today's Pagans hope to honor those long-ago Pagans they see as their forebears. In studying, reinterpreting, and reviving past Pagan religious beliefs and practices, contemporary Pagans dedicate themselves to defying historical and contemporary forces of religious intolerance by proclaiming and practicing openly what was once prohibited and punished. In this way, the assertion of a Pagan identity is often understood as an act of defiance against long-standing patterns of religious intolerance and oppression. A similar logic applies to the use of the word *Witch* as a self-

designation among members of Wicca and Goddess Spirituality movements (Pearson 2002b; Salomonsen 2002).

Modern Pagans' embrace of the derogatory term as a deliberate act of defiance is comparable to the use by African Americans, notably the 1960s Black Muslim leader Malcolm X, of the letter *X* as a simple but forceful reminder of the loss of surnames and family relationships suffered by Africans brought to America during the cruel centuries of slavery. In another parallel case, some homosexuals in the United States and elsewhere have embraced *queer*, the term of approbation directed at them by hostile heterosexuals, as their self-designation of choice in protest marches and other actions undertaken to obtain civil rights and legal protections equivalent to those enjoyed by the "straight," heterosexual majority. Pagans have similarly found pride and power in the revaluation of a formerly derogatory name, and just as African Americans, homosexuals, and other members of repressed social minorities have made efforts to educate the general public about the past achievements and contributions of their respective groups, so have modern Pagans begun to assert the accomplishments of past Pagan peoples. This effort involves an interpretation of Western history and culture radically different from that often espoused by earlier generations (Strmiska 2003), noting, for example, that the exquisite cultures and advanced civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome were the creations not of Christians but of Pagans.

However, not all of those who are involved with Pagan revival movements approach the appellation *Pagan* with the same understanding of the word, let alone the same goal of reclaiming a negative term and refashioning it into a source of pride. Some reject the term *Pagan* and prefer alternate designations such as *Heathen*, *Witch*, or *traditional*, whereas others prefer to use a specific name for their specific religious tradition and opt out of any general identification with other Pagan associations.

The previously cited distinction between the terms *Pagan* and *Neopagan* (or *Neo-pagan*) is still more controversial. Many modern Pagans reject the term *Neopagan*, identifying themselves only as Pagans, pure and simple, in order to stress their affinity with the Pagans of the past and eschew any distinction between themselves and their forebears. The title of the current volume as well as several of the chapters here avoid the term *Neopaganism* at the explicit request of modern Pagans to not be classified as "Neo," which they see as derogatory and unnecessary. More than one Pagan believer interviewed for this book noted that modern Christians or Muslims are not called Neo-Christians or Neo-Muslims, despite demonstrable differences between the forms of Christianity or Islam practiced today and those of centuries past: why then, they asked, should Paganism be subjected to such labeling?

Nonetheless, a fair number of scholars have viewed the Pagan/Neopagan distinction as a useful means of highlighting a crucial historical issue. The religious traditions practiced by modern Pagans are inspired by or based on the Pagan religions of the past, but they are not necessarily the same as these ancient traditions and may actually involve considerable departure from the earlier religions. This historical issue is indeed significant and will be a chief topic of the essays in this volume even where the term *Neopaganism* is avoided. With such terminology being a matter of continuing discussion and disagreement, I have decided, as editor of this volume, to allow all the authors to use the terminology—*Pagan/ism*, *Neopagan/ism*, or other—that they feel is best suited to their topics. Such variability in terminology may be annoying or confusing to the reader, but it is an accurate reflection of the unsettled, evolving nature of the public understanding, as well as the self-understanding, of these religious movements.

Modern Pagans are reviving, reconstructing, and reimagining religious traditions of the past that were suppressed for a very long time, even to the point of being almost totally obliterated in many cases. Thus, with only a few possible exceptions, today's Pagans cannot claim to be continuing religious traditions handed down in an unbroken line from ancient times to the present. They are modern people with a great reverence for the spirituality of the past, making a *new* religion—a *modern Paganism*—from the remnants of the past, which they interpret, adapt, and modify according to modern ways of thinking. Modern Paganism is, in this way, both old and new: an ancient/modern hybrid, like a tree with roots deep in the earth but branches reaching into the sky.

In parts of Europe, Pagan religious traditions may have been continuously practiced from early times to our own, particularly in Eastern European countries such as Lithuania where many Pagan customs survived in popular culture despite official efforts at Christianization. However, even in such cases, it cannot be doubted that the Pagan religion was greatly disrupted by the introduction of Christianity. It is also worth emphasizing that the modern Pagan movement of Lithuania, known as Romuva, is a creation of the twentieth century, not of ancient times, even if the myths, rituals, and other traditions it practices and promotes do date from medieval or even more ancient times. Therefore, it is accurate to speak of the *religious movement of Romuva* as a “new” religion, a “modern” Pagan religion, even though the *content* of the religion is derived from very old Pagan sources.

As this discussion illustrates, it is important to bear in mind the fundamental historical condition of these religious movements as a *return*, *rebuilding*, and *reimagining* of religious traditions that were forcibly suppressed—and in many regions, all but erased—with the rise to supremacy in Europe of Christianity in the period from 500 to 1500 CE.

The European, the Indigenous, and the Pagan

The decision to restrict the discussion of Paganism in this volume to religious movements that use pre-Christian *European* religious traditions as their point of reference is another controversial point requiring explanation. It should first of all be acknowledged that not all scholars and practitioners of modern Pagan religious movements would agree with this Eurocentric definition. The political scientist and Wicca practitioner Gus DiZerega, in his work *Pagans and Christians: The Personal Spiritual Experience* (2001), and the sociologist of religion Michael York, in *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* (2003), have each made a thought-provoking case for applying the word *Pagan* to all religious traditions worldwide that are locally based, polytheistic, and nature-oriented and that have resisted attempts at conversion by missionary religions such as Christianity and Islam. In this view, *Pagan* becomes synonymous with *Indigenous*, and the traditional, hereditary religions of Indigenous peoples such as Native Americans, Africans, and Australian Aborigines, often referred to as Indigenous religions, can all be encompassed under *Paganism* as a very broad umbrella term uniting a large proportion of humanity. As York makes his case:

Among the broad sweep of world religions, a designation is required for competing perspective encompassing or delineated by animism, polytheism, pantheism, and Shamanism. One objection to using the term *pagan* is that it represents a Eurocentric imperialism that denies indigenous people their separate identities. Some would have the word *pagan* used solely for the pre-Christian European traditions . . .

I maintain that subsuming primal religiosities under a Eurocentric label [Paganism] is not “politically incorrect” . . .

Although the Christian missionaries used the term *pagan* pejoratively, they at least recognized the similarities among the faiths to which they were opposed . . . As a general designation in today’s more cosmopolitan world, it is time to rescue paganism from its historically negative connotations to be a useful and more affirmative endorsement of a neglected practice and marginalized worldview. (York 2003, 6–7)

I choose to not follow this line of thinking because it seems to me that blurring together the religious traditions of these many different peoples, with their vastly different historical and contemporary situations, does a disservice to Indigenous peoples’ struggles for postcolonial self-determination by conflating them with the very peoples they see as their oppressors and colonizers. The term *Indigenous*, like the term *Pagan*, will be capitalized in this text as an expression of respect for the peoples, cultures, and spiritual

traditions designated by these terms. Indigenous peoples share a common experience of immense devastation and suffering under colonialism and racism, a universe of suffering visited on them by Euro-American Caucasians; the same people who comprise the majority membership of such modern Pagan religious movements as Wicca or Asatru. Modern European-derived Paganism and Native American and other Indigenous religions of non-European origins involve similar elements, such as reverence for nature, polytheistic pantheons, and life- and body-affirming worldviews, but there are differences as well, stemming from their different cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds.

However sympathetic modern Euro-American Pagans may be to Indigenous peoples and however great may be their interest in learning aspects of Indigenous cultural and religious traditions, the contemporary situations of Indigenous peoples are quite different from those of most modern Pagans in North America and Europe. This brutal social reality and the immense historical, economic, and political realities that lie behind it cannot be bridged by a simple labeling process or ameliorated by a unilateral proclamation of spiritual unity between modern Pagans and Indigenous peoples.

The labeling issue is particularly delicate because of contemporary Indigenous peoples' struggles to establish their rights to control and continue their hereditary spiritual traditions. These struggles are the result of long-standing grievances against Europeans, Euro-Americans, and others of European/Caucasian descent who have occasionally appropriated various aspects of Indigenous religious traditions and then claimed them as their own. Included in this group are European and American Pagans who have taken Shamanic practices from the Saami of Northern Europe or native peoples of North America and adapted these for use in Wiccan or other modern Pagan rituals without first attaining the consent of the Indigenous peoples for whom the Shamanic practices are sacred, ancestral traditions.

Recent works on the topic of Neoshamanism by Jenny Blain (2001), Susan Mumm (2002), and Robert Wallis (2003) address the difficult issue of the challenge that is posed to Indigenous peoples' rights to control their Shamanic and other religious traditions by appropriation of these traditions by Caucasian Europeans and Americans. Such insensitive and irresponsible appropriations of Indigenous traditions have left scars of anger and distrust, in addition to the damage wrought by missionaries and other colonizing agents bent on eradicating and replacing native spiritual traditions. These historical wounds can only be healed by the slow process of sustained, respectful communication between members of the various groups involved. It is therefore presumptuous at best and insulting at

worst for mainly Euro-American Caucasian Pagans to believe that they can easily make common cause with Indigenous peoples and their religious traditions without first developing sincere and time-tested relations of mutual trust and respect. Such dialogue may prove to be deeply meaningful, as one would surely hope, but this discussion is only in its very early stages.

It is also worth observing the simple courtesy of calling people by the names they wish to be known by and not calling them by names they reject or are uncomfortable with. The designations *Pagan* and *Paganism*, let alone *Neopagan* or *Neopaganism*, are not the terms of choice that Native Americans or other Indigenous peoples usually apply to themselves and their religious traditions. These words are, however, generally acceptable to people involved in reviving and reconstructing pre-Christian European religions, as it is within these circles that the terms have been under discussion for several generations.

However, members of such Pagan groups use other names as well, and many different forms of self-designation have been developed by the members of modern Pagan religious organizations, as well as by their scholarly observers and commentators. The interested reader who branches out from these pages to investigate particular forms of Paganism in greater detail will find a still wider variety of terminology in the religious movements of various regions and considerable disagreement as to the precise definition and proper usage of such terms as *Pagan*. The reader is therefore well advised to never take these terms for granted in any given context but to always inquire into how they are used and understood in specific regions and by specific persons and groups.

Disagreements over terminology may seem petty or trivial, but they are not if we consider what is at stake for modern Pagans. It is not simply a matter of Pagans choosing names for themselves that they find appropriate or that are pleasing among groups of like-minded persons. Because of the past history of condemnation, suppression, and even persecution of Pagans by churches, governments, and other sectors of society, many modern Pagans are intensely concerned with how they will be represented in popular discourse and perceived and judged by the general public, knowing that a negative public image could be used as a legal and political weapon against them by those who oppose this type of religion. In debating which terms to use to describe themselves and their religious beliefs and activities, contemporary Pagans are conscious of shaping public perception and media scrutiny of matters that are highly significant and indeed sacred for them, touching on the most precious, private, and sensitive points of personal identity. For many though not all modern Pagans, one of the most sensitive of such issues is the matter of ethnic identity.

To Be, or Not To Be, Ethnic

The question of whether ethnic identity is central or peripheral to modern Paganism has proven a provocative issue. In the spring of 1998, members of different Pagan organizations from across Europe and North America as well as a certain number of scholarly observers, including the editor of this volume, were invited to participate in a conference initially named the World Pagan Congress, which was held in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, in June 1998. After several days of lectures and discussions, in the course of which it was agreed to make the World Pagan Congress an annual meeting with a continuing organization, the leading participants gathered to consider what would be the most fitting name for the organization.

The word *Pagan* was rejected by the majority of delegates as being an overly pejorative label, by reason of its past usage by Christian authorities as a term of opprobrium for non-Christian and supposedly inferior and wicked religious beliefs and practices. The word *Heathen* was rejected on the same grounds. The suggestion of *Native European Religion* was dismissed as inadequate to the ambitions of the congress to eventually include representatives of non-Christian, non-Muslim, nonmissionary, Indigenous, and traditional religions from around the world, even though the overwhelming majority of those gathered in Vilnius were in fact Europeans or Euro-Americans. *Indigenous* was seen as appropriate in terms of its root meaning of “native to a given place or people,” but it was voted down because of its appropriation by native peoples of the Americas and other regions as a linguistic tool for distinguishing themselves from the colonizing, missionizing Europeans who conquered their lands; disrupted their societies; and attempted to eradicate native culture, language, and religion. *Traditional* was put forward as a term that many felt would highlight the common effort to preserve and follow past spiritual and folkloric traditions, but on closer consideration, it was rejected as lacking in precision.

The final decision was to rename the organization the World Congress of Ethnic Religions (WCER). The term *ethnic* was viewed with alarm by some of those attending for its possible associations with such disreputable concepts as “ethnic purity” and “ethnic cleansing,” as had recently been observed in the bloody aftermath of the collapse of the multiethnic nation-state of Yugoslavia, but it was appealing to the majority for its roots in the Greek term *ethnos* and its associations with the European academic discipline of *ethnology*, the study of peoples and cultures. As Denis Dornoy, a founding member of the WCER later noted in *The Oaks*, the official newsletter of the WCER:



Jonas and Inija standing at the WCER, June 1998, Vilnius, Lithuania. (Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)

Many observers are surprised, suspicious, or even frightened by the word ethnic in our name. Is ethnic connected with ethnic cleansing? Is it another pure race ideology? Do you have to belong to a long-lost people to be ethnic? Isn't ethnic a subject for white-haired academics?

Ethnic is none of the above, and its meaning is far simpler. *Ethnos* is Greek, meaning people, and *ethnic* means related to a particular people, i.e., anything that defines a people: its language, customs, daily behaviour, food . . . or spiritual outlook. We call this last point ethnic religion. It is a set of traditions, worship, way of life, related to a people. It often, but not always, involves ancestor worship. Sometimes it is so integrated into everyday life that it cannot even be called "religion" (i.e., belief) according to Western standards. (*The Oaks*, no. 1, August 1999, available at <http://www.wcer.org>, accessed on October 12, 2003)

The choice of *ethnic religion* as the primary descriptive term for the nature and focus of the organization was the decision of a largely European majority, however. A group of North Americans might well have chosen yet another term, such as *nature religions*, which has been a popular descriptive label among religious studies scholars in the United States and Canada.

One of the primary discussion forums for scholars interested in Paganism and related topics in North America has been the Nature Religions Network, an Internet mailing list created and maintained by Chas Clifton, a professor at the University of Colorado. This situation illustrates the greater emphasis European Pagans typically place on cultural and spiritual traditions preserving ethnic identity versus the American and Canadian tendency to set the worship of nature at the center of their forms of Pagan religious activity and to downplay ethnic identity or even dismiss it as irrelevant.

The lesser interest that some North American Pagans take in ethnicity is grounded in a long history. From the colonial period until fairly recent times, rejection or concealment of ethnic identity was understood by immigrants in the United States as the necessary first step of assimilation into mainstream American society:

The pattern of minority life developed in the English colonies in the seventeenth century set the standard for future European minorities in this country. The English colonists and later Americans of the majority group appreciated the labor that newcomers could provide, but expected the immigrants to absorb the dominant customs while shedding their own as quickly as possible. Minority group members were sought for their labor yet despised for their ignorance of English, their attachment to cultures and faiths prevalent in the Old World, and their lack of knowledge of the American way. (Dinnerstein and Reimers 1988, 13)

That is, considerable pressure to obliterate all traces of ethnicity in favor of assimilation to the so-called melting pot ideal of de-ethnicized national unity is deeply embedded in the social construction of American identity, with somewhat similar attitudes prevailing in Canada (Gans 1979; Waters 1990; Jacobson 2002).

In recent decades, there has been a greater acceptance of ethnic diversity and identity, but a fuller understanding of the multiethnic, multicultural nature of American and Canadian society has generated conflicting emotions of appreciation and anxiety. Modern North American Pagans who proudly embrace ethnic identity as a key point in their system of religious values may find themselves on the defensive against charges of racism and even Nazism. Greater consciousness of the suffering of African slaves and the devastation of Native American and Native Canadian peoples and cultures by the European founders of the modern North American nation-states has caused some Canadians and Americans to question whether European ethnic heritage is anything worth celebrating, whereas others feel that all forms of ethnic distinctiveness are inherently valuable.

Another complicating factor is the sheer complexity of ethnic identity in modern Canada and the United States. With immigration to North America from diverse lands and increasing intermarriage between ethnic groups producing a more ethnically mixed and heterogeneous population than is generally found in Europe, it is often a far from simple matter to understand and articulate one's ethnic identity. For all of these reasons, ethnicity has become a much more complex and controversial subject in both the United States and Canada than in many parts of Europe.

Therefore, many of today's American and Canadian Pagans, like many of their non-Pagan compatriots, prefer to categorize themselves as Americans or Canadians, straight and simple, eschewing any attempt to untangle the bewildering complexity of mixed and splintered ethnic identities across generations of immigration and intermarriage. For North Americans of such complex and convoluted ancestry, choosing the religious path of Paganism may involve a desire to more closely affiliate with some single strand of their mixed-ethnic, ancestral tapestry; to identify with one or another ethnic group whose history or traditions they find especially appealing; or to reach toward a spiritual identity beyond ethnic distinctions altogether.

For Europeans with a long line of ancestors in the same country, speaking the same language and practicing the same traditions over many generations, ethnic identity is a far more straightforward and appealing concept. This fact is reflected in the greater importance accorded to ethnicity in modern European Paganism, with the possible exception of that in Britain. Decades of immigration from the former colonies of the British Empire, as well as from other regions, have vastly increased ethnic diversity in Britain, bringing it much closer to North America than to Europe in this regard. One would accordingly expect to see less priority placed on ethnic identity in British Paganism than that of more ethnically homogeneous European countries.

The disagreement between modern European and North American Pagans over whether to place ethnic identity at the center or periphery of their religious identity has many ramifications, as will be seen in the following chapters. Modern Pagans who view ethnicity as central to their religion may limit membership in their organization to people who claim or demonstrate ancestral links to the ethnic group historically associated with the particular religious tradition undergoing revival. For European Pagans, language also enters into the ethnic equation, as knowledge of the language of a particular Pagan tradition is among the means of demonstrating ethnic belonging.

Such ethnic exclusivity has been hotly debated and sometimes condemned as racism by observers and critics; as a consequence, some Pagans have completely rejected ethnic identity as a criterion for membership.

They take the view that those who feel a sincere pull to the gods and goddesses or other aspects of a particular Pagan tradition are entitled to membership based on their feeling of personal belonging. In the case of modern Celtic Paganism, Marion Bowman (2000) has coined the phrase *Cardiac Celts* to indicate the broad category of people without any definite Celtic ancestry who are drawn to Celtic myth and religion on an emotional level and so conceive of themselves as spiritual Celts, if not ethnic ones. For such Pagans, religious identity is determined not by communal ancestry but by individual affinity and choice.

Some modern-day Pagans employ the concept of reincarnation as a way of mitigating debates over ethnicity. In their view, the attraction that people of different ethnic origins feel to a particular ethnically based Pagan tradition, such as the Celtic or Scandinavian tradition, may be the result of having been a Celt or a Scandinavian in a past life. Through such an ingenious redefinition of ethnicity, a nonethnically Scandinavian person may be welcomed to join an ethnically Scandinavian Pagan movement, and the same could be said of many other ethnically oriented Pagan organizations.

Traditional versus Eclectic Paganism: Reconstructing the Past versus Reinventing It

Another major issue that today's Pagan movements grapple with involves their varying attitudes and approaches toward the texts, folklore, and other cultural traditions they use as the raw material for their contemporary religious practices and beliefs. The types of cultural resources that provide information and inspiration and the kinds of use made of them largely determine the character of modern Pagan movements. A huge difficulty for all of today's Pagans is that little information about the ancient traditions was set into written form by the Pagans of the past. Much of the existing information about Pagan mythology, beliefs, and rituals was put into writing by Christian clergymen, either in the form of clerical letters, chronicles, and other documents dealing with the growth of Christianity and suppression of Paganism in Europe or in literary re-creations of Pagan myths, poems, and epics in the postconversion period.

In the case of Iceland, the Old Norse literary heritage of Eddas and Sagas provides accounts of Pagan myth and religion whose richness and vividness are rivaled or surpassed only by those of classical Greece. Many of the Icelandic texts are believed to have drawn on oral traditions from the Pagan period but to have been adapted to written form by Christian authors in the postconversion period, with substantial influence of post-Pagan, medieval Christian perspectives. It is therefore difficult to be certain

about how much of Pagan religion and mythology in the Icelandic texts was “pure” Pagan lore and how much was distorted, deleted, or invented by the Christian writers who made the final decisions about the shape and content of these texts (Adalsteinsson 1990; Lönnroth 1991; Karlsson 2000). The same problem of distinguishing Pagan source materials from Christian editorial influence greatly complicates modern efforts to reconstruct other Pagan religious traditions.

A second, related issue is the extent and manner in which contemporary Pagans add new beliefs and practices, either borrowed from or inspired by other religious or cultural traditions or arrived at through their own creative efforts. All modern Pagan religious movements mix and match old, traditional elements with new ideas and practices from other sources, but these movements can be divided along a continuum: at one end are those that aim to reconstruct the ancient religious traditions of a particular ethnic group or a linguistic or geographic area to the highest degree possible; at the other end are those that freely blend traditions of different areas, peoples, and time periods. Here, for the sake of convenience, the two poles of this continuum will be called the *Reconstructionist* and the *Eclectic* forms of modern Paganism, and their adherents will be referred to as Reconstructionists and Eclectics.

Reconstructionists dedicate themselves to a fairly scholarly study of the ancient texts, folklore, archaeology, and languages that are believed to contain reliable information about the past religious traditions of the peoples of their particular region of interest. For Reconstructionist Pagans, the older the evidence is that gives information about the Pagan religion of the past, the better. By the same token, the more that modern Pagan practices and ideas can be brought into line with what is known of the Pagan religion of the past, the better. This is not to say that Reconstructionists do not take liberties with ancient traditions and create their own interpretations and adaptations to suit modern values and lifestyles; rather, they regard older traditions as better established, more authoritative, and more authentic than those that are newly created or vaguely imagined. Because of their intense concern with understanding, respecting, and, wherever and whenever possible, imitating and continuing the Pagan traditions of the past, Reconstructionists often make considerable effort to follow scholarly debates and research trends in history, archaeology, folklore, and other academic fields related to the Pagan traditions they are attempting to resuscitate. Some Reconstructionist Pagans are themselves scholars, and nearly all maintain some degree of interest in what scholars have to say about the religious traditions they are seeking to preserve, protect, and promote.

Eclectic Pagans are also highly interested in understanding Pagan traditions of the past, but they do not feel bound, as do the Reconstructionists,

to the past religious traditions of a specific region as their ultimate frame of reference; instead, they see the traditions only as a provisional gateway into deeper spiritual experience. Eclectics view the European Pagan past as a general source of spiritual inspiration, but they do not undertake to recreate past rituals, beliefs, or other religious traditions with scholarly attention to exact detail. For example, they are much less inclined than Reconstructionists to study the original languages of their source materials. As this suggests, Eclectics do not, as a general rule, dedicate themselves to an intensive study or reconstruction of the past Pagan religion of a particular region or people, as Reconstructionists do. Eclectics are more inclined to freely select religious ideas, practices, and even deities from a wide variety of sources, both European and non-European, and to combine them based on what they take to be their similarity or complementarity. The religious traditions of a certain people or region may provide the dominant theme or identity of an Eclectic Pagan movement, but there is no barrier to bringing in elements from other sources. The farther the Eclectic form of modern Paganism distances itself from any particular geographic or ethnic origin, the closer it comes to New Age religion, with its ideology of cosmic harmony and human perfectibility conspicuously devoid of any particular ethnic identity or marked sense of place or history.

Robert Wallis (2003) has described this de-ethnicizing and universalizing dynamic with reference to the development of “core Shamanism” in modern Neoshamanism. Jone Salomonsen has done the same in regard to the strongly held but only quite vaguely supported theory of a universal, prehistoric, matriarchal civilization that forms the pseudohistorical foundation myth of the Reclaiming Tradition and similar types of Goddess Spirituality (Salomonsen 2002; see also Neitz 1993).

Not surprisingly, people for whom ethnic identity is very important tend to prefer the Reconstructionist form of modern Paganism, and people with little interest or even a positive disdain for issues of ethnic identity tend to prefer the Eclectic type. The Reconstructionist form is therefore most strongly attested in Eastern Europe, where ethnic culture and identity remain important organizing principles of social life and cultural activities, whereas Eclectic Neopaganism is more prevalent in the British Isles and North America, where ethnic identity has tended to be de-emphasized and where totally ethnic-free forms of New Age religion have flourished.

One example, which unfortunately could not be represented by a chapter in this book, is Dievturi, a modern Pagan religious movement that exists only in Latvia and among Latvian diaspora communities in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere. Dievturi is centered around ancient Latvian song-texts known as *dainas* and the observance of traditional Latvian calendrical festivals (Misane 2000; Strmiska 2005). It is therefore a good exam-

ple of the highly traditional, Reconstructionist type of modern Paganism. Wicca, with its largely modern package of rituals and generic male/female deities borrowed from diverse sources, is a prime example of the Eclectic type of modern Pagan religion.

This Reconstructionist/Eclectic polarity is a useful schema for discussion, but its application to specific Pagan religious movements is neither as absolute nor as straightforward as it might appear at first glance. As dedicated to preserving and continuing Latvian traditions as Dievturi may be, some scholars have noted that some aspects of its ritual activities are highly reminiscent of Lutheran church services—for instance, the gatherings at which the *dainas* being sung seem to take the place of Christian hymns and a religious leader gives a speech not unlike a Christian minister's sermon. In addition, Dievturi's monotheistic interpretation of its Pagan pantheon also suggests a strong Christian influence. With regard to Wicca, although even the most enthusiastic Wiccan might concede that much of what the movement's founder Gerald Gardner claimed to be ancient tradition was really just his own creation loosely based on British folklore and other sources known to him (Kelly 1991), it cannot be disputed that the rituals Gardner and associates devised have led many people around the world into a sincere and deeply meaningful devotion to gods and goddesses of the Pagan past. Thus, the most Reconstructionist type of Paganism can prove to have quite a few nontraditional elements lurking in the shadows, just as the most Eclectic type of Pagan movement can lead people to experience imaginative encounters with very ancient spiritual realities.

In fact, such acquaintance with particular deities has stimulated some Wiccans to seek out more-detailed knowledge about the original historical and cultural contexts of these deities, resulting in the same kind of intensive exploration of source materials and regional traditions to which Reconstructionists are devoted. Some Wiccans have gone on to develop their own variants of Wicca, which take on characteristics of ethnically based, regionally specific Pagan religions, giving rise to Celtic Wicca, Norse Wicca, and others; such adaptations of Wicca become progressively less Eclectic and increasingly Reconstructionist.

It is possible to understand the Reconstructionist/Eclectic division on a different level, that of discourses of identity. Reconstructionist Pagans are greatly concerned with claiming an identity for themselves as faithful links in a long chain of spiritual but also ethnic and cultural traditions grounded in a particular place and among a particular people. Theirs is a discourse of continuity with the past and deep-rootedness in tradition, which they believe connects them with their ancestors and the gods of their ancestors.

The discourse of Eclectic Pagans flows in a different direction and engages with somewhat different issues. Theirs is an identity that highlights

openness and naturalness, connected not so much with any particular region of the earth as with the earth itself, affiliated not with any particular group of humans speaking any particular language or practicing any particular traditions but with a larger and also vaguer sense of universal humanity (Harris 2000). For Eclectics, the spiritual traditions of any particular people or region are not the final destination; they are not ends in themselves, as they might well be for Reconstructionists, but only the point of departure for a further spiritual journey. For ecologically and feministically oriented Eclectics, spiritual and political meanings and motivations are closely intertwined in a quest for universal social progress that transcends any particular location or identity.

To conclude this discussion, we might say that Reconstructionist Pagans romanticize the past, whereas Eclectic Pagans idealize the future. In the first case, there is a deeply felt need to connect with the past as a source of spiritual strength and wisdom; in the second case, there is the idealistic hope that a spirituality of nature can be gleaned from ancient sources and shared with all humanity. This universalistic strand of Eclectic Paganism is another example of its similarity to modern New Age religions.

The Pre-Christian Past and the Question of Indo-European Origins

All modern Pagan religious movements are, in different ways and to greater or lesser extent, involved in reconstructing religious traditions of the European past. One may ask, however, just how old these pre-Christian source traditions really are and exactly how far back in the past they are to be placed. The simple answer is this: before Christianity, or at least before Christianity became so dominant in a given locality as to cause the decline and suppression of native European religious traditions, Christianization was initiated and completed at different times in different regions of Europe. The Roman Empire became Christianized in the first centuries CE, England and Ireland in about the middle of the first millennium CE, Russia and other Slavic nations of Eastern Europe toward the end of the first millennium, and Scandinavia between the late first and early second millennia (Latourette 1938; Fedotov 1960; Finnestad 1990; Pennick and Jones 1995; Fletcher 1997; Cusack 1998). The royalty of Lithuania did not officially accept Christianization until 1386, with the rural folk not accepting the new religion for centuries to come (Gimbutas 1963; Rowell 1994; Christiansen 1997). The time given as the “golden age” of past Paganism accordingly varies from one Pagan movement to another, depending on their understanding and interpretation of the historical background of their particular Pagan tradition.

There is, however, a deeper historical question that has generated great interest among many contemporary Pagans: the issue of whether, in some long-distant time, there may have been an original civilization or cultural complex that was the original source of their European ancestors and hence their Pagan religious traditions also. Many Pagans have taken a positive interest in the theories of such scholars as Max Muller, Émile Benveniste, Georges Dumézil, Jaan Puhvel, and Marija Gimbutas concerning the possible existence of an “Indo-European homeland,” a common, Proto-Indo-European civilization, hypothetically dated as early as 4500 BCE and usually located by most theorists and researchers in the steppe region of southern Russia or farther east in Central Asia. The location of the theoretical homeland remains a matter of much debate and has been so since the nineteenth century. No one has yet been able to make a perfect match between linguistic evidence of the origin and spread of languages and the archaeological evidence of material remains of past cultures and civilizations. J. P. Mallory’s book *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* (1989) surveys a number of competing theories and comes down in favor of the Central Asian site for the homeland. At the present time, this perspective may be taken to represent the consensus view of a fair number of researchers—but not all. It is believed that this common culture splintered into smaller culture groups associated with the various Indo-European languages, which were then, over the course of many centuries, carried by migrants or invaders to diverse lands across Asia and Europe, from India and Iran in the east to Ireland and Iceland in the west.

The theory of Indo-European origins provides contemporary Pagans with a respectable academic basis for claiming an extremely ancient pedigree for their religious traditions, even though many of the texts, folkloric traditions, and other such source materials utilized by modern Pagan movements date only from the medieval period of European history or even later, not from the much more distant time of hypothetical, Proto-Indo-European unity. Contemporary Pagans make the case that their traditions are much older than the surviving medieval sources, which are simply late crystallizations of the original Pagan religious traditions during their final period of existence before or during Christianization. In this matter, Indo-European comparative mythology is of considerable importance because the parallels between myths recorded in medieval European texts and far older Greek, Roman, Iranian, and Indian mythological texts do indeed suggest a common body of myths and beliefs from which the various regional mythologies and religious traditions appear to have been derived (Littleton 1982; Puhvel 1987).

These variant forms are, like the language groups of the Indo-European family, understood to have undergone continual change through millennia

of separation, migration, and adaptation to diverse cultural environments, including interaction with non-Indo-European peoples, cultures, and religions, while still preserving discernible common elements. Therefore, how one regards the claims of great antiquity put forward by modern exponents of Pagan religions largely hinges on how one regards the hypothesis of a very ancient, Proto-Indo-European, common source of all these related religious traditions.

It should be noted that one significant segment of modern Pagan religion takes a very different view of European Paganism's Indo-European origins. The Reclaiming Tradition, Goddess Spirituality, and other feminist Pagan movements do not look back at either the period of pre-Christian European Pagan religion or the hypothetical earlier time of Proto-Indo-European religion as any kind of a golden age. They see the entry into Europe of Indo-European peoples from the steppe region of Central Asia as a Holocaust-like catastrophe by which an original matriarchal civilization of goddess-worshipping peoples, which they idealize as totally peace-loving, egalitarian, artistic, and prosperous, was disrupted and polluted by the war-worshipping, patriarchal social and religious system of the Indo-European invaders (Neitz 1993; Salomonsen 2002; Starhawk 1982, 1989).

Apart from feminist forms of Paganism such as Goddess Spirituality and Reclaiming, most modern Pagan movements do not share this bleak assessment of ancient Indo-European religion but regard its hypothetical Proto-Indo-European origins or final expressions among the various nations of pre-Christian Europe as their basis and inspiration, as will be seen in the chapters that follow.

Paganism and Nazism

A dark cloud of ill repute hangs over the entire field of comparative Indo-European studies and also taints the reputation of some modern Pagan movements. This cloud is the grim historical reality that certain leaders and sympathizers of the Nazi regime in Germany, such as Heinrich Himmler and Alfred Rosenberg (1893–1946), as well as other European racist intellectuals and agitators of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, manipulated theories of common Indo-European origins to insist that Caucasian Europeans (particularly Germans, in the case of the Nazis) were the original “Aryans”—the originators and rightful inheritors of ancient Indo-European culture and heritage, including their religious elements (Goodrick-Clarke 1992). Rosenberg was one of the chief architects of Nazi propaganda, but his attempts to find support for Nazi ideology in Germanic Paganism were not fully supported by his Nazi colleagues. Rosen-

berg's major publication, *Der Mythos des 20 Jahrhunderts* (*The Myth of the Twentieth Century*), often cited as an authoritative statement of Nazi ideology on a par with *Mein Kampf* and other writings by Hitler, was not published by the Nazi Party but by Rosenberg personally, showing that his thinking was not universally accepted within the party.

Rosenberg was a great admirer of the British historian and racist ideologue Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855–1927), whose 1899 magnum opus, *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (*Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*), was the direct intellectual antecedent of Rosenberg's 1930 *Mythus*. Rosenberg took from Chamberlain the conviction that the most important function of history and other human sciences was to promote a nationalistic mythos—that is, a certain worldview and set of values, particularly respect for the German nation and race—not to disseminate facts or engender critical awareness about the complexities of human history and culture. Such sentiments were widely shared within the Nazi Party, and the academic study of Germanic history and folklore under the Third Reich accordingly suffered from the total subservience of these and related disciplines to the needs of Nazi propaganda. This topic is explored in an excellent compendium of articles, *The Nazification of an Academic Discipline: Folklore in the Third Reich*, edited by James R. Dow and Hannjost Lixfeld (1994).

The word *Aryan* actually derives from the Vedic religious texts of ancient India, with close parallels in the Avestan texts of ancient Iran (Thapar 1992). *Aryan* was a term of respect among the ancient Vedic Indians, meaning something like the “good, noble people.” The word was anachronistically adapted by Rosenberg and others to designate the ideal German in the twisted logic of Nazi racist discourse. In a similar manner, a major Hindu nationalist organization in modern India calls itself the Arya Samaj, the Aryan society or society of the noble (Jaffrelot 1996). The Germanized interpretation of the originally non-Germanic term *Aryan* became part of the ideological justification for Nazi aggression and atrocities against Jews, Gypsies, and others considered lacking in Germanic racial purity. Because of this appropriation of Indo-European research to suit the political purposes of the Nazis, the field of Indo-European studies suffers from guilt by association with Nazism, a guilt that also attaches to modern Pagan movements that make use of the theory of common origins drawn from Indo-European studies.

Rosenberg and others in the Nazi Party also attempted to foster a distinctly Nazified version of German Paganism as an ideological support for the Third Reich. In this way, too, Nazism has cast a shadow over modern Paganism, with the result that even Pagans who proclaim their total rejection of Nazi ideology and interpretations of ancient mythology are still

sometimes tarred with the brush of Nazism. This situation is especially true in Germany and Scandinavia, but it also applies elsewhere to a lesser degree.

A straightforward linkage of Nazism with Indo-European studies and modern Paganism is inaccurate for a number of reasons. The Nazis had only the most superficial and selective understanding of Indo-European research theories; otherwise, they would have realized the absurdity of identifying Germans as the original Aryans. It is also demonstrable that the Nazis were far from wholly committed to Germanic Paganism as a would-be Aryan religion. The Pagan project of Rosenberg and several other Nazi leaders was ultimately rejected by the upper echelon of the party, including Hitler himself, and was contradicted by the alternative line of Nazi propaganda that interpreted Christian texts, teachings, and the figure of Jesus himself in a racist, pro-German, anti-Semitic manner, with a view to creating a Nazified version of Christianity. Rosenberg himself, unquestionably the leading figure in Nazi attempts to develop a distinctly Germanocentric and racist form of Paganism, wrote in his *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, “Jesus is a linchpin of our history. He became the God of the Europeans” (Rosenberg 1982, 391). As Richard Steigmann-Gall observed in a recent article, “Rosenberg’s frequent references to Christ . . . and his positive engagement with Jesus’ historical and contemporary significance revealed an attachment impossible for the true anti-Christian. These attachments signified an ambiguous revolution against the cultural heritage of Christianity” (Steigmann-Gall 2003, 89).

Therefore, an across-the-board equation of Nazism with either Indo-European research or Paganism is exaggerated and misleading. Indo-European studies and modern Paganism were neither the creation of the Nazis nor their exclusive property. It would be more accurate to say that the Nazis drew on Indo-European studies and dabbled in Paganism much as they dealt with other aspects of culture, tradition, and ideology, including Christianity: they altered, selected, interpreted, and disfigured features of European and especially Germanic culture and history in a random and inconsistent manner, in a desperate search for whatever theory, symbol, or allusion would momentarily support their ongoing quest for power and the illusory ideal of Germanic racial purity.

Pagan movements based on Germanic/Nordic/Scandinavian mythology and traditions have had and indeed continue to have particular difficulty in distancing themselves from Nazi associations, for two important reasons. The first of these has already been mentioned: the fact that Rosenberg and his allies within the Nazi Party were involved with experimental reconstructions of Germanic Pagan religion (the Schutzstaffel [SS] insignia was a Nazi bastardization of an ancient Pagan thunderbolt symbol, for example). The other reason is that, even today, a certain number of modern Nordic Pagan

movements are explicitly racist in orientation and in some cases openly sympathetic to Nazi ideology. Jeffrey Kaplan (1997) and Mattias Gardell (2003) have published compelling studies of these Nordic-oriented, Nazi-sympathizing Pagan movements.

Of the members of various Scandinavian Pagan organizations, Odinists stand out for their fervent embrace of racial purity as a core value in their belief system. Not surprisingly, there is considerable sympathy and overlap between Odinists and Neo-Nazis in the countries of Scandinavia and beyond. As Tore Bjorgo noted in a study of Scandinavian racialist movements, “Many White Power adherents in Sweden are Odinists, or at least use symbols and figures from old Norse mythology as idioms to express their Nordic identity and their opposition to the Jewish-inspired Christian religion” (Bjorgo 1997, 162).

A “White Power” youth culture blending Neo-Nazism, Odinism, Satanism, and heavy-metal rock music into a heady and violent brew emerged in Scandinavia in the late 1980s. One of the most prominent figures in this racist, Nordic subculture was the Norwegian “black metal” musician Varg Vikernes, a figure of considerable notoriety for his conviction in 1994 for a variety of violent crimes, including burning churches, vandalizing graves, and murdering a rival fellow musician (Bjorgo 1997, 280, n. 22). With racist Nordic Pagans like Vikernes performing such sensational and horrific acts, it is sometimes difficult for nonracist Pagans to make themselves heard in the mass media of the Nordic nations, and so the equation of modern Paganism with Nazism and racism remains a vivid impression in many people’s minds in Scandinavia and beyond.

The chapter on modern Nordic Paganism in this volume will focus on nonracist Pagan groups of Iceland and the United States that are devoted to the reconstruction and continuation of ancient Nordic religion, rather than any ideal of Nordic, Germanic, or supposed Aryan racial supremacy. The reader interested in racist forms of Nordic Paganism is advised to consult the previously noted studies of Bjorgo, Kaplan, and Gardell.

Paganism and Hinduism

If Nazi Aryan discourse and racially oriented forms of modern Paganism represent a xenophobic and racist response to scholarly research into ancient Indo-European commonalities, other Pagans have been inspired in a quite different manner. Conscious of the linkages that scholars have made between pre-Christian Pagan Europeans and ancient Hindu Indians, some modern Pagans have come to view modern Indians as their long-lost cousins and to regard the religion of Hinduism as their oldest spiritual

relative. This thinking is based on the dating of the earliest Hindu texts, the Vedas, to somewhere in the range of 1500–1200 BCE by most scholars. The Vedas were written in a language, Vedic, that is an early form of Sanskrit, with identifiable linguistic parallels to Greek, Latin, Lithuanian, and other European tongues. Many scholars of the Vedas believe that the authors of the texts were migrants or invaders who went to India from the Indo-European homeland between 2000 and 1500 BCE, following the collapse of the native Harappan/Indus Valley civilization in an area that straddles what today is northwest India and eastern Pakistan.

Because Hinduism has never been supplanted by any other religion in India, despite the efforts of Muslim conquerors and Christian colonizers, and has thereby remained the religious tradition of more than 800 million Indians, it is of special interest to European and North American Pagans. They look on Hinduism as the only Indo-European, Pagan religion to survive into modern times as the majority faith of an entire nation, despite the geographic and cultural distance that divides India from Europe and North America. For this reason, a number of modern Pagan movements pay a great deal of attention to parallels between Hindu myths, practices, and beliefs and those of their own particular regional traditions.

To give one example, *The Pagan Path*, a 1995 book giving an overview of Pagan religious movements in the United States and beyond, contains a section comparing healing practices in various Pagan traditions; the authors compare the Hindu *chakra* system of a hierarchical series of energy centers in the human body to the Norse notion of a World Tree with nine levels. Anticipating that some may object to the identification of Hindu and Norse religious concepts, the authors commented, “There is a common saying among occultists that you should not mix traditions, particularly the Western and Eastern mystery traditions. We would like to point out to people who feel that this system does not belong in Western Pagan practice, that if they look closely they will find that most of our traditions are of common Indo-European heritage” (Farrar, Farrar, and Bone 1995, 78).

To give another example, one of the international organizations dedicated to modern Paganism, the aforementioned World Congress of Ethnic Religions, has had increasing contact with representatives of Hindu sects in India. In February 2003, members of the Lithuanian organization Romuva and other WCER-affiliated groups attended the First International Conference and Gathering of the Elders in Mumbai (Bombay), India, which was followed by an “Indo-Romuva” conference in New Jersey in the autumn of 2003, further solidifying the links established between Romuva and Hindu organizations during earlier meetings. Such interactions indicate that cooperation and mutual support between modern Hindus and Pagans seem likely to continue, bringing Indo-European religion out of the realm of

purely scholarly investigation and into the domain of modern experience and activity.

Paganism and Christianity: A Troubled History

If many modern Pagans see Hinduism as a kindred faith that they highly respect and value, almost the exact opposite would have to be said about Christianity. In the popular discourse of modern Paganism, as can be found in Pagan magazines, websites, and Internet discussion venues, Christianity is frequently denounced as an antinatural, antifemale, sexually and culturally repressive, guilt-ridden, and authoritarian religion that has fostered intolerance, hypocrisy, and persecution throughout the world. For these reasons, Christianity is felt to be totally alien to the worldview of Pagan religions in both their ancient and modern forms, with nature, including human sexuality, regarded not as shameful but as sacred and with an acceptance of a wide choice of religious activities and affiliations, as prevailed in ancient Greece and Rome. Though an erudite Christian might object to this characterization of Christianity as antinatural, antisexual, and authoritarian, this is indeed the prevalent perception among contemporary Pagans. There is therefore a deeply felt conviction that Christianity and Paganism represent fundamentally opposing value systems. Gus DiZerega provided a thoughtful discussion of the historical background of Pagan and Christian animosity and offered some creative suggestions for fostering mutual respect and tolerance in his work *Pagans and Christians: The Personal Spiritual Experience* (2001).

The history of Christian suppression of Pagan religions in ancient and medieval times and continuing well into the modern era is the other issue that inflames Neopagan animosity toward Christianity. Many Christians in both Europe and North America are accustomed to proudly regarding Christianity as the source of morality, culture, and civilization and the suppression and replacement of Pagan and Indigenous religions by the triumphant expansion of Christianity as a necessary, or at least a forgivable, stage in cultural evolution. Contemporary Pagans take an almost diametrically opposite view of Western history, regarding Christianity as the destroyer of peoples, cultures, and spiritual traditions; the promoter of intolerance, zealotry and persecution, including witch burning in Europe and North America; and the handmaiden of colonialism (Strmiska 2003, 59–72).

The fate of the medieval Baltic state of Prussia, which formerly existed on the coast of the Baltic Sea between modern Poland and Lithuania, will serve as an example of the type of historical situation that modern Pagans

find particularly instructive and disturbing in regard to the role of Christianity in European history, raising suspicions and criticisms that are applicable to the impact of Christianity on other regions of the world as well. Prussia is best known today as a militaristic, Germanic state founded by Frederick I in 1701, later becoming Kaliningrad under Soviet rule in the post–World War II era. But what is less well known is that Prussia had a pre-Germanic history. It was once a land inhabited by Baltic tribes whose language, culture, and religion were closely related to those of the Baltic peoples in neighboring Lithuania and Latvia (Suziedelis 1997). The Prussian language is now a dead language, but from the few surviving documents, linguists have no doubt that it was a member of the Baltic subgroup of the Indo-European language family. It is also known that the Baltic Prussians practiced a polytheistic, Indo-European religion closely related to that of the Pagan peoples of Lithuania and Latvia.

Germanic crusaders, also known as the Teutonic Knights, conquered Prussia in the thirteenth century, dispossessing the native Baltic Prussians of their land, culture, and native religion. They reduced the population to serfdom and enforced a dual policy of progressive Germanization, in terms of language and culture, and Christianization, with reference to religion (Suziedelis 1997, 295–296; Christiansen 1997; Kiaupa, Kiaupiene, and Kuncevicius 2000, 47–48). The Prussians never regained their independence from their German Christian masters, and their language, culture, and religion atrophied, withered, and eventually disappeared. By modern standards, what happened in Prussia might be called cultural genocide, the deliberate extinction of an entire culture through the use of military force and other means.

The fact that Christian authorities have never apologized in clear and unequivocal terms for their past actions against Pagan religious communities in Europe remains a sore spot for many Neopagans. In 1998, the Catholic Church, under the authority of Pope John Paul II, issued “Reflections on the Shoah,” an apology for past harms done to Jewish peoples by the church across the centuries. “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past” was published by the Vatican in 2002, a more general apology for “mistakes and failings,” including religious violence, perpetrated in the past by the “sons and daughters of the Church.” But neither the pope nor other eminent Christians have ever made a specific apology for the damage done to Pagan peoples and religions by church activities in ages past, let alone acknowledged the value of the Indigenous European religious traditions reduced to near extinction by the efforts of the church.

The 2000 Vatican apology explicitly asserted the right of the church to persevere in “proclaiming the revealed truth entrusted to her,” a reference

to continued missionary efforts grounded in an assumption of spiritual superiority over all other religious traditions. Modern Pagans therefore tend to be suspicious as to whether the Catholic Church or other branches of the worldwide Christian community have actually developed any genuine tolerance or respect for other religious traditions.

Modern Pagans' negative perception of Christianity is further reinforced by their awareness of the continuing efforts of Christian missionaries to replace native religious traditions with Christianity in all corners of the earth, an intention proclaimed not only by the pope but also by many leaders of Evangelical churches and other sects of Christianity. For Pagans observing such developments with a critical eye, the statements that Catholic Church officials and other Christian leaders periodically make about their ambitions for world Christianization flatly contradict the calls for dialogue, tolerance, and religious understanding that issue forth from church leaders and theologians, and they add to contemporary Pagans' sense of distrust and disappointment with Christianity.

For Pagans living in regions dominated by very conservative forms of Christianity, as in the Bible Belt region of the American South, the issue of Christian hostility toward Pagan religions is not merely historical or academic but also a present-day social reality of which they have to be continually mindful. For example, in January 2000, Shari Eicher, an English teacher at Scotland High School in Laurinburg, North Carolina, was forced to leave the school grounds and was indefinitely suspended from teaching because of her affiliation with a local Wicca group (*The Christian Century* 2000, 114–115). The action against Eicher was not taken because she had attempted to promote Wicca through her classes, as one might expect, but because of parental concern about an Internet website promoting her local Wicca organization. Because the website contained some nudity, it was interpreted as an effort to seduce and abuse local children, despite the total lack of any evidence to support such an allegation.

Eicher had told school administrators of her religious affiliation many months before this incident and had apparently been a competent teacher up to the point of this controversy, which brought an end to her teaching career. Her case illustrates the perils of public Paganism, despite the legal protections that are supposed to safeguard a person from persecution or discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation in the United States and other countries. Though the quite serious charges against Shari Eicher as a corrupter of children were never proven, the controversy resulting from her Wiccan identity was sufficient to end her teaching career.

Such repercussions of Neopagan affiliation are not limited to the Bible Belt or even to the United States as a whole. A quite parallel case in England from April 2000 involved Ralph Morse, a drama teacher at Shenfield

High School in Essex. After the publication of an article in a prominent newspaper revealed his Wicca affiliation and his appointment to a leadership position in the Pagan Federation, a Pagan support group based in Britain with branches in other countries, he was dismissed from his position. The comments of several participants and observers illustrated the quite suspicious view they took toward Morse's religious activities.

John Fairhurst, the head teacher at the school, released a statement asserting that the school was "appalled" to be associated with the Pagan Federation and "wish[ed] it to be known that we completely and unequivocally reject their world of witchcraft and magic." He continued: "A teacher's private activities are, of course, his private activities. However, there is no doubt that this man's private interests are impinging upon the school . . . The member of staff concerned has been suspended pending an investigation into the extent of his activities and the conflicts of interest that arise between his out-of-school activities and his professional role." Fairhurst said the school taught religious education in a way "which we hope and expect would enable our students to reject the dangerous temptations of the occult." Father Leslie Knight, the local Roman Catholic parish priest, said, "We should be promoting Christianity and not things which go into witchcraft and magic." Doug Harris, spokesman for the Fundamentalist Christian Reach Out Trust, remarked, "Paganism opens you up to a supernatural power that cannot be controlled. It's dangerous to encourage young people" (*The Independent* April 9, 2000).

It is notable that the specific harm caused by Morse was never specified. For the headmaster and Morse's other detractors, the fact that he was affiliated with a Pagan organization was, in and of itself, understood as sufficient grounds to deprive him of his livelihood and career.

The cases of Shari Eicher and Ralph Morse are not at all unique. Many more such tales could be culled from newspaper archives or from Internet sites that deal with modern Paganism and Wicca or with religious freedom or tolerance. It is therefore not at all surprising that many contemporary Pagans feel it necessary to keep their religious affiliations and activities secret in order to avoid the risk of discrimination, persecution, and, if not quite the loss of life, very likely the loss of livelihood, as happened with Eicher and Morse.

The uneasy relationship that exists between Christianity and Paganism in North America and Europe is similar to that of other minority religions and Christianity, with one important difference. Asian religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism, which were brought to Europe or North America from outside the geographic and historical boundaries of the West, enjoy a certain exotic appeal as religions of the Other, the Orient, and the East. Rooted as they are in distant locations in terms of place, time, and culture,

these religions are not implicated as factors in Western history in any significant way and therefore pose no threat to the common definition of the West as a Christian civilization, as is implicit in the word *Christendom*.

It is different with the Pagan religions. As the predecessors and former competitors of Christianity within Europe itself, they represent a stark reminder—and for some Christians, possibly a painful one—that Christianity was neither the first nor the only religion in Europe. There were once alternative religious faiths in Europe of great antiquity and popularity, rooted in local language, tradition, and culture, that were only dislodged from popular affection by considerable effort on the part of the church and its allies over many centuries, including the occasional use of military force, coerced conversions, and brutal suppression of religious freedom (Latourette 1938; Fletcher 1997). The use of force and coercion against European Pagans by popes and crusaders, kings and emperors, and other active promoters of Christianization are not the proudest chapters of Christian history, and anything more than a superficial discussion of the Pagan religions of the European past automatically raises the specter of these morally questionable and even shameful historical episodes (Strmiska 2003).

The history of Pagan religions in Europe is therefore something of a skeleton in the closet of Christian memory, which many might prefer to leave alone. The rise of Neopagan religious movements, with their vocal expressions of outrage about the past Christian suppression of Pagan religions, threatens to bring this embarrassing skeleton out of obscurity and into full public view—and not on the terms church authorities would prefer. Much as the original Pagan religions of Europe represented an obstacle to the plans of ancient and medieval church leaders for a totally Christianized Europe, reborn and reconstructed Paganism is a thorn in the side of those modern Christians who like to think of Europe as an essentially Christian region.

The same obviously applies to North America, particularly the United States. Conservative Christian Americans are unlikely to take pleasure in seeing the rise of Wicca and other Pagan religions in the land they view as a “Christian nation” or a “new Jerusalem,” far superior to the Old World of Europe in the quality and fervor of its Christianity. In past times, Christian authors had no difficulty in excusing the methods by which Paganism in Europe was done away with by use of an “ends-justifies-the-means” argument. Paganism was barbarous, false, inferior; Christianity was civilized, true, superior; and hence, the replacement of the lesser faith by the greater by all available means was correct, beneficial, and fully justifiable, indeed inevitable. To many Christians today, this triumphalist version of world history, which sees the progressive Christianization of the entire earth as the

proper order of things, remains a reassuring narrative that bolsters their religious faith and identity. The rise of Neopagan religions forcefully demonstrates that not all people in North America, Europe, or other regions share this view of the world.

Considering the deep-seated differences and historical grievances that separate Pagans and Christians, it seems likely that there will be an increasing number of conflicts between Christians and the rising numbers of Neopagans in both Europe and North America. How such conflicts play out will depend on the ability of religious and political leaders to find creative solutions that will respect the rights of both faith communities.

Paganism and Satanism

The examples of the schoolteachers in Britain and the United States who were summarily dismissed from their positions because of their Pagan affiliations illustrate how explosive the topic of modern Paganism can be in public life. One of the factors that has contributed to this state of affairs is the common association of Paganism with Satanism, an association endlessly asserted by Fundamentalist Christians and other opponents of alternative religions and reiterated in the popular media (Hutton 1999, 407–409). The chapters in this volume, which cover a wide range of modern Pagan movements across two continents, none of which are centered on the worship of the biblical devil, demonstrate the general groundlessness of this accusation.

The sole exception to the essential incongruity of Satanism and modern Paganism would be the Nordic White Power Pagans, who combine pre-Christian Scandinavian mythology, Nazism, and Satanism in a general *mélange* of anti-Jewish and anti-Christian symbols and doctrines. However, as has been noted previously, such Neo-Nazi Pagans represent an extreme, if troubling, fringe and are not in fact implicated in the majority of cases in which Pagans are accused of involvement with Satanism.

The general association of Paganism with Satanism is a situation in which media mythology and anti-Pagan propaganda overpower reality. The Christian image of the devil, which has been propagated in multiple forms for many centuries, has come to symbolize, for many Christians and even for a good number of non-Christians living in Christian-dominated cultures, any sense of deity outside of the Christian monotheistic-trinitarian conception. In the previously cited book *Spirit Wars*, attacking the rise of modern Paganism, the author took some pains to quote a number of Neopagans and feminist witches who disavowed the linkage of their religious beliefs and practices with Satanism, but then he went right back to repeat-

ing the allegation: “There is a continuum in Paganism that ends in Satanism, i.e., the open worship of Satan. All one can say is that some witches come very close” (Jones 1997, 296, n. 51).

It is therefore quite understandable that for many people ignorant of the actual content of modern Pagan religions, the simple explanation that these religions are forms of Satan worship is a quick and easy way to place these unfamiliar religions into a comfortable, even slightly titillating conceptual category. Horror films such as *Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *The Seventh Sign*, *The Devil’s Advocate*, *Judgment Day*, and many others cut from the same cloth have also popularized the view that non-Christian religions are likely to be, at base, the worship of Satan. News media, catering to a largely Christian population, have found that sensational reports of alleged Satanism are likely to captivate audiences and boost the popularity of news programs. It is therefore very tempting for news organizations to seize on allegations that Pagans are actually Satanists, practicing dark and diabolical rites in secret. Until news organizations and other popular media are willing to devote airtime and ink to a more comprehensive and less sensationalistic discussion of Pagan religions, such distortions are likely to continue. It is to be hoped that the readers of this volume will be able to turn a critical eye toward equations of Pagan religions with Satanism.

Pagan Deities and the Principle of Cosmic Order

A great many deities are acknowledged in modern Pagan traditions. They are both male and female, with powers and functions ranging from wisdom to intoxication, from war to peace, and from fertility to death, among many others. Pagan deities often embody elements and forces of nature but also aspects of culture and psychology. In some cases, very precise functional and linguistic correspondences between the names, functions, and myths of Pagan deities reveal an underlying Indo-European commonality between the deities of different traditions.

Unlike the impersonal, transcendent deity of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheistic traditions, the Pagan deities are often described in myth and portrayed in various forms of art as human, all too human. They have passions and pleasures and enjoy various pursuits, according to their individual personalities. They have sexual relations, friends, and families, exactly like human beings. They are superior to human beings in their powers and abilities, but their power is not absolute. For Christians and other monotheists accustomed to a single, stand-alone supergod with absolute supremacy over all things, the humanlike personalities, imperfect nature, and limited power of the Pagan deities may seem like a perversion of the

very idea of deity. To Pagans, the limitations and imperfections of their deities reflect the actual dynamics of life on earth in a far more compelling manner than the absolute perfection of the monotheistic supergod.

In the Norse myths, for example, the gods themselves are understood to die fighting against their enemies in the final, cataclysmic Battle of Ragnarok. Though the god Odin is able to gain prior knowledge of this disaster, he is unable to avert this outcome and instead stoically prepares for destruction, perhaps comforted in knowing that the world will rise again, as will his dead son, Balder. The mortality of Odin and the other Norse deities does not cause modern Nordic Pagans to lose faith in the value of their deities but is instead taken as a poignant reflection on the limitations of all existence. This kind of tragic worldview strongly contrasts with the Judeo-Christian-Islamic vision of God saving his believers from all harm and evil and damning the wicked to hellfire.

There is also humor in much of Pagan mythology; a good deal of it earthy, even risqué. In the Celtic mythology of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, the lovemaking of the pot-bellied god of war and wisdom, the Dagda, with the war goddess Macha is described in a quite humorous and irreverent manner. Similarly, the Greek god Ares is trapped in a compromising position while attempting to pursue adulterous relations with the goddess of sexuality, Aphrodite, wife of the artisan god Hephaistos. In Norse myth, the usually macho thunder god Thor dresses in drag and pretends to be the beautiful fertility goddess Freyja in order to retrieve his magic hammer from an ugly giant who insists on marrying Freyja. To the monotheistic mind, these mythical follies and peccadilloes have no place in the depiction of deity; they are sacrilegious, perverse. In Islamic discourse, such playful tales would be viewed as *shirk*, a disrespectful representation of the divine that is to be abhorred and punished. The Pagan religious sensibility takes pleasure in these episodes as an acknowledgment that no one is perfect: no one is immune from the absurdities of life, not even the gods.

As the preceding suggests, modern Pagans do not expect their gods to be perfect. They respect them as representing and embodying important factors in life and nature, but they do not share the Judeo-Christian-Islamic sense that deity should be absolute, transcendent, and without flaw. For Pagans, it is enough that the gods are wise, if not always wise, and powerful in the way that natural elements such as rivers, storms, and mountains are powerful, if not all-powerful in the manner of an absolute monarch. They respect the gods as greater than human but do not imagine them as beyond all human feeling or understanding. Furthermore, some contemporary Pagans interpret the gods in psychological terms as psychic potentials within the psyche, somewhat in the manner of Carl Jung's theory of archetypes, rather than as external, supernatural beings. The Swiss psychoanalyst

Jung (1875–1961), an early disciple of Sigmund Freud, believed that god images, which Jung termed *archetypes*, are a universal human heritage encoded in the collective human psyche. The American psychologist James Hillman further developed Jung's theories in works such as *Re-visioning Psychology* (1978), arguing that the different gods of Greek mythology represent different forms of psychological organization, adaptation, and perspective. Yet other Pagans view the gods as existing simultaneously within the human mind and beyond it as well.

Another important difference between Pagan and monotheistic conceptions of deity is that the Pagan traditions place great importance on female forms of deity, which are almost wholly lacking in Judaism and Islam and only indirectly acknowledged in Christianity in the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary. Goddesses of fertility are arguably the most prominent female deities in Pagan traditions, but there are Pagan goddesses who preside over many other functions and forces. The goddesses of fertility are themselves usually multifunctional, with power over many other areas of life and nature besides fertility per se. The Norse goddess Freyja, for example, has power over death, war, and Shamanic magic in addition to fertility. The Greek goddess Artemis is associated with mountains, forests, and hunting but also with childbirth.

A distinct subsection of modern Paganism is devoted to goddess worship and/or modern interpretations of Witchcraft, inspired by the works of feminist scholars such as Marija Gimbutas arguing for the existence of a goddess-centered religion, as well as a matriarchal society, in prehistoric Europe prior to the coming of the martial, patriarchal Indo-Europeans sometime around 4500 BCE (Gimbutas 1989). The Reclaiming Collective founded by Starhawk and others in the San Francisco Bay area in the 1970s and now often simply referred to as Reclaiming is one of the most widespread and influential of such goddess-oriented Pagan movements, but there are many others. In a recent study of the Reclaiming movement, Jone Salomonsen concluded that "Witches perceive of themselves as having left the Father's House (Jewish and Christian religion) and returned 'home' to the Self (Goddess religion) with a call to heal western women's (and men's) alienation from community and spirituality" (Salomonsen 2002, 282).

Reverence for female forms of deity is also important in Wicca. Wiccans typically worship a god/goddess pair of male/female deities. Thus, they can include both the masculine and the feminine in their conception of the divine, defying patriarchy without attempting to replace it with matriarchy. This conception of male/female divine partnership is regarded as a universal principle of the world's ancient religions, permitting Wiccans to take any number of Pagan or Indigenous gods and goddesses into Wicca worship. The feasibility, not to mention the propriety, of attempting to fit

large numbers of the world's many deities into a single paradigm of male/female partnership is open to question on many levels, but it is a structure that has allowed people with interest in different deities and religious traditions to customize Wicca to suit their specific interests, thus enhancing the religion's appeal to a broad and growing membership.

There is a metaphysical concept evident in a number of Pagan religious traditions that may be said to approximate the Judeo-Christian-Islamic sense of deity, at least in certain limited respects. This concept entails an overarching, impersonal order that controls the course of events in the universe, including the fates of individuals. In Norse religion, the concept is variously expressed as *ørlög*, a word that means something like "cosmic law," and *Wyrd*, which translates approximately as "fate." In Celtic tradition, there is the notion of *Fír Flaithemon* (the Prince's Truth), which brings peace and prosperity to those who respect and preserve it and destruction to those who disregard it (Dillon 1975, 130). In the Pagan religion of ancient Greece, there was *harmonia*. Modern Lithuanian Neopagans find great meaning in the notion of *darnumas* as a principle of world order; the word is etymologically linked with the Indian Sanskrit term *dharma*, which carries multiple meanings, including world order and truth, in both Hinduism and Buddhism (Trinkunas 1999, 158–159).

In most of these traditions, the concept of an underlying order to the universe is not highly developed, but its presence suggests that the ancient Pagans were indeed capable of philosophical reflection, which modern Pagans will likely develop in new directions. This conception of a fundamental harmony or order in the cosmos is one of the more promising points for dialogue and mutual understanding between Paganism, the monotheistic faiths, and other religious traditions.

Pagan Ritual and Worship

Modern Pagan rituals can be divided into those conducted in public and those performed in private. The public rituals are generally linked with the annual cycle of seasons, that is, they are calendrical rites. The summer and winter solstices, as the longest and shortest days of the annual cycle, are widely celebrated holidays among today's Pagans, as they were among the Pagans of the past. Similarly, the advent of spring is commonly welcomed with ritual merriment, as is the time of harvest in autumn.

The coming of winter, when much in nature dies or withdraws from view, is also widely celebrated as the time when the spirits of the dead come to visit the living. In the Lithuanian festival of Velines, for example, people greet their ancestors by setting a place at the table for them, lighting spe-

cial candles, serving food and drink to the dead, and honoring them with traditional songs (Trinkunas 1999, 127–129). Alternately, families visit the graves of their ancestors and hold the same festivities there.

The Anglo-American holiday of Halloween was very likely inspired by memories of ancient Celtic traditions observed in the festival of *Sámhain*, celebrated at the end of the Celtic calendar in the month now known as October. The ancient Celtic practice of ritually preserving severed heads as protective talismans, often displayed in doorways, is echoed in the modern Halloween decoration of the jack-o'-lanterns. The ritualized chanting of "trick or treat," by which masked children request candy or other treats in exchange for refraining from mischievous tricks, mirrors the ancient Pagan belief in providing food, drink, and other forms of hospitality one's ancestors in order to forestall their possible anger or malevolence should the dead feel slighted or neglected.

The number and frequency of annual festivals observed by the Pagans of the past varied among different populations in different regions of Europe. Wiccans have produced a calendrical cycle of eight festivals, called sabbats, inspired by Pagan Celtic festivals of past times (Kramer-Rolls 2002, 228–236). The first festival of the calendar year is that of *Imbolc*, celebrated in the depths of winter at the beginning of February as a time of preparation for the coming of spring. The Celtic goddess *Brigid* is honored at this time. The second sabbat is the feast of the Germanic goddess *Ostara*, celebrated at the time of the vernal equinox on March 21 or 22, with egg decorating and other symbolic activities marking the first stirrings of spring with a general theme of fertility. The next festival is *Beltane* on May 1, a boisterous celebration of springtime, fertility, and life in abundance, with joyous dances, bonfires, maypoles, and other activities with sexual themes. The fourth Wicca sabbat is the summer solstice, which again features bonfires and dancing as well as symbolic burning wheels mounted on poles and then rolled down hills to represent the sun at the peak of summer.

The beginning of August is marked by *Lughnassad*, dedicated to the Celtic god *Lugh*. This festival celebrates the beginning of the harvest season. The autumn equinox on September 21 or 22 is known as *Mabon*, marking the peak time of the harvest. The activities of this sixth festival center around special treatment of the last sheaf of grain taken from the field (or a substitute), seen as representing the god or goddess of grain and fertility. The next festival is the previously mentioned *Sámhain*, with its worship of the dead and preparation for the coming of winter.

The eighth and final festival is the winter solstice celebration, often known by its Germanic name of *Yule*. This sabbat is a time of feasting and revelry, being cozy with family, close to the hearth, and safely insulated

from the harshness of winter winds and cold; there are a wide range of activities, some of which involve a reappropriating of rites that formerly had been taken into Christianity from European Pagan winter celebrations, such as the decoration of evergreen trees with lights and the viewing of burning logs in the family hearth.

This Wicca yearly round of eight sabbats is a composite of traditions from Celtic, Germanic, and other sources and is not honored in all its particulars by all modern Pagans, but the general celebration of the agricultural cycle, especially the key times of solstice and equinox, and respect for the dead are indeed common among Pagans, whatever the variations in ritual times and activities.

Another important dimension of Pagan ritual life involves regional and sometimes transregional and even international festivals in which Pagans gather on farms, in parks, and in other open spaces for days of revelry, feasting, music, dance, and sharing of ritual lore in a setting close to nature, with nighttime bonfires always a central event. The anthropologist Sarah M. Pike has conducted extensive research on such increasingly large and popular festivals in the United States. As she commented, “Neopagan identity is primarily expressed at festivals through music and dance,” emphasizing the raucous, joyously physical nature of much modern Pagan ritual (Pike 2001, 5).

In Lithuania, the annual August festival of *Mėnuo Juodaragis* (Moon of the Black Horn) brings together Baltic Pagans, artists, and musicians ranging from traditional Lithuanian folksingers to heavy-metal rockers and performers of electronica and trance music. As with the American festivals observed by Pike, the Moon of the Black Horn brings large crowds of Pagan revelers from Lithuania and other European countries out to the open countryside for music, dancing, and feasting around roaring fires (Strmiska 2005).

Another category of modern Pagan religious activity consists of private forms of worship performed by individuals or families in their homes. Such domestic Pagan worship is highly variable. Many, though not all, Pagans fashion and decorate images of deities to whom prayers are directed, songs are sung, and offerings are given. Though rites of worship in the European Pagan religions of old frequently involved animal sacrifice, this practice is rare in modern Paganism, even among Reconstructionists, who are usually so dedicated to an exacting re-creation of past practices. It is common to find Pagan deities worshipped with offerings of bread, cake, fruits, flowers, and other nonmeat items and milk, beer, wine, and other beverages. Candles and incense are often lit to create a more sensually evocative atmosphere and as an indoor substitute for the rollicking fires typically lit when rites are performed outdoors.

Prayers may be spontaneous or formulaic, with prayer texts shared on the Internet or published in magazines and books; religious songs are similarly distributed on the Internet or sold in cassette or compact disc (CD) form. Reconstructionist Neopagans often engage in spirited debates about the precisely right way to make offerings, recite prayers, chant incantations, or perform other such ritual activities, sharing information and interpretations through the Internet and other media. Another important area of religious activity is the symbolic decoration of places of worship. Eclectic Pagans revel in a wide variety of artistic representations derived from imagination, popular books and magazines, or other sources, whereas Reconstructionists generally prefer to rely on symbols and objects proven by archaeologists and other scholars to have actually been used in past Pagan rituals.

Such subtle differences of emphasis should not be overstated, nor should they distract us from observing the broad agreement among modern Pagans of all stripes about the use as legitimate forms of worship; of food, drink, and other such material offerings; prayers, chants, songs, dances, and other verbal, aural, and kinetic expressions; and symbols, images, statues, and similar forms of visual and tactile art.

To compare Pagan styles of worship with those of other religions, we find that the use of images in domestic worship sets Paganism apart from the aniconic severity of Judaism, Islam, and post-Reformation forms of Christianity, while bringing it close to the devotional practices of Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, the Roman Catholic form of Christianity (with its profusion of Jesus, Mary, and saint images), and Orthodox Christianity (with its sacred icons). The raucous music and dancing common in modern Pagan festivals and public rituals expresses a joy in sensuality that is usually contained and limited—and often denounced as wicked and wayward—in many world religions rather than openly celebrated.

Why Now? Reflections on the Reasons for the Rise of Modern Paganism

In light of the past suppression of Pagan religions in Europe and the predominantly Christian affiliation of the European colonies and settlements that eventually became Canada and the United States, it is worth pondering *why* Neopagan religion is flourishing today in Europe, North America, and elsewhere. It is possible to identify a number of causative factors, but it must be understood that these factors apply in varying form and to different extent in the diverse regions and nations under discussion in this book.

It is worth noting that the rise of modern Paganism goes against a number of previously well-established assumptions. From the view of history,

long favored by many Christians, that saw the Christianization of Europe and, by extension, North America as inevitable and irreversible, the growth of Paganism should *not* be happening. Pagan religions were supposedly long ago discredited and replaced by a superior faith (Platinga 1999). But happening it is. From the perspective of modern science, particularly the “secularism hypothesis” that saw religious faith declining relative to a growing confidence in a scientific view of the world, Paganism should not be attractive to people living in an era of high technology and scientific wizardry because it seems little more than a repackaging of random bits of folklore, mythology, and superstition. But attractive it remains; the same is also true, of course, of many other religions, which grow in popularity despite the supposed dominance of scientific rationality in our high-tech modern world. Therefore, to attempt to answer the question of why Paganism is gaining popularity in the social and cultural climate of the present time is also to examine the failure of such formerly dominant explanatory systems as Christianity and science to provide people of this era with a fully satisfactory understanding of and relationship to the world we live in.

The first trickles of popular interest in pre-Christian religious traditions of the European past came in the form of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romanticism and national independence liberation movements. Scholars and intellectuals such as Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) and the brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm generated interest across Europe in collecting, documenting, and preserving folk songs, traditional customs, and other forms of folklore among the peasantry and lower classes, as these folkloric traditions were felt to embody the unique “folk-soul” or spirit of a given people, ethnic group, or nation. The development of cultural self-consciousness gave rise to movements for ethnic, cultural, and, ultimately, national self-determination.

Iceland is a useful case in point. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Iceland was a Danish colony under the firm control of the king of Denmark. A new awareness of the richness of its native mythology and literary heritage arose among educated Icelanders in the course of the 1800s, thanks in no small part to the intellectual climate of Romantic nationalism and folklore enthusiasm (Karlsson 1995). This interest led to a popular movement for greater autonomy from Denmark, with one notable demand being the insistence that Copenhagen return to Iceland the precious Old Icelandic manuscripts containing the Eddas, Sagas, and other early Icelandic literature. Iceland eventually achieved full independence from Denmark in the wake of World War II, with the manuscripts returning home to a hero’s welcome in Reykjavík. The modern Asatru movement in Iceland has its roots in the nineteenth-century cultural revival and independence movements, built on a romantic appreciation of the Icelandic cultural her-

itage. Other European-based Neopagan movements show similar roots in cultural revival movements of the 1800s in which a new appreciation of native folklore and mythology contributed to a new sense of national worth, as well as a new awareness of native cultural heritage as a national *spiritual* heritage (Misane 2000). That is, native dances, customs, styles, and songs, not to mention myths and gods, were not seen merely as markers of ethnic identity but also as living links to religious traditions of the Pagan past.

When European immigrants settled in the United States and Canada in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they carried with them this same pride in their ethnic folkloric heritage. For some immigrants, as well as their descendants, this ethnic heritage possessed a spiritual dimension that would in time provide the foundation of Reconstructionist Paganism in North America.

If the Romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century may be seen as one important factor in the development of modern Paganism, another of more recent vintage would be a widespread disillusionment with traditional authority structures of the modern world (Giddens 1991). The horrendous wars and totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, the continuing threat of nuclear weapons and other forms of high-tech annihilation, the pollution and devastation of the natural environment, and other crises such as the mass suffering and death wrought by the spread of AIDS have shattered popular confidence that government, science, and other authority structures are able and willing to protect the general well-being of our world. The indisputable technological progress of modern times is no longer seen as holding the key to human progress or security but only as a sad counterpoint to humanity's general inability to care for its own.

With traditional authorities losing their ability to command respect and compel obedience, the way has been opened to a freewheeling search for alternative sources of guidance and identity, with modern Paganism being one cultural response among many others. The continuing proliferation of new channels of information and communication, from radio and television to the personal computer and especially the Internet, has allowed modern Pagans to disseminate their religious ideas, attract new members, and facilitate communication between communities across the globe in a rapid and easy manner. Electronic media such as the Internet also allow for communication and cross-pollenization between different social and political movements with common or overlapping interests.

A third factor is declining church membership and participation in Christian activities in Europe, the United Kingdom, and Canada. The situation is somewhat different in the United States, where Pentecostal, Evangelical, Fundamentalist, and other forms of Christianity are showing increasing vigor and popularity (Ammerman 1987; Wald 2003). In most of these

other nations and regions, however, Christianity is on the decline, at least in terms of active support and participation. Part of the reason for this decline would seem to be the general loss of confidence in traditional authority structures noted earlier, which for some segments of the population extends to Christianity, viewed by some as an ideological bastion of a failed social order. However, another interpretation is also possible.

Not long ago, the populations of Europe and North America had very few religious choices. The Christian religion was closely allied with state authorities, resulting in considerable pressure on people to belong to one or another sect of Christianity. In European nations that had an official state church, to be a citizen meant to be a Christian, and babies were baptized into the state church as a matter of course. To *not* be a Christian was to invite discrimination and abuse, as was brought home by the cruel treatment of Jews in Europe and North America in times not long distant. Therefore, it is questionable whether the higher percentage of membership in Christian churches and higher levels of general participation in church activities of centuries past demonstrated a greater level of sincere Christian piety than what we see today or simply a higher degree of pressure and compulsion applied to enforce Christian membership and participation.

Today, we see a shift in the power differential between the long-dominant religion of Christianity and other religious traditions. The nations of Europe and North America have rejected the earlier social arrangement in which Christianity was greatly privileged over other religious traditions and allowed to compel obedience to the dictates of church authorities and to punish dissent and noncompliance. To varying degrees, Europe and North America stand united in implementing a new social order emphasizing citizens' rights to practice the religion of their choice, whether this be a form of the Christian faith or another religion altogether. With religious rights having thus become far better understood and more vigorously protected than in any previous period of the last 1,000 years, Europeans and North Americans have been empowered to opt out of the Christian religion completely if they so wish and affiliate with other religions or with none at all (Rémond 1999). Non-Christian religious communities can openly function and organize without the threat of open reprisals by church or state authorities, a threat that was very real and dangerous in times not long ago. As noted previously, public acknowledgment of membership in Pagan religious organizations is still not totally without risk, but there is a general understanding in an increasing number of nations that Paganism and other "alternative" and minority religions are valid religious expressions, to be protected under the law, not persecuted by it.

In this respect, the rise of modern Paganism is both a result and a measure of increased religious liberty and rising tolerance for religious diversity

in modern societies, a liberty and tolerance made possible by the curbing of the sometimes oppressive power wielded by Christian authorities to compel obedience and participation in centuries past. To say it another way, modern Paganism is one of the happy stepchildren of modern multiculturalism and social pluralism.

In Eastern Europe, there is another important factor to note—the collapse of Soviet communism in the late 1980s. The governments of the various Soviet republics had repressed and persecuted religious activity to varying degrees, for both ideological and political reasons (Misiunas and Taagepera 1983; Ramet 1987). The passing of Soviet authority therefore opened the way to new religious freedom, with both Christian and non-Christian religious communities thriving in the newly open atmosphere and modern Pagan groups in some places enjoying a certain prestige as faithful bearers of non-Soviet, native traditions and ethnic identity (Lewis 2000; Lieven 1994, 109–116; Misane 2000).

A final factor to be noted is the formation of Pagan advocacy and support networks operating at both the national and international levels. In the United Kingdom and Western Europe, the Pagan Federation provides information about Pagan religion, alerts people to local discussion groups and other community activities, and also provides legal aid for Pagans who experience religious persecution or other legal difficulties. In the United States, the Circle Network plays a similar informational and coordinating role, with an affiliate organization, the Lady Liberty Network, providing assistance on Pagan-related legal matters. The Ring of Troth is an American-based but increasingly international network for the support and promotion of Norse-Scandinavian Paganism. As mentioned earlier, the World Congress of Ethnic Religions, based in Lithuania, is an attempt to create a global support network for modern Pagan and Indigenous religions. All of these organizations depend heavily on the Internet as their primary channel of disseminating information and organizing events.

The rise of modern Paganism is therefore attributable to a combination of factors. Intellectual movements of the nineteenth century, particularly Romanticism, planted the seeds of renewed respect for pre-Christian religious traditions of the European past, as embodied in myths, folklore, and other aspects of cultural heritage. The decline of traditional authority structures made alternative religions more attractive, just as the development of new communication technologies made them more accessible. The changing relationship of government and religion is another significant factor. Whether we examine the gradual de-linkage of government and Christianity in North America and Western Europe or the sudden collapse of the Soviet Communist state with its antireligious policies, the withdrawal of government authorities from an active role in religious affairs has

made it possible for citizens in most modern countries to participate in Pagan religious activities and communities without fearing the persecution and reprisals of times past. It will be seen that these factors apply differently to the various modern countries of North America and Europe, with accordingly divergent results.

What Next? Speculations on the Future of Paganism

Though the Pagan religions of Europe have their origins in much earlier times, modern Pagan revival movements are generally children of the twentieth century, at least in the sense of their modern names and organizations. To conclude this introductory chapter, it is worth offering some thoughts on the possible future of these new/old religious movements as they move forward into the unpredictable conditions of the twenty-first century.

Just as the original Paganism of Europe was suppressed by the ascendant religion of Christianity, so does it seem that the Pagan revival of modern times will continue to be affected by the attitude and power of the various Christian churches. As remarked earlier, Christianity is declining in popularity in much of Europe but experiencing renewed growth in the United States. From this divergence, we can hypothesize that Neopagan religions will likely enjoy increasing acceptance as one form of religion among others in Europe, as well as in Canada, while continuing to experience resistance and reprisals in the United States, particularly in American communities dominated by Fundamentalist and Evangelical forms of Christianity.

It can also be expected that international communication and cooperation through the Internet and other means will play a significant role in determining the position and status of Pagan religion in relation to Christianity. As Pagan religious associations become more established in Europe—as, for example, in Denmark, where as of November 2003, Nordic Paganism was granted official status with full legal rights to perform marriages and other ceremonies (Olsen 2003)—they will be in a strong position to offer assistance to embattled Pagans in the United States struggling to preserve their communities against conservative Christian churches or other bodies seeking to suppress their activities and organizations. The reverse situation may apply in Europe, where Christian groups attempting to resist the growth of Pagan organizations may turn to American churches for support. In Russia, where post-Communist government authorities have shown increasing favoritism toward the Russian Orthodox Church, it is possible that modern Pagans will face increasing resistance from government agencies.

Within particular Pagan communities, any marked growth in membership is likely to place serious strains on organizational structures. Modern Pagans have proven resistant to centralized leadership and organization, with a preference for small, local, or regional units and a tendency to split into still smaller factions when disputes and personality conflicts arise. Whether increasing numbers of Pagans would mean larger membership for existing organizations or an unending proliferation of smaller splinter groups is difficult to judge. It may be that much will depend on the quality of leadership offered by particular individuals and their ability to sway others to cooperate with the visions and programs they articulate. Alternately, decentralized, cooperative organizational structures, which eschew the dominance of individual leaders, may prove of critical importance for the future of Paganism. In the Pagan organizations and associations cataloged in this volume, evidence of both styles of leadership can be found.

The Reconstructionist and Eclectic forms of modern Paganism are likely to remain distinct, viable, and separate options, insofar as they answer to the varying needs of people in different regions for community, identity, and spiritual meaning. Wicca has thus far attained the largest popularity of all forms of Paganism, and the times ahead will tell whether it will retain this dominant position. Among Reconstructionist Pagan communities, there are many tales of members who turned to this type of Paganism after an earlier involvement with Wicca. They report feeling the need for a religious community more solidly grounded in the past religious traditions of a particular time, place, and people, which propelled them to seek out a more ethnically based form of Reconstructionist Paganism. Whether this will prove a continuing or increasing trend remains to be seen and will tell something about whether people of the twenty-first century feel a greater need for a broad, universal, and de-ethnicized framework of spiritual meaning, as in Wicca, or for religious meaning packaged together with ethnic identity, as is offered in Reconstructionist Paganism.

As societies worldwide, including the formerly closed nations of Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe and the once homogeneous peoples of Scandinavia, become more ethnically diverse through increased travel, immigration, marriage, and other forms of interaction with peoples of other regions, ethnically oriented, Reconstructionist Pagans will face a huge challenge. They will have to decide whether to reinterpret ethnicity to allow immigrants, non-Caucasians, mixed-race persons, and other people of formerly distant national, linguistic, and racial backgrounds to join in their brand of Paganism or to develop modern Paganism as a last bastion of ethnic purity against the “barbarian hordes” of immigrants and others. Both tendencies can even now be observed, with intense debates raging on the Internet websites of Asatru groups and others.

For the majority of modern Pagans who are either Europeans or descendants of European immigrants, the motivations for becoming involved with Paganism range from a desire to reclaim ancestral traditions from the cobwebs of fading familial memories to a wish to identify themselves with past ethnic and spiritual traditions they find personally meaningful, from an inspiration to blend the spiritual components of European ethnic heritage with insights and practices gleaned from other religious traditions to an intention to manipulate traditional symbols and beliefs for political purposes. The chapters that follow give insight into how a variety of contemporary Pagan communities are addressing these issues, within their particular social and historical contexts.

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Chapter Two

Italian American Stregheria and Wicca: Ethnic Ambivalence in American Neopaganism

SABINA MAGLIOCCO

Italian American Witchcraft, or *Stregheria*, is one of a number of ethnic varieties of Neopagan Witchcraft to have emerged in the United States during the late twentieth century. Like other forms of revival Witchcraft, Stregheria is based on the premise that Witchcraft was an ancient, pre-Christian religion based on the natural cycle of the seasons and the worship of a goddess that survived in the folklore of European peasants. *Streghe* (practitioners of Stregheria; the singular form is *Strega*) see the natural world as sacred, divinity as immanent in nature, and the cycles of nature as metaphors for spiritual processes. The structure of Stregheria is similar to that of Wicca and its derivative variants: members worship in small groups led by a priestess and priest; the divine is perceived as having both feminine and masculine aspects; worship is centered on ecstatic union with the deities; magic is a fundamental part of worship; and meetings take place on full moons, solstices, equinoxes, and cross-quarter days—the days that fall roughly between each solstice and equinox. The unique practices of Streghe that distinguish them from other Neopagan Witches will be described in greater detail.

In this chapter, the term *Neopagan* refers to any of a number of modern religions that draw inspiration from pre-Christian forms of worship. Many practitioners of these religions prefer to call themselves by the term *Pagan*, eliding the distinctions between ancient religions and their modern revivals; some believe that the prefix *neo* invalidates revival Paganism and other new

religions. As this chapter will demonstrate, however, revival and reclamation are integral to the process of tradition itself and are often responsible for the preservation of materials that would otherwise be lost. Distinguishing between pre-Christian paganisms and their modern revivals is meant not to delegitimize Neopaganism but to draw attention to the process of revival itself, which is clearly observable in the case of Italian American Witchcraft. *Neopagan* and *Pagan* will be used interchangeably in this chapter to refer to the modern movements; *pagan* will be used to indicate historical religions. In the same vein, *Witchcraft* will denote Neopagan revival Witchcraft, whereas *witch*, *witchcraft*, and *strega* will indicate folkloric, historical, or anthropological concepts. *Wicca* will be used to refer only to British traditional Craft as presented by Gerald B. Gardner and his followers.

The roots of Stregheria are entwined with those of Wicca, the first form of Neopagan Witchcraft to be described in print by Gardner in *Witchcraft Today* (1954). Although Gardnerian Wicca served as a template for all other varieties of the religion, one of Wicca's most important sources was also central to the development of Stregheria. *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* (1890), the work of amateur folklorist Charles G. Leland, is a collection of spells, rhymes, and legends that Leland claimed to have collected from a Florentine fortune-teller he called Maddalena. According to Leland, Maddalena belonged to a family of witches who practiced a form of pagan religion centered on the worship of the moon goddess Diana and her consort, Lucifer. Lucifer, whose name means "bearer of light," is not the conventional Christian devil in this narrative but both the brother and lover of Diana. Together, they have a daughter, Aradia, who descends to earth to teach the peasants to resist the tyranny of their oppressors through sorcery. Through Aradia, Diana instructs the witches to gather in the woods when the moon is full and hold a witches' supper of moon-shaped cakes made of meal, salt, and honey. There, they feast, sing, and, as a sign that they are free from the restrictions of social class, dance naked in the worship of Diana.

The *Gospel of the Witches* also contains a number of spells used to summon Diana's help. Many of these aim to dispel bad luck or the evil eye or to bring good luck in special enterprises. In tone, these spells emphasize a clientistic relationship between Diana and her followers: the deity is threatened if she does not help fulfill the supplicant's prayers. Though this relationship may be shocking to contemporary Pagans, who prefer a bond of equality and collaboration between worshippers and their deities, it was not out of character for nineteenth-century Italian peasants. It reproduced the character of many social relationships of the time between wealthy and powerful individuals and their poorer clients. Similar types of relationships can be found today in rural Italy between Catholics and local saints, who



*Statue of Diana, the huntress, in the garden at the Villa Rizzardi, in Bardolino, Italy.
The garden was created by Luigi Trezza from 1783 to 1791 for Count Adriano Rizzardi.
(Edifice/Corbis)*

may be venerated when things are good and threatened or punished when they do not deliver what their devotees want or expect. For example, in rural Sardinia, statues of the local saint may be brought out of the church at the end of the dry season, where locals pray to them to bring much-needed rains. If enough time goes by without any rain, though, villagers may get angry and decide to punish the recalcitrant saint by putting the statues upside down in a well.

Leland interpreted the spells and the legends he collected according to popular folklore theories of the late nineteenth century: as survivals of the pagan religion of the ancient Romans or the Etruscans, a people whose civilization dominated central Italy before the rise of Rome. According to his claims, late nineteenth-century Italian witches continued to practice this form of paganism, which he dubbed *la vecchia religione* (the old religion). Leland's work provoked controversy from the time of its publication. Because nothing quite like it has ever been documented by Italian ethnologists, it was widely believed to be a fake. Leland was suspected of having invented its contents himself, and some even supposed that Maddalena was another of Leland's fabrications. Those who were willing to accept her existence believed that she had concocted material to satisfy her patron's peculiar interests and tastes, as Leland never hid the fact that he paid her for information. Historian Robert Mathiesen has discovered evidence that Maddalena was a pseudonym for a real woman, a Florentine courtesan and popular psychic whom Leland frequently visited during his stay in Florence in the late 1890s (Mathiesen 1998). He has proposed that *Aradia* should be interpreted as a dialogic and intersubjective text—a product of the close interaction between Leland and Maddalena, during which Maddalena selected and reinterpreted the parts of her folklore that most interested her wealthy patron in ways she knew would keep him spellbound. The result was a document that incorporated many elements of folklore but strung them together in unusual ways, giving them a unique and atypical interpretation.

Despite the controversies surrounding it, Leland's *Aradia* remains one of the most important texts of the witchcraft revival movement. Its contributions to modern Neopagan Witchcraft include specific practices (full moon meetings; the goddess name of Aradia; the practice of naked worship, adopted by Gardnerian and other British traditional Craft; and the Charge of the Goddess, later rewritten by Doreen Valiente), as well as the concept of witchcraft as a form of peasant resistance and cultural critique.

For Italian American Neopagans, the most important contribution of Leland's *Aradia* is its location of an ancient goddess-worshipping religion in the heart of Italy. Its inclusion of a number of items of folklore drawn directly from the Italian tradition—for example, spells against the evil eye,

the blessing of the flour before making bread, and children's rhymes—allowed Italian Americans who read it to interpret their own family traditions as part of an ancient pagan religion, a form of goddess worship, and a tactic of resistance against church and state oppression. As Neopagan Witchcraft diffused throughout North America during the 1960s and 1970s, Italian Americans began to reclaim and rework Leland's material.

One of the first authors to openly identify as an Italian American Witch was Leo Louis Martello (1932?–2000). A first-generation Sicilian American, he wrote several esoteric books—*Weird Ways of Witchcraft* (1972), *Black Magic, Satanism and Voodoo* (1973), and *Witchcraft, the Old Religion* (1975)—in which he recounted how he was initiated into a family tradition of witchcraft on reaching puberty and sworn to secrecy by means of a blood oath. Although the secret nature of his family's magical practice made it impossible for him to reveal all its characteristics, he described it as a remnant of Sicily's cult of Demeter and Persephone, preserved under the guise of Marian worship (the worship of Mary, mother of Jesus) in the Catholic Church. In fact, he claimed that Sicilian families concealed their pagan religion under the guise of devotion to the Virgin Mary, whom they interpreted as simply another version of the goddess Demeter. Martello portrayed a number of Italian folk traditions as traditions specific to witches. For example, he maintained that the *mano fica* gesture, in which the thumb is held between the first and second fingers in a fist, was used by witches to turn away evil spells. In this interesting interpretation of popular tradition, a gesture widely used to avert witchcraft and the evil eye is interpreted as a form of magic unique to Italian witch families. Italian Americans reading Martello could easily be led to believe that the presence of the gesture in their family folklore was evidence of their belonging to an ancient pagan religion—*la vecchia religione*.

Martello drew a number of motifs from Italian folklore and popular culture into his narrative, weaving a web that tied together elements from different Italian regions and historical periods. He cited historian Carlo Ginzburg's research on the *benandanti*, a group of seventeenth-century Friulian peasants who told inquisitors they traveled at night in spirit to fight evil witches over the fertility of the crops. He presented legends about Neapolitan witches, known as *janare*, who gathered around the walnut tree at Benevento for their sabbat frolics, connecting them with reports about the continuing worship of Diana through the linguistic link between *Diana* and the Neapolitan dialect word *janara*. Perhaps his most surprising claim was his assertion that the Mafia was linked to the Old Religion. He explained the origin of the word *mafia* as a combination of the Latin words *mater* (mother) and *filia* (daughter) or *fidelitas* (faith)—meaning “mother and daughter” (Demeter and Persephone) or “mother faith” (that is,

goddess worship). Martello's description of his family's magical tradition as linked with secrecy, blood oaths, honor, and vendetta drew heavily on popular stereotypes of Italian organized crime, perhaps in an attempt to reclaim and revalue this negative stereotype by linking it to a positive tradition of peasant resistance and goddess worship.

Martello's work influenced a number of other Italian American spiritual practitioners, among them Lori Bruno, who grew up in a New York Italian neighborhood in the 1940s and 1950s. Bruno believes she is descended from relatives of apostate monk Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake for heresy in 1600, and counts among her ancestors a healer executed in Catania for lancing the swellings of patients afflicted with bubonic plague. Bruno's mother and grandmother practiced midwifery, herbal healing, the removal of the evil eye, the cutting away of illness using a special knife, and divination. As in many Italian families, healing prayers and techniques were secret and transmitted only to other family members. When Bruno came of age, she inherited the tradition from her mother and grandmother. Her tradition seems to involve a form of trance or altered consciousness, during which the healer communicates directly with spirits or deities. In an August 2000 interview, she explained, "My parents told me, 'When you need to leave [your body], it will happen.' And when they touch us, we feel them with a warmth that fills your whole body. And we walk with them—we walk with the gods." She described how she healed her own grandchild, who was born with a heart defect, by calling on Apollo, the Greek god of healing, and Asclepius, the ancient Greek physician.

Martello and Bruno cofounded the earliest known Italian American coven in the United States: the Trinacrian Rose Coven of New York City. In this group, Wiccan traditions are given an Italian flavor through the use of Mediterranean deities and sabbat names. Membership is not limited to Italian Americans; according to Bruno, ethnicity is not important in determining membership. "I cannot make a Strega," she said. "Do you know who makes the Strega? It is the gods and goddesses—the hand that touches you that causes the quickening, that wakes your memories of a different life" (Interview with Lori Bruno, August 2000). So, though individuals of any ancestry can be initiated into the Trinacrian Rose after an appropriate period of study, Bruno maintains the Old World belief that a certain part of magical ability is inborn.

Martello and Bruno were key figures in the development of an Italian American Witchcraft, but the creator of what today is called Stregheria is Raven Grimassi. Grimassi's father was American (Grimassi is a pen name); his mother came from the region of Campania, outside Naples. She belonged to a family whose members practiced a number of magical traditions, including the removal of the evil eye, the making of medicinal



A television still from the HBO series The Sopranos. The series focuses on the lives of the mafia living in the United States: their families, friendships, enemies, and the culture that surrounds them. (HBO/The Kobal Collection)

liqueurs and oils, and divination. She was also a teller of tales and legends, some of which she passed on to her son. In one folktale, the moon is impregnated by her lover, the morning star, whose name in this story is Lucino or Lucifero, recalling Leland's tale of the moon goddess and her lover, Lucifer. Grimassi was also close to his mother's sister, another active bearer of the family healing tradition; this aunt initiated him into the tradition when he reached adolescence. Like the traditions described by Martello, Bruno, and a number of Italian ethnologists, it consisted of a set of secret teachings limited to family members, passed on only to those who were felt to have some innate magical ability and interest. But it is not this tradition that Grimassi has written about in his works *The Ways of the Strega* (1995), *Hereditary Witchcraft* (1999), and *Italian Witchcraft* (2000), all published by Llewellyn, a popular New Age publisher. Instead, he has presented a religion similar to Wicca in structure and practice, with Italian flavor added through the names of deities, spirits, and sabbats. One early commentator jokingly called it "Wicca á la Florentine." Stregheria is allegedly based on the teachings of Aradia, who, according to Grimassi's expansion of Leland's legend, was born in Volterra, Italy, sometime during the thirteenth century. She was raised by a family of Witches and began to spread her

gospel of peasant resistance through the practice of the Old Religion. Grimassi presents Italian Witchcraft as divided into three clans: the Fanarra of northern Italy and the Janarra and Tanarra of central Italy. No mention is made of southern Italy, despite the fact that the majority of Italian immigrants to North America, including Grimassi's mother, originated there. Grimassi explains this tripartite structure as the result of the travels of Aradia's twelve disciples, who, after her disappearance, dispersed into groups to spread her teachings through Italy. Each tradition is directed by a leader known as a *Grimas*. Like the names of the three Strega clans, the word *Grimas* does not occur in Italian or in any of its dialects.

A number of factors impinge on his decision not to reveal family folk practices in his writings. In part, it is out of respect for his promise not to reveal the secrets of the tradition outside the family. This is reinforced by a belief that once a person passes on magical knowledge, his or her own healing powers are lost. Yet, on another level, Grimassi wants to preserve his family's magical tradition and share it with the world. Nevertheless, he is also aware that many aspects of what was a rural peasant system of practice and belief do not translate well into the lives of twenty-first-century Americans. For example, he has described a cure that involves a classic instance of contagious magic, or the idea that qualities can be transferred from one object to another merely by touch. To cure illness, one should rub the body all over with a piece of animal fat or lard and then discard the fat by throwing it into the ocean or burying it. The illness, which has been magically "transferred" to the fat, will disappear. But he has pointed out that modern Neopagans "are grossed out by this . . . They'd say, 'I'm vegan; can I use broccoli instead? Can I use tofu?'" (Interview with Raven Grimassi, August 2000). The idea of rubbing raw meat or fat all over the body is not part of the ethos of contemporary Neopagans, for whom belief in the sacredness of nature extends to all life-forms and can lead to becoming vegetarian. Other aspects of Grimassi's family tradition involve music and dance steps that are only incompletely remembered or practices that are deeply grounded in agricultural life and cannot be replicated by urban and suburban dwellers. Rather than risk revealing a tradition that, out of context, makes little sense and might easily be misunderstood, Grimassi has chosen instead to elaborate on certain aspects of his tradition using existing Neopagan and Wiccan sources, such as Leland and Gardner, as well as scholarship on Italian folklore, to reconstruct the missing historical and ethnographic background. When he cannot reconstruct, he creates new traditions to replace what has been lost or cannot be revealed.

Stregheria contains certain elements that bear some relation to Italian folk customs; for example, in *The Ways of the Strega* and *Hereditary Witch-*

craft, Grimassi has given examples of prayers to Saint Anthony to retrieve lost objects, to Saint Peter and Saint Blaise to bless a holy stone as a talisman, and to various saints to cure the evil eye. His “Nanta Bag,” a small pouch containing sacred objects worn around the neck with a cord, is similar to the Italian tradition of *brevi*, tiny bags containing herbs and sacred images worn on the body for protection, a tradition that can be traced to ancient Roman practice. He describes divination by reading the shapes made by olive oil dropped into a plate of water, as well as by the use of cards. These practices are widespread in rural Italy and have many analogues in collections of Italian and Italian American folklore. However, the framework into which these practices are inserted is that of Neopagan Witchcraft.

Other aspects of Stregheria are culled from historical and ethnographic sources. Leland’s *Aradia* is the inspiration for many aspects of the religion, from the focus on Diana and her consort to the name of the prophet herself. Because of Leland’s fascination with Etruria and his tendency to postulate an Etruscan source for almost any non-Roman element in the folklore he collected, Grimassi’s Stregheria is also heavy on Etruscan elements. He borrows from Leland’s *Etruscan Roman Remains* (1892) the Etruscan names of the deities (Uni and Tagni) and the emphasis on ancestor spirits, or *lasa*. He uses the Etruscan alphabet as a secret, magical system of Strega writing, to which he adds a number of glyphs of his own invention. The work of historian Carlo Ginzburg on both the benandanti, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Friulian agrarian cult, and the legends of the Society of Diana, groups of women who traveled in spirit under the protection of a supernatural female leader, variously called Diana, Herodias, and many other names, is interpreted as evidence of the widespread existence of Stregheria in medieval and early modern Italy. Many elements of contemporary Italian folklore, such as the Befana, a good witch who brings children gifts on January 6, are reinterpreted in Grimassi’s books as part of the Strega tradition. From folklorist Alessandro Falassi’s *Folklore by the Fireside* (1980), Grimassi borrows the concept of the *veglia*, or an evening gathering during which various genres of folklore are performed; he presents it as a practice unique to witch families. He even adapts spells from contemporary collections of Italian American folklore, reinterpreting them as unique Strega practices.

Grimassi never claims to be reproducing exactly what was practiced in Italy. His genius is creative, rather than scholarly: in his writings, he has admitted that Streghe have “adapted a few Wiccan elements into their ways” (Grimassi 1995, xviii) and acknowledged that he is expanding on his own family tradition, adding elements to it to restore it to what he imagines was its original state. But from his attempts to restore a tradition, a brand-new

tradition has emerged—one that bears little resemblance to anything that was practiced in Italy or in Italian American ethnic communities.

In form and structure, Stregheria is similar to Wicca and other traditions of revival Witchcraft. The basic unit of worship is the *boschetto* (grove), a small group led by a priestess and priest. Streghe worship a goddess and god, variously called Diana and Dianus, Uni and Tagni, Tana and Tanus, Fana and Fanus, or Jana and Janus, and interpreted as versions of the moon goddess and her brother/consort as described by Leland. The ancestor spirits, called *lares* or *lasa*, also figure prominently in this tradition and are honored during the October 31 sabbat, *la festa dell'ombra* (the feast of the shadow). The other sabbats also follow the Wiccan year cycle and include *la festa dell'inverno* (the winter feast, December 21), *la festa di Lupercus* (the feast of Lupercus, February 2), *l'equinozio della primavera* (the spring equinox, March 21), *la giornata di Diana* (Diana's day, May 1), *la festa dell'estate* (the summer feast, June 21), and *l'equinozio d'autunno* (the fall equinox, September 21). Some of these sabbats have a slightly different emphasis in Stregheria than in mainline Wicca: for instance, although many Wiccans honor the goddess Brigid on February 2, Streghe dedicate this feast to Lupercus, whom the ancient Romans celebrated in February during the Lupercalia, a festival of purification. And May 1 in Stregheria is dedicated to the goddess Diana, whereas many Wiccans celebrate the union of the goddess and the god on this sabbat, to which they give the Irish name of Beltane. Like Wiccans, Streghe also observe the new and full moons and have special rites for initiations, weddings, child blessings, and funerals. These rituals are similar to those of revival Witchcraft in its various forms: worship takes place in a circle, which is consecrated at the beginning of the ritual; Streghe invoke the deities and protectors of the four directions (whom they call *Grigori*); their main goal is to achieve union with the divine through a variety of techniques to shift consciousness; and they generally end with a shared feast of cakes and wine. In addition to worshipping a goddess and god, many Streghe also recognize the existence of other spirits, such as *silvani*, *linchetti*, and *folletti*, similar to fairies in Italian folk tradition.

Because Stregheria contains some elements of folklore that are part of the Italian American experience, it is relatively easy for Italian Americans to interpret ethnic folk practices as signs that their families preserved an ancient pre-Christian religion. An individual whose family preserved gestures or charms against the evil eye, for example, might conclude from Grimassi's writings that the family practiced some form of Stregheria. Even overtly Catholic elements are reinterpreted in this way. In an interview, Grimassi stated that his family had a *lararium*, a shrine to the ancestors in the tradition of the Roman practice of ancestor worship. When

asked for further details, he described a shelf where photographs of dead relatives were displayed, along with an image of the Virgin Mary. There, his mother would light candles and occasionally leave a small vase of flowers. This display is typical of that in many Italian and Italian American homes, but very few practitioners would interpret it as a form of ancestor worship. Most see it as a way to maintain an emotional link with their dearly departed within a larger framework of Catholic worship, in which the souls of the dead are entrusted to God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints, and relatives offer prayers for their salvation. Modern Streghe, by contrast, interpret folk practices in their families as signs that they are heirs to an ancient, pre-Christian, Mediterranean religion. The overtly Christian elements are explained as a cover that allowed paganism to persist in the face of Christianity; they are erased to unearth the underlying “original,” pagan forms.

Fabrisia, a hereditary Strega who maintains a website on her religion, described her grandmother’s practices:

My grandmother Adelina . . . had the “obligatory” Catholic statues. I remember [she] had a wonderful herb garden, and on one side of it was a statue of the Virgin Mary. When she cut herbs or worked in the garden, she always turned the statue away from her work . . . I remember [her] working potions and charms, always *in Italiano*, so I only got bits and pieces of what [she] was doing. When my grandmother passed over in 1963, there was no Catholic “thing,” only a simple ritual at her home. Her athame [ritual knife] was buried with her along with a variety of stones to “help her on the way.” She was buried in the cemetery and flowers were strewn over her grave. I was only eight years old and “knew” this was different. (E-mail correspondence to the author, July 2000)

The practices Fabrisia described are very much in keeping with an Italian peasant tradition. They are not the complex ritual worship of Wiccans but the growing of herbs, the making of curative liqueurs, and the recitation of healing prayers and charms. She now sees these as conscious acts of resistance and preservation, under the guise of conforming to appearances of Catholicism. She elaborated further in the story of her grandfather:

My grandfather Primo was a caretaker at a Catholic church. What a way to stay hidden. Primo’s father Luigi was also a caretaker at this same church. Luigi’s brother Salvatore was a priest and worked closely with many popes . . . According to family “tales,” many who attended this church were of The Ways [practiced a pagan religion]. Since my dad won’t discuss this, I am at a loss to know for sure. (E-mail correspondence to the author, July 2000)

Here, her family's religious activities are interpreted as paganism hiding under the very noses of the Catholic clergy, including the pope himself. Although she first said that according to family stories, her relatives practiced a pagan religion, she later added that her father refused to discuss it with her. Fabrisia interpreted his silence as evidence of her family's involvement with *la vecchia religione*.

Although Streghe have a tendency to interpret the presence of any folk elements in their family's heritage as evidence that they have preserved an ancient pagan religion, folklorists, anthropologists, and historians see Stregheria as an example of "invented tradition." This concept, coined by historian Eric Hobsbawm (1983), referred originally to traditions developed by would-be European nations during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a period of great social change and nation building in the West, as part of the process of state formation. Anthropologists and folklorists have adapted the concept, applying it to other groups that develop or adapt customs in an attempt to create identities for themselves, usually in contrast to a dominant culture. Scholars understand the revival, revitalization, and invention of new traditions as an integral part of the process of tradition. In the case of ethnic groups living within a majority culture, it is part of the process of identity creation and maintenance that characterizes globalizing multicultural societies. Thus, Stregheria should not be interpreted as an inauthentic religion or an attempt to market "fakelore" but as part of the process through which ethnic groups reinterpret and reclaim memory, ultimately maintaining traditions. The construction of ethnic identity—and its interpretation of memory—can vary greatly from one individual to the next and from one generation to another. Stregheria is simply one of the latest iterations of this expression among Italian Americans.

Although they now recognize that authenticity is always culturally constructed, scholars distinguish between invented and reclaimed traditions, on one hand, and those that are clearly linked to Old World practices and worldviews. Ethnic studies scholar Robert Klymasz (1973) identified three layers of folklore present in each ethnic community: the traditional, which has changed little from its old country form; the transitional, in which some old elements are crystallizing while others are disappearing and being replaced by new adaptations; and the innovational, which often revives or replaces forms that have been forgotten or that never existed in the first place. The development of innovational folklore is part of the process of ethnic adaptation, acculturation, and identity creation and is common to nearly all ethnic groups. The existence of family healing traditions among Italian Americans belongs to the traditional layer, but Stregheria as a Neopagan religion is clearly innovational.

Historical Roots

Despite its status as an invented tradition, Stregheria has roots in the history and folklore of Italy. The word *strega*, meaning “witch,” comes from the Latin word *strix*, which referred both to witches and the owls they were believed to change into on their night flights. There is ample evidence that the ancient Romans both believed in and practiced sorcery, and the goddess Diana, along with her counterpart Hecate, was thought to preside over their activities. The poet Horace, writing about the witch Canidia, had her invoke “night and Diana, ye faithful witnesses of all my enterprises” (Horace, Epode 5, vv. 49–54). One form of Roman sorcery consisted of making *defixionum tabellae*, lead tablets inscribed with the names of enemies whom sorcerers wished to entrust to the gods of the Otherworld to ensure their demise. These tablets were pierced with nails and thrown into wells and ditches, where today’s archaeologists sometimes discover them. Spells that cursed enemies by piercing objects with nails or pins could still be collected in Italy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Leland’s “Conjuration of Lemon and Pins” (1990, 29–32) is typical of these and similar to one collected in Sicily by the great Italian folklore collector Giuseppe Pitré: to make an enemy fall ill, take a lemon or an orange to midnight mass on Christmas Eve; at the moment of the Eucharist, pierce it with pins while reciting, “As many pins as I stick in this orange, may so many ills befall you.” The fruit is then thrown into a well or cistern (Pitré, cited in Di Nola 1993, 49, translation by the author).

It was not only witches who worshipped Diana in ancient times. Because she was the patroness of childbirth, she was also venerated by women, who would gather around the lake of Nemi on the calends of August to celebrate a festival in her honor. Since the rites of Diana were women’s mysteries and closed to outsiders, no written record has survived of the activities there, but archaeologists have found many votive offerings in the area. Figures shaped like uteri and statuettes of mother and child, tablets beseeching the goddess’s aid, and statuettes of horned stags representing Actaeon, the youth whose lust Diana punished by transforming him into a stag, are part of the archaeological record. These objects leave tantalizing clues to what might have been a predecessor of today’s Neopagan religions.

It is not clear how long the mysteries of Diana continued to be practiced in Italy after the advent of Christianity, but during the Middle Ages, the name of the goddess resurfaced, this time in the encyclicals of clerics, where it was joined with the name of Herodias, one of the wickedest women in the New Testament and a possible linguistic source for the name Aradia. Between the ninth and the twelfth centuries CE, numerous writings by church officials lamented popular beliefs in legends about “Diana, the

pagan goddess, or Herodias,” whom some women claimed to follow on nightly spiritual journeys (Bonomo 1959, 18). According to the ninth-century *Canon Episcopi*, the most famous of these documents, some women professed to ride out at night on the backs of animals, following their mistress Herodias or Diana, who called them to service periodically (Caro Baroja 1961, 62). But who was Herodias, and what was her connection to Diana?

Herodias first appears in the Gospel of Matthew as the wife of King Herod's brother. She developed such a dislike for John the Baptist that she insisted Herod arrest him when he came into his kingdom, and she persuaded her daughter, Salome, to dance for Herod and then ask for the head of the prophet in return for her favors (Matthew 14:3–12). According to an early Christian legend, when Salome saw the head of John the Baptist brought before her on a platter, she was seized with remorse and began to wail and regret her sinful request. Then a powerful wind issued from the saint's mouth, so strong that it blew the wicked dancer into the air, where she was condemned to wander forever as punishment (Cattabiani 1994, 208). In Roman usage, the women of a household were commonly known by the name of the male head of the household, so it is easy to see how Salome and her mother, Herodias, might have merged in popular legend until it became Herodias who flew through the air on nightly journeys. In Italian, Herodias is known as Erodiade, which is linguistically similar to Aradia. Leland, in fact, equated the two in the *Gospel of the Witches*. Herodias may have become linked with Diana through a third character, the goddess Hecate, with whom Diana was often conflated. Hecate ruled over the Otherworld and was said to ride at the head of the procession of the unquiet dead on their nightly raids. Like Diana, Hecate protected witches and sorcerers in their magical work and was most active at night. Through the common motif of nightly flights, the figures of Hecate/Diana and Herodias became linked during late antiquity or the early medieval period, and additional motifs became a part of the emerging legend complex: the practice of witchcraft; a connection with the moon; the presence of other spirits (for example, spirits of the dead); and gatherings of women that included feasting, dancing, and sexual license. It was these legends that disturbed the Christian clerics in the ninth and tenth centuries and that became part of a growing body of folklore in the area of northern Italy, southern Germany, and the western Balkans.

The view of the *Canon Episcopi* was that the legends of Diana and Herodias were false and that women who believed they rode out with these figures were deluded and in need of religious education. But over the next two centuries, this point of view slowly changed, until by the twelfth century writers began to portray the nighttime journeys as though they had actually

occurred. As the Inquisition grew stronger, women were arrested for claiming that they had ridden out with Diana, Herodias, and other supernatural women whose names varied according to region and dialect. In a series of trials in Milan during the late 1300s, several women, most of them folk healers of some sort, confessed to going out at night to the “games of Erodiade.” Participants in the gatherings would slaughter and feast on livestock, which Erodiade, the leader of the assembly, would magically bring back to life at the end of the evening. They would visit the homes of the wealthy, where they would eat and drink as much as they wished; these provisions too would magically regenerate by morning. The assembly blessed homes that were clean and neat. The leader would instruct her followers in healing and divination techniques and answer their questions about illnesses and thefts. But all the assembled were sworn to secrecy. To attend the gathering, Pierina de Bugatis, one of the accused, would summon a spirit called Lucifelus, who appeared in the form of a man to take her.

These tales puzzled the judges who presided over the trials. In the early phases, the accused were imprisoned for having believed and repeated false stories, but by the late 1390s popular opinion had shifted, and the accused were executed for having actually participated in the assemblies, an act the judges considered heretical. It is unclear whether anything like the nighttime assemblies and feasts ever took place in reality. Many of the experiences of the accused suggest events that could only have taken place in dreams, fantasies, or trance states: the night flights, magically regenerating livestock, and the granting of wishes are clearly fantastic in nature. Other features of the assemblies, however, suggest that some aspects actually could have taken place. All of the accused who reported these tales were folk healers and diviners. The tales were remarkably similar, and they were not obtained under torture. A key function of the nighttime assemblies was obtaining answers to divinatory questions and information about healing. These features are very similar to those of other belief systems involving healing, spiritual journeys, and supernatural beings from the area around the Mediterranean, including Greece, North Africa, southern Italy and Sardinia, and the Balkans. In many of these examples, ethnographers have documented the existence of healing societies that convened in the flesh to play music, dance ecstatically, and perform healing ceremonies (DeMartino 1961; Gallini 1988). In other cases, the societies existed only in spirit and included spiritual members such as fairies, *jinn*, or *iele* (Henningsen 1993; Crapanzano 1975; Kligman 1981). But each of these cases involved complex belief systems in which healers cured illnesses caused by spiritual beings by communing on some level with the spirits themselves. It is not impossible to imagine that the accused in the Milan trials may have belonged to a similar kind of society of folk healers.

In sixteenth-century Friuli, another example of pagan material surfaced through the witch trials. Historian Carlo Ginzburg studied trial records in which numerous men claimed to be *benandanti*, literally “good walkers,” who traveled at night in spirit to fight against the *stregoni* (wizards) for the fertility of the crops. Once again, the judges in these cases were mystified by the strange reports and tried to make them fit into what by then had become the standard template of diabolical witchcraft: the witches’ sabbat, consisting of a Black Mass (a parody of the Catholic mass), acts of cannibalism and sexual perversion, and a pact of allegiance to the devil (Ginzburg 1966). This case demonstrates how material from the dominant discourse—in this instance, the subversion myth of diabolical witchcraft that had developed among the European elites in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries—imposed itself on the folk belief systems of common people, erasing the native interpretation and forcing its own onto the narratives despite the rather poor fit. It also shows that for early modern Italian peasants, a witch—a *strega*—was a wholly negative figure, linked, by then, with the Christian devil and the myth of the diabolical pact. Both sets of trials illustrate that pre-Christian beliefs existed in Italy well into the medieval and early modern period. But in neither of these cases were the accused describing the survival of a pagan religion as cultural system. Rather, bits and pieces of earlier belief systems merged with other elements of folklore and acquired a Christian veneer.

But could an ancient pre-Christian religion involving the veneration of Diana have survived in Italian peasant tradition, only to be brought to North America by Italian immigrants? The lack of written evidence makes any answer to this question hypothetical at best, but from the historical record, such a scenario would be very unlikely. Three factors make the survival of a pagan religion in Italy into the twentieth century and its transmission through written documents such as Leland’s *Aradia* improbable: the strong presence of Christianity throughout the peninsula from fairly early after the fall of the Roman Empire; the lack of a unified Italian culture and language until the late nineteenth century; and the relative isolation and lack of resources of the peasant classes, the very ones who are said to have preserved the religion, according to the Neopagan mythos.

Because Italy was at the very heart of the Roman Empire, Christianity spread quickly after the Emperor Constantine’s conversion in 415 CE and thoroughly penetrated every part of the peninsula. In fact, it can be argued that during a long era of separation, Christianity was the single most powerful unifying force in the Italian peninsula. This is not to say, however, that pre-Christian beliefs and magical practices did not persist because they clearly did—some well into the twentieth century. However, these practices were inserted into a Christianized context, with saints taking the place of

earlier goddesses and gods and Christian prayers substituting for pagan charms and spells. A clear example of this involves the use of moon-shaped charms to cure epilepsy. This neurological illness was thought to be a gift or curse from the gods in the ancient world, and it was believed to be linked to the phases of the moon. Ancient amulets against epilepsy survive in the archaeological record; these depict a crescent moon and the goddess Diana, sometimes accompanied by a frog, which was also a lunar symbol. Similar amulets featuring the crescent moon and the figure of a male saint exist going back to the eighteenth century. These charms, also said to protect the wearer against epilepsy, are dedicated to Saint Valentine in the north of Italy and Saint Donato in the south. In this case, the *form* of the amulet (crescent moon plus powerful supernatural figure) has remained the same, as has the *belief* in its efficacy (wear this and the powerful supernatural will keep epilepsy away), but the *nature* of the supernatural being and the *context* in which the amulet and the belief exist have changed from a pagan one to a Christian one. Italians wearing an amulet of Saint Donato or Saint Valentine would not perceive themselves as worshippers of Diana but as good Christians turning to the saints for protection.

What of claims that some families hid their practice of the old pagan religion under the very noses of the Catholic clergy? This interpretation may result from an oversimplification of the complex relationship between official and folk Catholicism in Italy. Despite the Church's strong historical presence in the peninsula (or perhaps because of it), Italians have traditionally had mixed feelings about it. The Church was often allied with the elite classes and the state; this caused many nonelites to be suspicious of its motives and to see it as complicit in their economic and cultural oppression. In addition, the ethos of male dominance present throughout the Mediterranean led many men to regard priests, who were allegedly celibate, with distrust; they were suspected of seducing women and corrupting boys and were portrayed thus in countless stories, rhymes, and songs. Especially in rural areas, people practiced folk Catholicism, a mixture of some pre-Christian elements with an overlay of Christianity. They remained relatively ignorant of official dogma and doctrine, aspects that, until after the Second Vatican Council in 1962, were communicated in Latin, a language the common people did not understand. Yet historically, the Church frowned on folk religious practices and attempted to discourage them, often labeling them as pagan because of their historical links to an earlier magical worldview. Those who engaged in folk religious practices, such as the removal of the evil eye, would be strongly motivated to hide such practices from the clergy. This did not mean, however, that they actually practiced a pagan religion. In fact, the very villagers who practiced folk healing were often also deeply involved in religious fraternities and sororities, the

maintenance of saints' shrines, and the organization of celebrations surrounding saints' days. They saw no contradiction between their involvement with the more formal aspects of Catholicism and their magical practices, since they both involved the veneration of saints.

The history of Italy in the post-Roman period also makes the diffusion of Grimassi's Stregheria, or a religion resembling it, unlikely at best. Between 500 CE and 1861, Italy consisted of a patchwork of kingdoms, principalities, city-states, and papal lands. Although originally united under the Roman Empire, Italy was, by the fourteenth century—the time when Grimassi claims that the prophetess Aradia arrived—divided by language and custom, as well as by political boundaries. Free movement from one region to another would have been difficult, especially for common people and peasants, who lived under a feudal system. Moreover, dialectical differences further divided the regions from one another, making communication challenging. Even at the time of Italian unification in the late nineteenth century, the dialects of the various regions were not mutually intelligible, and it was impossible, for example, for people from Friuli in the northeast to understand Sicilians in the south. These dialectical differences persist to this day; it is only the influence of the mass media, with their equalizing effect on dialects and pronunciations, and the national system of public education, with its emphasis on teaching standard Italian, that have eroded these distinctions in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. So although pre-Christian elements persisted in folklore well into the twentieth century, they did not form a part of a unified, homogeneous religious system but differed considerably in both dialect and form according to region.

Finally, until the years following World War II, the majority of Italy's population was rural and agricultural. Most families lived in small villages and towns; there was little access to education outside the elite classes, and instruction was controlled by the Catholic Church. *Contadini* (peasants) were illiterate and relied on oral tradition to maintain their way of life. Texts such as Leland's *Gospel of the Witches* could not have been transmitted, and Aradia's teachings, if they had existed, would not have been written down. These factors make it improbable that a pre-Christian religion survived as an intact system throughout Italy into the twentieth century.

Folk Traditions in the New World

Nevertheless, Italy has a rich body of folk beliefs and practices, which anthropologists and folklorists have documented in the last 100 years. Some of these were carried to North America by Italian immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and many survived in the families

of contemporary North American Neopagans, who now interpret them as evidence of the survival of an ancient pagan religion.

By far the majority of Italian immigrants to North America in the period between 1890 and 1950 were *contadini* from the south of Italy, a region economically devastated by continuing exploitation and governmental neglect. They brought with them a folk religiosity that was nominally Catholic but had little to do with the official church dogma and doctrine. It was instead “a syncretic melding of ancient pagan beliefs, magical practices, and Christian liturgy” (Vecoli 1977, 26). Their universe was animated by a variety of spirits, including angels, saints, and demons as well as local spirits who could be invoked to help with survival but were also not to be fully trusted. Religious devotion was often focused on the patron saint, especially the patronal festival, whose secular, celebratory aspects, untouched by the Protestant Reformation, included expressions of passion and ecstasy through which worshippers experienced direct contact with the sacred. The immigrants also brought with them a rich tradition of folk magic, especially a pervasive belief in *il malocchio* (the evil eye). The evil eye was believed to be the cause of many physical and social ills, and the immigrants had at their disposal an arsenal of amulets and cures to protect against it. Most rural communities had folk healers whose craft was learned in the family. They practiced a range of therapeutic techniques, from the preparation of herbal infusions and philters to the use of prayers and charms to family-based practices of divination that employed altered states of consciousness. Villagers and immigrants alike relied on the craft of the healers, but those individuals were also sometimes suspected of casting injurious spells.

The healers were not to be confused with the *Streghe*, or Witches—individuals believed to have an inborn ability to cause harm. Italians had many legends about these beings, who performed feats that were obviously supernatural: they could fly through the air to the magic walnut tree of Benevento, transform into animals, enter homes through keyholes, steal milk from nursing mothers, suck the blood of living things, and paralyze their victims in their sleep. At times, the popular imagination conflated the witches of legend with local folk healers, leading to accusations of witchcraft.

The folk beliefs and practices of Italian Americans met with immense hostility from the dominant American culture. The representatives of the dominant culture, in the form of doctors, social workers, educators, and the Irish-dominated American Catholic clergy, stigmatized them as signs of ignorance, backwardness, and superstition and decried the strength with which Italian Americans clung to them. Instead of being a source of pride and status within the community, folk magical practice became increasingly

stigmatized, a source of shame. Practitioners began to hide their actions from outsiders and eventually from family members as well.

Early twentieth-century scholarly studies of popular traditions contributed to their stigmatization in the dominant culture. One fashionable theory of the time interpreted folklore as “survivals” of an earlier stage in the allegedly unilinear evolution of human culture. According to this hypothesis, customs and traditions that appeared irrational or inexplicable were in fact the detritus of “savage” or “barbarian” stages in human development. As populations became educated and evolved, survivals would disappear and be replaced by more scientific understandings. The doctrine of survivals was first developed by Edward B. Tylor and was applied to Italian folklore by early Italian ethnographers, who interpreted many customs as vestiges of ancient classical civilizations even as they compared them to the habits of indigenous peoples from Africa, the Americas, and Polynesia, with whom anthropologists were just becoming familiar. These theories were enthusiastically adopted by American educators, social workers, and clergymen struggling to understand unfamiliar Italian American folkways. For example, social worker Phyllis H. Williams wrote, “The religious practices of the South Italians preserved in modified form many elements . . . associated with ancient Greek, Roman and Mohammedan beliefs” (1969, 135). She argued that saints were actually “folk substitutes for the old Greek and Roman gods and spirits of the woods and rivers . . . The polytheism of the old departmental deities survived in the veneration of local saints” (1969, 136). It was just a short step from the claims of the American Catholic clergy that Italian American Catholics were not Christians at all but heathens practicing paganism.

Although survivalists intended to account for unfamiliar practices, their interpretations ultimately disenfranchised Italian Americans even further. They gave the practices a romantic origin but ignored their important role in the social and economic lives of Italian agriculturalists and Italian American immigrants. An Italian American commentator of the time remarked, “These ethnic survivals cause us to be laughed at, even disdained, exposed to the sarcasm of the Americans” (Bernardy 1914, quoted in Vecoli 1969, 233).

Despite this social stigma, many Italian folk magical and religious practices did not die out. Patronal feasts remain one of the liveliest, most vivid expressions of popular religiosity in the cities of the American East Coast, but folklorists continued to document magical practices well into the 1970s. Many Italian Americans remember a *nonna* (grandmother) who could remove the evil eye, cure common ailments with charms and prayers, or purify the house with salt. Often, though, the younger American-born generations adopted the view of the dominant culture that traditional prac-

tices were superstitious nonsense. The term *strega* was sometimes used disparagingly by family members to refer to the bearers of these traditions.

By the 1980s, researchers began to notice that some customs had fallen into disuse, while others remained largely as expressions of ethnic pride rather than elements of belief. Folklorists Frances Malpezzi and William Clements noted, for example, that the bright red horns that had once been ubiquitous amulets against the evil eye were now displayed on the rearview mirrors of cars as symbols of ethnic identity (1992, 131). Even when Italian Americans continued their traditional religious practices, it was clear that by the late twentieth century these existed in a context very different from that of the small towns and villages where they had originated. The socio-economic transformations of the twentieth century combined with the stigmatization of traditional practices to form a veil of secrecy and mystery around them. For many second-, third-, and fourth-generation Italian Americans, the word *strega* and the traditions surrounding it became little more than whispers in family legends—decontextualized, marginalized, silenced, but still powerful fodder for the imagination. They were, in short, ripe for revival.

The Emergence of Stregheria and the Politics of Ethnicity

The revival, reclamation, and invention of tradition always emerges within a particular historical, cultural, and political context in which it serves a specific function for the group involved. Stregheria is no exception to this rule. For Italian Americans in the early twenty-first century, it serves three identifiable roles: it provides a way of connecting with an ethnic identity free from the constraints of the ethnic or religious community, it revalues spiritual experiences and practices devalued by the dominant discourse, and it addresses the changing role of Italian Americans vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in the shifting political landscape of the late twentieth century.

For most of the twentieth century, Italian American ethnic identity did not exist apart from Italian American ethnic communities. Especially in the cities of the eastern seaboard, Italian Americans originally settled in neighborhoods populated by other Italian Americans—often people from the same regions and villages as the newer immigrants. These neighborhoods, known as “Little Italies,” grew into communities that provided everything the immigrants needed to survive in the new cultural environment, from shops that furnished ingredients necessary for Italian cooking to mutual-aid societies to which immigrants could turn in cases of financial or personal setbacks. The local Catholic church was also an important part of the community, bringing its members together regularly for worship, enforcing

morality, and providing additional opportunities for community collaboration through festival organizing committees, religious brotherhoods and sisterhoods, and other parareligious associations. In these ethnic communities, identity was a matter of belonging to a family, a neighborhood, a church. But by the late twentieth century, many Little Italies had changed considerably as Italian Americans moved up the socioeconomic ladder and into the suburbs, while new immigrant groups occupied territories once considered exclusively Italian American. In the suburbs, Italian Americans increasingly associated and intermarried with other ethnic groups. Allegiances to the old neighborhood became attenuated, and even church attendance decreased. For many young Italian Americans today, growing up apart from neighborhood ethnic and religious communities, identity is no longer tied up with these structures. Some actively reject the old ethnic communities as too restrictive of individual freedoms. For young women especially, the sexual restrictions that characterized family, neighborhood, and religious communities were perceived as forces of oppression. During the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, many Italian Americans distanced themselves from these associations as they searched for identities grounded in individuality, rather than in belonging to a group.

Yet this process also left a vacuum when it came to ethnic identity formation. Italian Americans who had grown up apart from ethnic communities or who had intentionally distanced themselves from them in search of more individualistic options began to search for a way to be ethnic without the restrictions on individuality imposed by the small-group dynamics of neighborhood, church, and ethnic communities. They wanted an Italian American identity free from the associations and constraints of Little Italies. Some yearned for a spirituality that would still connect them with their roots, without the behavioral and moral conservatism of the Catholic Church. For these seekers, *Stregheria* offered a powerful brew.

Like other forms of Neopaganism, *Stregheria* is a framework for the practice of magic and ecstatic states. The folk Catholicism of Italian American immigrants provided plenty of contexts for the individual to experience direct contact with the sacred and a personal relationship with spiritual beings, including the Virgin Mary and the saints. But these expressions made Italian Americans subjects of scorn among the dominant culture, including Catholic officials in the United States, whose own traditions reflected a different cultural background. They branded Italian Americans as pagans and heathen—backward, ignorant folk whose practices were signs of a less evolved stage of human development, according to the racist theories of the late nineteenth century.

Stregheria represents a reclamation of these terms and a revaluing of the spiritual traditions that were so disdained by the dominant culture in the



Italian celebration on Mulberry Street, Little Italy, New York City, NY, 1938. (Photo Collection Alexander Alland, Sr./Corbis)

past. It provides a way for Italian Americans to reconnect with the spiritual practices of their grandparents and great-grandparents. When these traditions of religious ecstasy and vernacular healing have been lost or forgotten, Stregheria provides new traditions to replace them and a new framework in which to understand them. Instead of being evidence of ignorance, they become links to a complex system of occult philosophy and ancient learning; rather than being irrational superstitions, they are regarded as a form of peasant resistance. Italian American Streghe can interpret almost any form of folklore in their families as signs they are heirs to an ancient, noble pagan religion—one the church helped to destroy.

This reclaiming of past Italian ethnic and spiritual traditions becomes particularly significant against the backdrop of identity politics that emerged in late twentieth-century North America. During the first half of the 1900s, ethnic politics were dominated by assimilationist paradigms: immigrants were supposed to gradually give up their old ways and adopt the language, customs, and beliefs of the dominant Anglo-American culture. But as a result of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, this model began to change. By the 1970s, a new multicultural model of ethnic identity emerged, popularly known as the “salad bowl,” in contrast to the earlier “melting pot” paradigm. According to the new model, each ethnic group maintained elements of distinctiveness, contributing to the “flavor” of the larger society. The civil rights movement also introduced a new mechanism for the creation of identity: because African Americans, Native Americans, and others who struggled for civil rights suffered horrible injustice at the hands of the dominant culture, discrimination and victimization became part of the mechanism for claiming a legitimate identity.

Italian Americans found themselves caught in the middle of these shifting political sands. Most had arrived in North America at a time when the dominant paradigm emphasized the importance of assimilation, blending or fitting in with the dominant culture. As a result, they shed or hid the practices that made them objects of discrimination. To distance themselves from their peasant roots, Italian Americans tended to align themselves with Italian high culture, lionizing great historical figures such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo and organizing Columbus Day celebrations as markers of Italian ethnic pride. But by the 1990s, this strategy consistently backfired. Christopher Columbus was no longer regarded as a great figure for his “discovery” of America but was seen as an evil colonizer who brought disease and destruction to peaceful indigenous societies. Columbus Day parades were criticized as expressions of white imperialism. Whereas in the early twentieth century, there was much discussion as to whether Italian Americans could even be considered white, by the late twentieth century they had become subsumed into a larger category of

dominant white culture, in contrast with minorities of color (African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans). This change had happened largely because Italian Americans had begun moving into the middle classes in much larger numbers. By the late twentieth century, they were no longer living in isolated ethnic neighborhoods but had become fully integrated into mainstream American society, sometimes occupying positions of significant authority. American political discourse tends to use ethnicity to address issues of class. Middle-class white Americans are often perceived as lacking any kind of ethnic distinctiveness or cultural difference. In gaining economic and political clout, Italian Americans lost the badge of authenticity that had earlier provided them with a sense of ethnic identity.

In this new political climate, some Italian Americans felt they were targets of criticism from all sides. Many remembered having been the objects of prejudice and discrimination well into the 1970s and 1980s because of their cultural differences. But by the 1990s, they were perceived as white oppressors by newer minority groups. The new paradigm of victimology led European Americans to engage in new forms of Italian bashing: Raven Grimassi recounted how he began to explore his own ethnic magical traditions after some Celtic Witches, who perceived Italian Americans as the descendants of imperial Romans, blamed him for the destruction of the Druid religion of Britain and Gaul. Thus, Italian Americans became caught up in the squall of identity politics: subsumed into the category of the dominant culture by newer minorities but still the objects of prejudice from other European Americans, who either continued earlier traditions of anti-Italian bias or found reasons to discriminate based on new ideologies and historical understandings.

Like Wicca and other forms of Neopaganism in North America, Stregheria creates identity by aligning its practitioners with the folk cultures of Europe. And like oppressed indigenes of the New World, Old World peasants were themselves oppressed by the forces of church and state. Stregheria uses folk culture as a marker of spiritual authenticity in a political climate where identity claims are more legitimate if groups align themselves with the marginalized and oppressed. It creates an illustrious pedigree for folk traditions, even as it disassociates them from the imperial heritage of Rome and Catholicism.

Stregheria also allows Italian Americans to reclaim and recast negative stereotypes in a more positive light. Thus, Martello turns the mob into a secret religious society that continued the veneration of Demeter and Persephone; Grimassi transforms the epithets of “witch,” “pagan,” and “heathen” from signs of shame into evidence of spiritual teachings that survived millennia. Through this process, folk magical practices are transformed into sources of ethnic pride and distinctiveness, and they create new ways for

Italian Americans to imagine themselves. This process is valuable in two ways: it provides a new paradigm in the creation of ethnic identity in a homogenizing mass culture, and it may actually help preserve certain traditions that otherwise might have disappeared.

At the same time, it is important to note that even though *Stregheria* appears to create solidarity with the experiences of Italian peasants and immigrants to North America, it is a far cry from their cultures. Few *Streghe* have traveled to Italy, and of those, even fewer have actually visited rural villages where traditions of vernacular magic can still be found. Many *Streghe*, Grimassi included, do not speak, read, or write Italian and are relatively uninformed about Italian history. Not all *Streghe* are of Italian descent; those who are are often several generations removed from the immigrant experience. Perhaps as a result of this lack of direct contact with Italian culture, *Stregheria* tends to romanticize Italian peasant culture. Its image of rural Italian life has more in common with an Olive Garden commercial than with lived experience. It portrays Italian peasants as existing in a land of plenty in harmony with nature, whereas the Italian peasant experience was generally one of hunger, poverty, and privation. It also removes the Christian element from Italian and Italian American folkways, distorting their context and meaning in a way that renders them unrecognizable to their actual practitioners. In its own way, *Stregheria* repeats the pattern of earlier generations of Italian Americans who created identities by emphasizing the legacy of the elite, only now, *Aradia di Toscano* and *Giordano Bruno* have taken the place of Christopher Columbus and Leonardo da Vinci. It also reproduces the Italian prejudice against southern Italy by portraying its origins as Tuscan/Etruscan and thus indigenous to the north or center.

At root, this contradiction is about the ambivalence Americans feel around issues of ethnicity. Many Americans would like to enjoy what they imagine as the benefits of belonging to an ethnic community: the warmth of a ready-made extended family, a feeling of being part of something greater than one's self, a connection to a noble heritage, and, of course, colorful folk customs. But few want to experience the limitations on personal freedom that accompany life in the confines of a small group, and even fewer would welcome the prejudice, discrimination, and poverty that are often part of the American ethnic experience. More to the point, because American discourses of ethnicity and class are inextricably intertwined, many Americans feel tremendous ambivalence about ethnicity: they want the feeling of belonging to an ethnic group without the inconvenience of belonging to the lower classes. Many positive representations of ethnicity are thus stripped of their class markers; they are sanitized, commodified, and rendered nonthreatening to a white middle-class audience.

In this, Stregheria is not different from other ethnic varieties of Neopagan Witchcraft or, for that matter, from other positive public representations of ethnicity.

Stregheria Today

It is difficult to estimate the number of Streghe practicing in North America today. As with all Neopagan religions, self-reporting can be unreliable because many practitioners keep their religions secret due to discrimination, prejudice, and misunderstanding in mainstream culture. Also, because Pagans and Witches typically belong simultaneously to a number of different traditions, counting the members of each individual tradition and group can lead to inflated estimates, since membership overlaps considerably. Nevertheless, in the larger landscape of revival Witchcraft, Streghe constitute a minority. The number of initiated Streghe descending from either the Triancrian Rose Coven in New York or from Grimassi's coven in California is probably quite small, along the order of 200 individuals. However, Grimassi's books sell approximately 60,000 copies apiece, indicating that there may be many more who either identify as Streghe or maintain an interest in ethnic varieties of Witchcraft. Although many Streghe are of Italian American descent, the religion admits members from any ethnic group if they demonstrate a sincere interest. Grimassi has developed an adoption ritual that is used to welcome non-Italian American members into his group, but not all Strega covens practice it.

The legal status of Streghe depends on the larger national networking organizations to which individual practitioners and groups belong. Several Pagan networks, such as Covenant of the Goddess and Pagan Spirit Alliance, offer their member groups legal status as religions, as well as certification of religious specialists, tax-exempt status, and legal advice and protection in cases of discrimination. Streghe who join these organizations receive the full benefits of membership. Unaffiliated Streghe may not have the same protections. Wicca and revival Witchcraft are now better known to the dominant culture, but Stregheria is still relatively unfamiliar outside the Neopagan movement. For this reason, as well, there are few if any popular representations of Streghe by the American mass media and popular culture. Most popular representations of modern Witches tend to focus on Wicca rather than its more esoteric ethnic variants.

Popular representations of Witches in Italian culture are sometimes enthusiastically adopted by Italian American Streghe, who see them as validation of their traditions and sometimes adopt them as personal symbols. Two of the most prevalent are the Befana, a good witch who flies through

the air on her broom delivering toys and goodies to children on January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany, and the liqueur Strega. The liqueur is flavored with walnuts, and its name is a reference to the folkloric walnut tree of Benvenuto, the legendary gathering place of witches in Italian folklore. Italian American Streghe sometimes display bottles of the liqueur and objects decorated with the Befana in their homes as signs of their ethnic and religious affiliation.

Although Wicca has made some inroads in Italy, especially in urban areas, it is still relatively invisible to the majority culture. However, judging from one Internet site, some American Streghe have contacted Italian magical groups seeking additional information on Italian magical traditions. The Internet site of the Associazione Culturale Hermes e Afrodite (Cultural Association of Hermes and Aphrodite), a group dedicated to magical practice and esoteric teachings, has a link for American Witches to follow. It leads to a page that reads, in part:

If you are a USA Wiccan and you read our site, you will get a strange Impression of us. A lot of people come to our site and say “what’s wrong here?” Someone tried to teach us the meaning of some Italian words:-)))) [sic]. This is because there are a LOT of differences between USA Witches and Italian Witches. These differences are due to the different history, the different traditions, and different beliefs. There is another thing: you tend to consider the USA way to Italian Witchcraft as the “Original Old Italian Way.” It is NOT . . .

but Raven Grimassi said . . .

We read the Raven Grimassi books. We were interested, we find it interesting, but we concluded that if you want to know Italian Country you should step foot in Italy at least once . . . We NEVER heard words like “Tanarra, Janarra and Fanarra,” and we never knew that Italy was divided in 3 clans . . . [ellipses in original] we can count almost 180–200 different dialects in Italy and each dialect has its own spells, beliefs, traditions, and clans in that country. Perhaps, Italy was dominated, divided and divided again in a lot of conqueror’s zones, and that introduced a kind of cultural difference, due to the obvious communication difficulties between each conquered zone, often found in war. So, “Tanarra, Janarra and Fanarra” were never three clans of witches that divided all of Italy, as he said.

Last but not least, we never heard any of the rites and spells he proposed on [sic] his book . . . we found some right words but nothing equal to what we do here . . . [ellipses in original]

We see that Grimassi is very popular with 2nd or 3rd generation Italian-Americans that want to discover their Italian Roots, but we think his work is a little “how USA People see Italian guys: pizza, pasta, Mafia and some other

common word.” (Sophia Loren is not any kind of Witch, ok?) But, we don’t hate Grimassi books, we only ask that you to call it “the USA look to the Italian path,” and NOT, as you are doing, “The Only Original True Ancient Italian Way” . . . call it by its correct name, and we will be very, very friendly with you. (<http://www.streghe.cc>, accessed February 17, 2004)

The authors of the website also explain several other important differences that separate Italian magical groups from their American counterparts. One is the absence of the Wiccan Rede, or guiding ethical principle, “An’ it harm none, do as you will.” Although a few Italian groups have now adopted it into their traditions, it is not a part of traditional Italian magical practice. Second, representatives of the Cultural Association of Hermes and Aphrodite describe sex as central to their practice and call American magical groups for whom this is anathema “puritanical.” A third difference cited is the tendency of American magical groups to eclectically combine concepts from a variety of world religions and magical traditions—for example, the use of concepts such as karma, tantra, and psychology within a Wiccan ritual context. Finally, the authors of the site decry American “political correctness” and the open-minded tolerance of other religions that is typical of most American Neopagan groups. Citing the omnipresence and persecution of the Catholic Church, the Cultural Association of Hermes and Aphrodite expresses its need to protect itself through secrecy and exclusivity.

This is a single website that represents only one association of Italian magical groups, but it is also the only one to address the issue of Italian American Witchcraft as seen by Italians. Presumably, other Italian magical groups are either unaware of Stregheria or have chosen not to publish their impressions of it on their websites.

The Future of Stregheria

It is difficult to predict what road Stregheria will take in the future. In *Italian Witchcraft* (2000), Grimassi presented a prophecy that Aradia allegedly made during the thirteenth century when she descended to earth to bring back the Old Religion. According to the prophecy, the age of Christian domination will be followed by the “Age of the Daughter,” a time when “there shall be an awakening in the awareness of women, and their wills shall be asserted. Laws will change and women shall walk in the ways of men” (Grimassi 2000, 269). This time will be followed by a period of violent upheavals, until “out of the ashes shall arise a new world of reason. People shall no longer be ruled by governments. Nor shall any one people oppress

another. There shall be no rulers, but only teachers and counselors. No one shall possess power over another, nor shall anyone restrict or control any other person. The Earth shall be of one people, and they shall live under the emanating rays of love, peace and reason” (Grimassi 2000, 269–270). The arrival of this time will be heralded by a new prophet, whose birth will coincide with the repeal of the last anti-Witchcraft laws. Perhaps this is intended to imply that Grimassi is that prophet, since England repealed its last witchcraft laws in 1951, the year of his birth. In this vision, Aradia’s teachings play a central role in the enlightenment of humankind and the arrival of a new golden age.

This vision is, however, somewhat improbable. More likely, Stregheria will continue to expand as long as Grimassi continues to promote it and as long as people are inspired by his writings. Stregheria’s interpretation of Italian folk magic as an ancient pagan religion may even take root more broadly among Italian Americans. However, esoteric mystery religions seldom become forces in the transformation of human history because by their very nature they are secret and exclusive. Stregheria and indeed all of American Neopaganism would have to change considerably in order to achieve the cultural transformation described in Grimassi’s prophecy of Aradia.

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- Raven Grimassi. Home page. At <http://www.ravengrimassi.com>.
- . Stregheria home page. At <http://www.stregheria.com>.
- Strega.net. Website on Aradia and Stregheria. At <http://www.strega.net>.

Other Materials

- Interview with Lori Bruno by Sabina Magliocco, August 2000.
- Interview with Raven Grimassi by Sabina Magliocco, in Escondido, CA, August 2000.

Chapter Three

Druidry in Contemporary Ireland

JENNY BUTLER

This chapter deals with Irish Druidry, through an ethnographic examination of the traditions of a specific Druidic grove and some of the main Druid orders and organizations in present-day Ireland. There are, of course, many other Neo-pagan traditions existing in contemporary Ireland. Apart from the various forms of Druidry and diverse forms of Celtic-Based Spirituality, there are also the traditions of Wicca, Witchcraft, Heathenism, and Shamanism. Many of these traditions could also be categorized under the broad term of *Celtic Spirituality movements*, such as Celtic Wiccan Covens, Celtic Shamanism, and many individuals and groups who choose to follow what they consider to be Celtic-based spiritual traditions. This chapter focuses solely on an examination of the Neo-pagan tradition of Druidry, and through this examination it sheds some light on Irish Druidry as Celtic-Based Spirituality.

Very few academic works have been written on modern Druidry. As far as the author is aware at the time of writing, there has been no large-scale ethnographic work at all carried out exclusively on Neo-paganism in Ireland, and in this respect, the area of research is virgin territory for ethnographic analysis. Even though there are various different Druid orders and many different groves and solitary practitioners who are worthy of in-depth study, the concentration in this chapter is wholly on one particular Druidic group, the Owl Grove, and the orders associated with this group, Conradh Draoithe na hÉireann (CDÉ, the Convocation of Druids in Ireland) and the Hibernian Order of Druids (HOOD). It is necessary to limit the analysis in this way in order to give a thorough portrayal of the worldview and activities of this group and the role of the orders connected to it. Also, the

author has done a great deal of participant observation with the Owl Grove, and in-depth interviews were conducted with the members; thus, an adequate ethnographic profile of the group can be provided. It is useful to view this group as representative of the wider Druid movement in Ireland, though naturally, no attempt is being made to suggest that what the members of the Owl Grove believe or practice is characteristic of all Druids or of the Druid tradition in its entirety. Each individual and group will have a unique outlook and unique rituals, but ethnographic research can shed some light on principles and behaviors that are shared by the Neo-pagan Druid tradition as a whole.

Many Druid orders, groups, and solitary practitioners exist in contemporary Ireland. Brief mention will be made of some of the other main Druidic orders and organizations in Ireland today, though space does not allow for a detailed discussion of the beliefs and practices of each of the groups and associations mentioned.

In this chapter, the term *Neo-pagan* is used to signify contemporary nature-based spirituality or religious traditions, and the term *Pagan* refers to pre-Christian nature-based spirituality or religious traditions. Many practitioners have issues with the term *Neo-paganism*, and it should be emphasized that its use here is intended, for the sake of clarity, to distinguish contemporary Pagan practices and modern worldview from those of pre-Christian times. Many prefer the term *Old Religion* or *Ancestral Religion* to *Pre-Christian Paganism*, and it should be made clear that the use of the prefix *Neo* is in no way an attempt to detract from the authenticity or validity of contemporary religious traditions.

It is important to note that the term *Druidry* is itself a catchall term for diverse forms of spirituality. Some Druids today would describe themselves as Pagans or earth-based spiritualists, but others would describe themselves as Christian Druids; further, there are eclectic Druids who combine Pagan and Christian elements in their worldview and practices. *Druidry* is both an ancient and a modern spiritual path. The ancient Druids were the priests of the Celtic religion. The modern Druids are practitioners of a nature-based or earth-based spirituality. Many individuals and groups today hold that contemporary *Druidry* is derived from or even a continuation of ancient Druidic practices. One group that maintains a spiritual link between ancient and modern *Druidry* is the Owl Grove.

The aim in this chapter is to focus on the ways in which the worldview of the Owl Grove is given expression and to relate this to the wider Celtic spirituality movement in Ireland. The information presented here has been gathered during research conducted over a two-year period, which was funded by a scholarship from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. The methodology used included participant



observation with the group at their celebrations of the annual festivals, ethnographic interviews with group members, and informal interviews and e-mail communication. Interview extracts are included where personal narrative recounts a strongly held belief or meaningful personal experience, as viewpoints and subjective experiences are better expressed in the words of the group members themselves.

The Owl Grove is a Druidic group located in County Laois in the Irish midlands. The group was formed in 2001 and has seven members who gather together to celebrate the festivals. There are also members abroad, one in Scotland and one in Canada, who coordinate their own celebrations to coincide with the Owl Grove ceremonies; thus, those who cannot be physically present in Ireland can abide by the Owl Grove's observance of the festivals by doing a working simultaneously to the Owl Grove working (a *working* is the group's term for ritual practice). At the Celtic festival of Imbolc in 2002, the author was made an honorary member of the Owl Grove, which meant that the grove granted her permission to conduct her research without having to undertake any training (new initiates of the grove must wait a year and a day, in which time they take a training course and complete homework and other tasks as part of their training). The members of the Owl Grove were aware of the fact that research was being carried out. Initiating the author as an honorary member was a way of facilitating research in that an outside researcher was allowed to observe and take part in their activities while not being bound to a lengthy training course that could not be undertaken due to time constraints; further, the group members were able to maintain their stipulation that only initiated individuals can take part in their rituals.

Celtic Traditions and Neo-Druidry

The Owl Grove follows a tradition called the Irish Hereditary Druid Tradition. This tradition, as the *Ard Draoi* (High Druid) of the group asserted, maintains some of the older Irish Druidic practices, believed to stretch back to the Celtic Druids of pre-Christian Ireland. Thus, the grove, and the wider Druidic order it belongs to, can be categorized as a Celtic-Based Spiritual movement.

The designated term for a Druidic group is a *grove*, which relates to the association that Druidry has with trees. The name for the Druids themselves (Greek pl. *druidai*; Latin pl. *druidae*) is itself related to trees, the etymology of the name coming from the root words for the oak tree: *dru* in Old Irish and *drus* in Greek; the second syllable is deemed equivalent to the Indo-European root *wid*, meaning "to know" (Piggott 1981, 89). Some scholars

have suggested that the name means “knowledge of the oak.” It is speculated that Druids worshipped trees and that they considered certain trees sacred. The Celtic word for a sacred tree is *bile*, and the Irish warrior goddess Maeve had her own sacred tree, named *bile Meidbe* (Green 1997b, 43).

Classical accounts tell of Druids holding assemblies deep in forest clearings. The Latin term *nemus* means a “grove” or “woodland glade” (Frazer 1993, 110), and the word *nemeton* is thought by some to mean “sky-place,” perhaps because of “the illusion that the trees climbed upwards and therefore united the sky to the earth” (Ó hÓgáin 2002, 29). Miranda Green pointed out that “whilst the Celts sometimes worshipped in built temples, their cult foci were frequently natural features in the landscape, like trees, forests or groves. The term ‘nemeton’ refers to a sacred place and, in particular, a sacred grove” (Green 1997b, 108). Thus, consciously adopting the term *grove* as a name for contemporary Druid groups resonates with the notion of ancient Celtic Druids practicing their religion in sacred woodland groves. A related word in the Irish language is *neimheadh*, sometimes prefixed by the *fiodh* (tree), and it was in these *fiodhneimheadh* that the ancient Druids were said to have performed their rituals (Ó hÓgáin 1999, 71). There is some evidence that Christian monastic settlements were built on earlier Pagan sites of tree worship, which were perhaps the sacred groves of ancient Ireland. Certain Irish place-names are suggestive of this: some examples are Saint Brigit’s monastic settlement in Kildare; the Irish name *Cell-dara*, meaning “Church of the Oak,” and the Christian site associated with Saint Columba in Durrow that was built on an earlier site bearing the name *Dair-mag* (oak plain) (Lonigan 1996, 112).

The Owl Grove uses the term *grove* due to its association with trees and with the loci for ancient Druidic practices. Although the grove continues and maintains some aspects of older traditions, members of the group are self-conscious about issues of historical continuity and identity. They are aware that it is nearly impossible to revive ancient religious practices per se. The term *Celtic-Based Spirituality* is appropriate to describe the ethos of the Owl Grove. The wider movement with which the grove is affiliated veers toward the viewpoint that Celtic traditions can be revived while simultaneously holding the opinion that part of this spirituality involves changing the old traditions, as older traditions need to be modified to suit modern contexts. As the Ard Draoi, Mel, pointed out:

We maintain as much as we can from the Hereditary Tradition. Some things of course we can’t maintain. And . . . simply because they are not appropriate. It’s not appropriate to take a life and dissect somebody’s shoulder and have a look to see what’s going on with the world [*chuckles*], you know? So in those things, you know, that’s where Druids use change through the

centuries, Mmm, but Druidry is always changing. (Interview with Mel, September 2002)

The dissection of an individual's shoulder "to see what's going on with the world" was a reference to the ancient practice of scapulomancy, a kind of divination by means of the cracks that appear in a burning shoulder blade. Classical sources refer to Druids using various methods of divination and also sacrificing human beings as part of religious observances. Obviously, these practices would be unpalatable and offensive to people today and, in the case of human sacrifice especially, illegal under Irish law and the laws of most other countries!

The Irish Hereditary Druid Tradition, according to the high Druid of the Owl Grove, is a body of knowledge that has survived from an older time; traditions have been passed on and preserved in certain Irish families. According to Mel, one of the reasons why Irish Druidry is different from Druid traditions elsewhere in Europe is that Irish Druids did not experience Roman invasion and therefore that the tradition was conserved and sustained in the country until relatively recent times. As Mel put it:

Druidry was more or less virtually exterminated in Wales by the Romans at Anglesey with a big battle there. The majority—it is said that all Druids were killed but I'd say the majority of them *were* killed, you know, slaughtered. So Druidry came to [be] . . . fizzled out in England, on that island. And in France, the same. And then . . . it came through a kind of a rebirth in the eighteenth century and they used the writings of Pliny, who [discusses] cutting the mistletoe with a golden sickle and how the Druids wore white. So you'll find that Druids in France and the Druids in England wear white. They wear the bed-sheets. That didn't happen in Ireland. Druidry was never actually wiped out so early on. Druidry came to more or less a standstill in Ireland around about, I think it was just after the Battle of the Boyne, 1690, something like that. Right up until that time there were Druid schools in Ireland. So the tradition in Ireland is more pure than that of England or France, though they wouldn't like . . . to hear me say this, probably! Now, there is a great enough depth—the knowledge is there. It's hidden, but let's say, what's it—seventeenth century, it's only four hundred years ago. So, quite a lot of the knowledge of what the Druids did, although it's . . . I don't think its ever been publicized, it's still there. It's still available. There are bits available in various families. (Interview with Mel, August 2003)

Mel's reference is to Pliny's account in *Naturalis historia* (*Natural History*) of Druids carrying out a ceremony involving mistletoe:

In their language the mistletoe is called “the healer of all.” When preparations for a sacrifice and feast beneath the trees have been made, they lead forward two white bulls with horns bound for the first time. A priest in white clothing climbs the tree and cuts the mistletoe with a golden sickle, and it is caught in a white cloak. They then sacrifice the bulls while praying that the god will grant the gift of prosperity to those to whom he has given it. They believe that mistletoe, when taken in a drink, will restore fertility to barren animals, and is a remedy for all poisons. (Pliny, quoted in Koch and Carey 1995, 26)

As Mel mentioned, many Druids in England and other countries wear white robes when conducting ceremonies. The members of the Owl Grove, however, have chosen not to wear white robes, as they feel it is not part of Irish tradition. This decision is therefore tied in with identity as an Irish Celtic group that avoids non-Irish practices rather than associating themselves with the Druid traditions of England, France, and other areas of Europe. The ritual garments of the Owl Grove members are earth-colored, predominantly dark brown or black. These colors are chosen due to the correlation of dark colors with the element of earth and also because, since the rituals of the Owl Grove take place mostly at night, darker shades enable participants to go unnoticed when outdoors. Mel explained:

You’ll notice all our robes are black. That’s because traditionally . . . again it comes from the hereditary information that the Irish Druids wore robes which were made from the earth, earth colours. Again, nobody mentions white. You don’t often get white earth. You do occasionally in some places, you get white clay, but mainly, you know, they would be earth colours. They would be colours made from the dyes of vegetation or the dyes of soil. (Interview with Mel, August 2003)

The tradition that members of the Owl Grove follow is based on information passed on to them by a woman named Rosie O’Moore, who lived in Northern Ireland. Mel stated that O’Moore’s grandfather had some connection with the old Druids and attempted to carry on the older Druidic traditions with which he had come into contact. The group considers the knowledge that O’Moore conveyed to Mel to be a sacred source. Since Druidry is believed to be an oral tradition, the grove does not keep a book of esoteric knowledge, nor do members write their rituals down. Mel created a manual for new initiates to use when doing their training course, containing information on general beliefs and the outlook of the group, but the actual ritual practices are not written down.

Members base their beliefs and practices largely on the information gleaned from Rosie O’Moore. It may not be historically accurate to state

that Druidic traditions have continued from pre-Christian times to the present, but for the Owl Grove members there is a strong connection between their own practices and those of Druids in pre-Christian Ireland, even though, in their view, the information has come via different families and has been filtered through various perspectives even before reaching O'Moore. Scholars of history and archaeology may have difficulties with the notion of a continuity of Celtic traditions into present-day Ireland. Some academics may look on the Owl Grove's worldview and the members' accounts of the history of the Hereditary Druid Tradition as a reimagining or reinterpretation of the past. For the group, the perceived lineage to that tradition is extremely important in terms of their identities as Druids.

The attitude of the group toward sacred sites is indicative of this connection with a Celtic past and an acknowledgment of the religious tradition once thought to have been practiced in the land. The following interview extract brings some important points to light:

J [INTERVIEWER]: Places like Tara and Uisneach—do you think ancient Druids, or the Hereditary Tradition that you've talked about, practiced at those places?

M: Oh they did, yeah. You know the Druids were definitely at Uisneach . . . of course they were at Tara as well. They used to go to Tara and they used to make/amend the laws. They used to have a fair, didn't they, . . . I think it was every three years—you'd have to check on that—where they would actually amend the laws, at Tara.

J: So, do you think modern Druids going to those places is a way of continuing on that tradition?

M: It is, yeah, and the modern Druid of tuning into the people that, or the energy of those, who worked in Tara as well as maintaining it. But you can't maintain it because you don't know exactly what they did. Do you understand what I mean? There's been a gap and we don't know exactly what they did but we can . . . tune into what remains.

J: So when you say the energy of a site—do you think the energy of a place can be changed over time or, you know, if people practiced magical ritual, let's say, in the past, does that leave some sort of imprint on a place?

M: It does, yeah. (Interview with Mel, August 2003)

This interchange highlights the views shared by many contemporary Druids. Even though it cannot be known for certain how the ancient cultures of Ireland practiced their religions, it *is* known that they visited certain sites and carried out some sort of ritual practice there. This activity

cannot be precisely reconstructed today because so little evidence exists of what took place in ancient times. Modern Neo-pagan practitioners, however, believe that they are able to tune into the energies that are thought to still permeate these sites. Many Druids today claim that they can feel the energies at particular sites, and some choose to practice rituals at places where they can sense this special atmosphere, as they feel it is conducive to ritual work. This belief somehow transcends documented historical information in that it is based on gut feeling or spiritual connections rather than objective, analytical recorded data.

One of the most well-known sacred places in Ireland is Tara. Tara is a site immersed in myth and legend, and the epithet by which the modern County of Meath is known—Royal Meath—comes from Tara's association with mythological and historical kings of Ireland. The Irish name for the site, *Teamhair na Riogh* (Elevated Place or Assembly Hall of the Kings), is where the Irish *Ard-Rí* (High King) is said to have had his seat. Legend has it that the *Lia Fáil* (Stone of Destiny), associated with a 12-foot horizontal pillar of granular limestone (6 feet showing above the ground) on the Hill of Tara, would roar when the true king of Ireland touched it or stood on it (Slavin 2002, 18). Tara is approximately 507 feet high, and structures there have been dated to 2000 BC. What a visitor sees today is a collection of earthen mounds. There is some evidence that an assembly was held annually at Tara to celebrate the Feast of Samhain (Pennick 2001, 120). The gathering at Samhain is also associated with the Feast of Tara (*Feis Temro*), a ritual banquet held subsequent to a ritual where the new king would symbolically mate with the sovereignty goddess (De Breffny 1983, 163). Tara has been a sacred assembly site from the remote past to the present day. Neo-pagan Druids often visit the site, especially at Samhain and midsummer.

On the first weekend of October 2003, a gathering of Druids was called at Tara in response to news of road building near this sacred site. A number of rituals took place on Tara's mounds over the weekend. One of these rituals was an earth-healing ritual to protect the Hill of Tara from any damage that the road might cause. This ritual involved approximately twenty-five people, who held hands to form a large circle atop Rath Gráinne, one of the mounds of Tara. Four people who stood in the center called the quarters (that is, called on the spirits and energies of the four directions: east, south, west, and north). Energy was raised by everyone humming simultaneously in different pitches and, following that, chanting. This was followed by the Neo-pagan ritual dance known as the Spiral Dance, which involves whirling in toward the center to make a spiral shape and then dancing around again in the other direction. One woman stood in the center and played the tune "King of the Fairies" on her tin whistle. Participants resumed the circular position after the dance, and the energy that had

been raised was channeled. Each person concentrated on visualizing the energy and concurrently focused on sending this energy out of the circle to envelop the group members and the site on which they stood. The intention was for the energy to form a magical barrier around Tara that would protect it from the immediate structural danger that could be caused by the building of the road. Tara is well known as a sacred site to Neo-pagans and many others of various spiritual and religious traditions. The ritual described here serves as one example of the Neo-pagans' concerns regarding the destruction of sacred sites.

The historical reality of Celtic religion and the role and activities of the Celtic Druids is at times overlooked by Neo-pagan Druids in favor of a highly romanticized version of Celtic Druidry. This process of reinterpretation is similar to the way in which contemporary devotees of "Celtic Christianity" interpret their spiritual tradition as a historical phenomenon and see themselves as revivers of an older version of Christianity. This movement has been examined by the scholar Donald Meek, and his discussion shows how the ideology of Celtic Christianity is very much part of the mindset of contemporary people; he described it as "fashionable, contemporary cloth which seems so neatly tailor-made to fit the profile of our time" (Meek 2000, 3). Similarly, the concerns of the modern Druid movement and other Celtic spiritualities are very much concerns of our modern age. For example, using so-called sacred sites on the natural landscape and striving to be close to nature are choices made in our fast-moving technological world, in which people do not have as much contact with the natural world as their forebears did in the distant past. The reverential attitude toward nature, prevalent within earth-based traditions such as Druidry, is an emotive connection with ancient Pagan and animistic religions of the past. The way that contemporary Druids express these beliefs is also part of a modern way of thinking. For example, the ritual to protect the sacred site of Tara in the face of destruction by road building is a response to a modern problem. Ancient peoples may have venerated nature (or personifications of nature in divine form), as they depended on the natural environment for survival, yet they were not attempting to heal the planet in the same way many contemporary Druids and other Neo-pagans are. Ancient peoples were not faced with the same ecological problems that face us today. The notion of creating a magical barrier to protect a sacred site is one way in which contemporary Neopagans' concerns are expressed.

Druidic ritual practice occurs at particular locations on Ireland's landscape. The most common places for rituals to be held are megalithic stone circles (or reconstructed stone circles), standing stones or other megalithic or Iron Age monuments, and natural landscape formations. It is unclear whether the ancient Druids actually constructed the monuments them-



Druids descend the Hill of Tara after a ritual atop Rath Gráinne, Ireland, 2002. (Courtesy of Jenny Butler)

selves, but it is strongly believed that Druids at least used these monuments, regardless of whether they themselves built them. Certain Neo-pagan groups view the practice of conducting rituals at these sites as a “revival” of pre-Christian Pagan practices. This reformulation of religious observance at established ritual sites on the landscape is a significant factor in the meaning system of the modern Druid tradition. For modern Druids, religious observance is a way of expressing their connection to ancient Druids, and some groups incorporate any information available to them on ancient Pagan ritual practice into their worldview. There is a strong connection with a romanticized version of the context in which Druids existed prior to Christian influence in Ireland and elsewhere. Many have idealized notions of pre-Christian Druids as sagacious men, adept in magical practices, who had a deep spiritual connection with the land, living in harmony with the natural cycle and worshipping the old gods. Documented evidence on Druidry in Ireland is limited, and partly because Druids are believed to have had a predominantly oral tradition of transmitting knowledge, no firsthand accounts by pre-Christian Druids about their ritual practice or belief system have survived. Ancient Druidry cannot be known about in any detail, yet despite this, contemporary Druids choose to practice ritual at places they believe had some connection to ancient Druids. Despite the



Owl Grove's stone circle, Ireland, 2003. (Courtesy of Jenny Butler)

lack of documented historical evidence that these places were the ritual sites of Druids in the distant past, there is an emphasis on spiritual ancestry and intuitive feeling within the Neo-pagan Druid tradition. Many contemporary Druids profess that they can sense the energies at these sites and can develop an emotional connection with them. These places are sacred sites to today's Druids because there is a meaningful association between the modern spiritual path of Druidry and what is perceived to have been the ancient spiritual path of Druidry. Whether or not that connection can be proven on a scholarly level is not the most important concern to many of those who follow the spiritual path; what is more important is that the sites that still remain on the Irish landscape are believed to have had some link to an older Druid tradition. Many Irish Druids feel that they are engaging with the ancient spiritual practices of this land by carrying out ritual in the same sacred space as their ancestors once did.

The Shaping of Modern Irish Druidry: A Historical Perspective

Many people accept as true the notion that aspects of the ancient Druid tradition continued on in the beliefs and practices of certain families in Ire-

land. The Hereditary Druid Tradition that the Owl Grove follows is believed to be a working example of this kind of maintenance of older Druid traditions in some form in the family of Rosie O'Moore. The Hereditary Druid Tradition and other family traditions of Druidry are, for obvious reasons, tremendously difficult to investigate and trace back in history.

In examining Ireland's historical background, it can be seen that the tracing of Hereditary Druid Tradition would prove quite difficult. This is because Irish folk religion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contained elements of both Irish Christianity and older pre-Christian observances.

Historians generally agree that the transition from Paganism to Christianity was a more harmonious process in Ireland than in other areas of the world. Because of Ireland's peripheral location and because Christianity was not enforced in the same way there as it was in Britain by the Roman state, there was accommodation between the Pagan religion and the new Christian faith. The Celts in due course converted to the Christian religion, and "apparently many of the Druids and *filid* (members of the traditional order of poets), the traditional guardians of Celtic religion, converted to Christianity and simply continued many of the same practices under the name of a different God" (Jestice 2000, xiv). This time of Irish history is popularly perceived as a harmonious combination of the two belief systems into Celtic Christianity, as mentioned earlier.

This syncretism of the pre-Christian and Christian traditions in Ireland meant that older Pagan elements survived as part of popular religious practices. Aspects of the pre-Christian festivals (Imbolc and Lughnasadh in particular) continued to be celebrated into the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Saint Brigid's Day replaced the old Pagan festival of Imbolc, and worship of the older goddess Brigid continued in the form of Catholic devotions to Saint Brigid. (It is likely that the saint is a Christianized version of the Pagan goddess.) Even today in Ireland, thousands of people climb barefoot up Croagh Patrick, a 762-meter-high mountain in County Mayo. This assembly at the sacred mountain is a survival of the ancient Lughnasadh festival, which was celebrated in Ireland by assemblies on hilltops (De Paor 1985, 40).

The worldview of rural Irish people in the premodern era had a duality that reflected both Pagan and Christian perspectives. Observances of pilgrimages to places such as Lough Derg show this synthesis of Pagan and Christian elements in the practice of traditional religion. Lough Derg is the destination of one of the major Christian pilgrimages because of its association with Saint Patrick (Dames 1992, 22–26); it is also known as a stronghold of Druid tradition. Beneath Station Island on Lough Derg, there are believed to be labyrinthine caverns that Druids allegedly once used for their initiatory rites (Spence 1995, 42).

The devotional practices at holy wells are also reminiscent of older religious rites, most likely remnants of pre-Christian practices. Many believe that the wells dedicated to Christian saints were previously markers of sacred springs. Wells are considered sacred and held in high esteem in vernacular Irish religion, and this adherence to water worship may stretch back to the pre-Christian era. According to the antiquarian writer James Bonwick, the people had such respect for wells that some called the Irish “the people of wells” (Bonwick 1986, 239).

The pattern-day of Irish folk tradition is often associated with a holy well dedicated to a patron saint. Many pattern-days coincide with the major seasonal festivals of Imbolc, Beltaine, Lughnasa, and Samhain (to use their Irish-language spellings). Patrick Logan pointed out that there are other festival days, but since the seasonal ones were the most important, the practices associated with those ancient festivals in particular persisted: “Some pre-Christian practices associated with these festivals were continued when Christianity had become the religion of the Irish and some of them are still seen after fifteen hundred years” (Logan 1992, 35). Vestiges of pre-Christian practices remained firmly in place within Irish Christian customs, with the two traditions eventually blending together in folk religiosity. The continuance of ancient practices in the Irish context has had strong implications for the revivers of the Druid tradition in the country in modern times; for them, it represents a legacy of ancient Druid tradition that may be revived in some sense by modern Druid practitioners.

Another historical influence on the development of the Druid tradition was the Romantic revival in the arts and literature from the late eighteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, since this movement had an impact on how Druidry was conceptualized. Certain stereotypical images of Druids were created during the Romantic revival, an example being the painting “The Druidess” by Rover Lionel. Writers such as Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold idealized and adulated the Celtic, and with this idealization of the ancient Celtic peoples came the idealization of lands inhabited by modern speakers of Celtic languages (Ó Giolláin 2000, 25–27). The rugged scenery of Ireland and the isolated geographic location of the island attracted the Romantics, and the notion of wild landscapes and “noble savages” appealed to Romantic sensibilities. One of the attractions for Romantic writers such as William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory was the notion of the Celtic, and they viewed country folk as having almost mystical qualities, living close to the land and leading simpler, serene lives. The writers of the Anglo-Irish literary revival tended to idealize an Irish peasantry and portray these people as having more spiritual qualities, and connections were made in their writings between Celticity and the contemporaneous Irish country people.

One of the ramifications of such notions was that the image of mystical wild men in the form of wizards or Druids was employed in Romantic literature as something akin to the wise man, a common motif in medieval Irish literature. For example, the motif of a hermit living in the wilderness surrounded by nature is Suibhne Geilt (Mad Sweeney). He is often considered a mythological character but also appears in historical accounts of the Battle of Mag Rath, which occurred in 637 CE. Legends about this character state that he was cursed by a saint and consequently went mad during a battle and retreated to the wilderness, where he lived in the trees (Smyth 1996, 158–162), and one of the most famous nature poems in Irish literature is attributed to him; the poem is a eulogy to forest trees and is called *Laoi Shuibhne (Sweeney's Lay)* (Mac Coitir 2003, 19–21). The prototypical image of the Druid is a wise man living a reclusive lifestyle in the forest.

Rugged landscapes and pure, simple values associated with the Irish peasantry became bound up with wider cultural nationalistic sensibilities. Paintings by visionary artists such as George “A. E.” Russell became popular, as did the poetry of the Romantic poet-folklorist Yeats, who viewed so-called peasants as having a deeper spirituality due to their relationship to the land. The ideas circulating among Romantics at that time formed a foundation for the revival of the spiritual tradition of Druidry, a prime example of the spiritual connection to the land and nature and, moreover, a tradition with origins in Celtic lands.

A leap forward through history brings us to a second kind of revival in which romantic ideas and enthusiasm for all things Celtic once again began to circulate. In the late 1970s, enthusiasm raged for wild, rugged landscapes and spiritual values. The scholar Donald Meek made the point that, since the upsurge in interest in all things Celtic in the British Isles in that period, certain notions about Celtic spirituality have become popular and that “the popularity of the subject has created an expectation which anticipates a glowing portrait of the ‘Celts’ and their spirituality” (Meek 2000, 4). He also pointed out that the word *Celtic* has become a contemporary buzzword, with many different meanings attributed to it. People in today’s society identify with aspects of Celtic culture, and for many a spiritual bond exists between contemporary spiritual life and the notion of ancient, mystical Celtic religion. As Marion Bowman remarked: “The Celtic mists are swirling once more, and in the twilight can be glimpsed an assortment of images of the Celts. Pagans, New Agers, Christians and society at large are reclaiming the Celts, and while there have been various periods of fascination with Celts and Druids in the past, they have not had such spiritual significance as we are witnessing now” (Bowman 2000, 242).

Regardless of whether an individual has ancestral roots in a country that has been historically influenced by Celtic culture or whether the individual speaks a Celtic language, the contemporary view is that one can connect to Celtic spirituality. Bowman also highlighted this phenomenon and stated that “there are increasing numbers of people who might be described as ‘Cardiac Celts’; they feel in their hearts that they are Celts. For Cardiac Celts, spiritual nationality is a matter of elective affinity” (Bowman 2000, 246). This enthusiasm for Celtic culture and embracing what is perceived to be survivals of Celtic tradition has helped to spur on the Neo-pagan movement in Ireland, as elsewhere.

The majority of Neo-pagan orders and organizations in Ireland were founded in the early 1990s. There are many more recent ones, including those discussed here. Although there were Neo-pagan groups in Ireland as far back as the 1970s and 1980s, they were not widely known, and Neo-paganism did not have so much of an impact in the country at that time. Since the 1990s, however, Neo-pagan movements have grown in Ireland, and it seems they are coming into the spotlight all the more in the twenty-first century.

The Workings of a Druidic Grove: The Owl Grove

The grove is named after the owl, a bird that is very significant to the members. Although the owl is associated with the Otherworld and may also be important to other Neo-pagans for this reason, the Owl Grove feels a particular affinity with the bird, and it is an important symbol in their worldview. The group was named the Owl Grove when Ard Draoi Mel discovered a relief of an owl on the standing stone in the garden used by the grove as a sacred site. Weathering on the stone formed the shape of the owl, and Mel saw this as a sign to call his new grove by that name. There are many mythological connections with this bird: one example is the Welsh goddess Blodeuwedd, who was changed into an owl by the magician Gwydion (Cotterell 1999, 22). Gwydion created Blodeuwedd from flowers, and because she was a magical creation, she could not be slain by ordinary means; to overcome this, Gwydion condemned her to live in the form of an owl, confined to a night-time existence (Green 1995, 60). The owl in this myth is symbolic of the supernatural and is a creature associated with the Otherworld. Closer to home in County Galway in Ireland is Slieve Aughty, the reputed home of the owl goddess Ectach, a dark goddess associated with midwinter whose screeches were said to be heard after sunset (Dames 1992, 222–223). A poem by Domhnall Mac Fhionnlaidh, favored by the Owl Grove, reads as follows:

I am coeval with the ancient oak
Whose roots spread wide in yonder moss,
Many a race has passed before me,
And still I am the lonely Owl of Srona.

(quoted in Carr-Gomm and Carr-Gomm 2001, 51)

The owl represents observation and wisdom and the search for hidden things, symbolizing the human unconscious. The Owl Grove manual states:

To follow Owl is to be acting upon one's highest wisdom, to see clearly in the darkness, to use and develop one's intuition to its highest degree, to attain a vision of things and situations that are not normally seen. By listening and learning the ways of the Owl we learn to speak with compassion from our highest self, with our hearing enhanced we listen carefully to all and meditate on everything that we see and hear. By showing respect for all we can give of our wisdom and meditation when required. (Lloyd and Draoi 2002)

When calling the quarters, the group invites Celtic deities into the circle and asks them to be present to watch over the ritual. The specific deities invoked are chosen beforehand from a list in the grove manual that was compiled by Mel, and they must have appropriate qualities for the particular festival that is being celebrated. The manual contains an inventory of Pan-Celtic gods and goddesses. Irish, Welsh, Breton, and Gaulish deities are invoked. Breton goddesses were invited into the sacred space for the spring equinox ceremony, for example, as these goddesses are associated with springtime. The group does not identify with deities from other pantheons belonging to Nordic or Greek mythology; the deities called on must have their origins in Celtic myth. What the Owl Grove manual refers to as dark goddesses are invoked during the dark half of the year (winter), among them Scathach, a warrior goddess who is associated with the Western Isles of Scotland (Smyth 1996, 151) and whose name means "shadowy" (Cotterell 1999, 82). Although group members call on the goddesses Nemhain and Badhbh, who form part of the triad of Irish war goddesses, they do not call on the Morrigan (the third goddess in the triad); they were unable to give a specific reason why this is so.

Within the Owl Grove, a female can invoke a god (or goddess), and a male can invoke a goddess (or god): gender is not an issue as regards calling the deities, as it is in some Neo-pagan groups. It should be noted also that the Owl Grove uses the term *Druid* to refer to both male and female initiates (the word *Druidess* is not used at all by group members, since they feel that feminine endings of this type were introduced during the Victorian era and that there is no need to differentiate between male and female practitioners).

The *Sidhe* are also invoked, which is an important part of the group's belief system. The word *Sidhe* (also spelled *Sí*, *Síd*, and *Síth*) has different but related associations; it can refer to (1) the fairy host of the Otherworld, (2) "Otherworld hill or mound," and (3) "peace" (Ó Cathasaigh 1977–1979, 137). In Irish folklore, structures such as a ringfort (*lios* or *ráth* in Irish) or a hillock are deemed to be entrances to the Otherworld. The fairy host (*slua Sí*) are thought to inhabit these mounds. The notion of peaceful existence is also characteristic of the Irish Otherworld. Mel was asked why the group calls on the *Sidhe*:

M: Because they are part of creation. The *Sidhe* are the High Fairies. If you look at the fairies—the elementals, as opposed to the elements, right? The elementals, the *Sidhe*, are the high folk and the lower folk are of a different category: the wee folk. We've got one on a photograph, haven't we? [Laughs] You know? It just so happens! They're part of creation. They're part of the unseen creation. Well they *are* seen occasionally. Fairies are seen.

J: There are different entities there but you call on the high . . .

M: High and the low, the wee folk. You would have heard me yesterday mention the wee folk.

J: So there are two kinds of *Sidhe*?

M: Well hopefully in between you get the rest of them as well, you know? The *Sidhe* are looked upon as being the higher realm of the fairy.

J: Like that they inhabit different realms or they're different kinds of beings?

M: I think they're slightly different, yeah. And the wee folk are slightly different again. And I suppose probably the elves as well. (Interview with Mel, September 2002)

(The mention of a photograph was a reference to something that occurred earlier on the day the interview was conducted, when the group had been examining a photograph of the garden that seemed to show a tiny figure standing on the stone by the altar in the south of the garden, next to the stone circle.)

Mel's conception of the *Sidhe* differs from the traditional Irish comprehension of these beings. The material in the Irish Folklore Archives contains Irish traditional beliefs about the *Sidhe* and precautions that humans can take against supernatural aggression. (The Irish Folklore Commission collection is now housed in manuscript form in the archives of the Department of Irish Folklore in University College Dublin and on microfilm in University College Cork and is one of the primary resources for information on the be-

liefs and practices of people in premodern Ireland.) The belief of the Druidic grove that iron should not be brought into the circle, as this is believed to repel the Sidhe and interfere with the magical working, is part of a Neo-pagan reinterpretation of what the Sidhe are. In the Neo-pagan worldview, the Sidhe seem to be generally thought of as benevolent denizens of the spirit realm and the *genii loci* (local spirits) of the Irish landscape. There are differences between the contemporary magical worldview and the traditional Irish worldview with regard to the Sidhe. In the vernacular Irish worldview, the conception of the Sidhe had its foundation in a specific understanding of the Otherworld. In native tradition, the realm of the Sidhe and the realm of humankind often intersect at certain times, in particular during the festivals of Beltane, on May 1, and Samhain, on October 31 (Danaher 1972, 121–124, 207–208). Recorded traditions of the practice of folk religion, such as tying ribbons to “fairy trees,” could be considered a kind of offering to the fairies, but more often than not, the traditions associated with these supernatural beings involve actions to ward them off or protect oneself from them. This perhaps stems from the Christian belief that human beings should not commune with the spirit world and that only the godhead should be worshipped. In vernacular Irish culture, there was a strong belief that iron could be employed as a defense against supernatural aggression. It was believed, for example, that if individuals carried nails or pins in their pockets, they would not be taken away by the fairies because fairies were thought to dislike iron. This folk belief has entered Neo-pagan discourse but has been reinterpreted: iron, once believed to be an amulet that would protect the wearer from supernatural aggression, is now omitted from Neo-pagan ritual practice in the belief that it will repel supernatural beings that may watch over a sacred circle or act as guides during the working. Rather than seeking protection against these entities, contemporary magical practitioners instead seek communication with them and embrace the supernatural.

The Owl Group uses the term *elementals* in a generic way to denote the various entities inhabiting different realms of existence. Members believe that the Sidhe exist simultaneously on both the earthly and the ethereal planes and that human beings can feel the energies of the Sidhe and sense their presence at certain locations. Some group members also believe that it is possible to communicate with these beings through ritual. Thus, they are invited not to come into this realm of being but to come into the sacred space of the circle if they wish to take part in the ritual and contribute their energies to the working. Mel said:

We always bring them in, yeah, because they do exist. That puts me into a funny frame [laughs]. But they do exist. It would be wrong to presume that we are the only ones that actually exist on this . . . [motions with his hands to

indicate the room around him] you know? People believe in deities, which you can't actually see. So people believe in elementals which you *can* see if you allow your eye to wander into that hedge in amongst the leaves and occasionally you'll see a face made of leaves and it looks very real. You can take a photograph and you'll see a face in a tree and just occasionally you'll take a photograph and there standing on a stone will be a little figure that you didn't see when you pointed the camera. (Interview with Mel, August 2003)

Mel likened belief in Otherworldly beings to belief in microbes; we cannot see microbes, but many believe that they exist. People do not normally see microbes unless they have a technique that enables this, namely, using a microscope. Similarly, in his view, human beings can communicate with the Sidhe and perhaps even view them if they have obtained the ritual techniques and spiritual receptivity conducive to such interaction with Sidhe beings.

In addition to the stone circle, there is a circular fire site at the back of the garden for people to sit around, telling stories and singing songs when the ritual has concluded. There are various altars and statues in the garden, but none inside the stone circle. The stone circle and standing stone were constructed by the grove members themselves for ritual use. A piece of slate in the center of the stone circle bears an inscription of the four directions (compass points). Mel constructed this as a visual aid for new members to help them learn the directions when calling the quarters.

As mentioned, the grove ritual attire is dark in color. The members do not work *skyclad* (the Neo-pagan term for ritual nudity), and wearing warm robes is a must in Irish weather. Also, the fact that each person's clothing is similar helps to create uniformity of appearance and symbolically means that each individual has equal status within the group. Some of the members create their own robes. Mel drew attention to the importance of ritual wear: "The rule is . . . if you can't make your own robe for various reasons, then you should work your own magic into that robe, your own energy into that robe" (Interview with Mel, September 2002). Various methods are employed to imbue a ritual robe with personal energy, such as embroidering a design or symbol onto the material or sewing on an item of jewelry or something else that the member personally finds meaningful. On occasion, ritual items are blessed within the sacred circle. One example of this consecration of ritual tools was the blessing of a large bog oak staff: the staff was held out horizontally, and each member of the group placed one hand on it and said a blessing. The Ard Draoi added that this staff would remain with him and then be passed on to his successor in the grove.

One member wears a crystal and a little marble owl necklace. An eighteenth-century shoe buckle of an owl done in silver filigree with ruby eyes is sewn onto Mel's robe. His wife gave this to him when they first met,



Ritual tools: A snake wand with a crystal and a wand with a pentacle etched into it, Ireland, 2003. (Courtesy of Jenny Butler)

and it had been passed on to her from her father. This fact has a deep significance for Mel, since he was forming the Owl Grove at the time she presented the gift to him; the owl brooch has become part of his ritual clothing and is, for him, a symbol of love. The regulation in regard to jewelry is that any kind can be part of ritual regalia provided it contains no iron. Watches and clocks are not allowed in the circle, since these follow ordinary, routine time.

The Hereditary Druid Tradition follows the seasonal cycle, or Wheel of the Year, and celebrates the eight annual festivals: Winter Solstice (December 21), Imbolc (February 1), Spring Equinox (March 21), Beltane (May 1), Summer Solstice (June 21), Lughnasadh (August 1), Autumn Equinox (September 21), and Samhain (October 31). The Neo-pagan spellings for the festivals are used here rather than the Irish-language versions because in most Neo-pagan literature, the anglicized versions of the modern Irish or Old Irish words are used. The Owl Grove diverges from the general Neo-pagan belief that the new year begins at Samhain, since this is when the Celtic celebration of the new year was; in the worldview of the Celts, the year was split into two halves, the dark winter half and a bright summer half. The Owl Grove celebrates the beginning of the new year on the winter solstice, not Samhain. The winter solstice is a dark time and a time of looking forward to the emergence of new light. As part of the celebration of winter solstice in 2003, the group had a large candle (a half-barrel tub completely filled with wax with six wicks going through it) that was lit on the night of December 21 and allowed to burn while a party commenced. A bonfire and smaller candles were also lit.

There is a basic structure to the Owl Grove ritual for festival celebrations. To begin, the members of the group walk from the house in a straight line and walk thrice around the standing stone and then into the circle. The last person to walk into the circle sets the owl statue down at the entrance (northeast) to close the circle and make it complete with nine stones. (Eight permanent granite stones make up the circle. The owl statue is kept on one of the altars in the house and is only brought outside to be used in a ritual. The statue is made of Connamara marble and serves as the ninth stone of the ritual circle.) The owl is one of the animals associated with the element of north (Shallcrass 2000, 31), and placing it in the position of northeast symbolically reflects the fact that the owl creates the “stone” of entrance and exit, since north is the quarter of darkness where things hibernate or end and east is the quarter of awakenings, fresh beginnings, and openings. The number of stones has a certain import in that it is three times three, and three is a magical number. Three symbolizes many things, including the triple aspect of the goddess—maiden, mother, crone—that is part of the worldview of many Neo-pagans. Some people also think that the

number three had a special significance for the ancient Druids as well. In Celtic mythology and also in medieval Irish literature containing similar stories and myths of pre-Christian times, the number three is a prominent motif. Triads feature prominently in genres of Irish literature, such as a group of three sayings or stories (Welch 2000, 363). Commonly in traditional Irish stories, there is the motif of a union of three, an event occurring thrice, or a triple aspect of a deity or hero. Indeed, triplism runs through Celtic literature and art, in which triune and tripartite figures appear (MacKillop 1998, 364).

In the ritual celebration, a person is chosen to call each quarter. The quarters are called starting in the east and going in a *deiseal* (Irish for “clockwise”) direction. The word *deiseal* (often anglicized as *deosil* in Neopagan discourse) derives from the Irish word *deas*, and because *to go deiseal* is to turn in accordance with the sun’s trajectory in the sky, it has associations with rectitude and progression. It has been pointed out that *deiseal* is “movement in harmony with the sun’s diurnal course and was thought from ancient times to be auspicious” (Ó Cadhla 2002, 11). The person calling the quarter draws a circle in the air with his or her index finger. This circle represents a portal, created so that the spirit world may enter the sacred circle with ease. At each quarter, a particular deity is invoked or called on to be present and oversee the ritual. The spirits of that particular quarter are also invited to come into the circle and join the ritual. Calling on the spirits includes the Sidhe (who are, in the group’s view, divided into High Fairies and the Wee Folk) and any other entities of that quarter that are welcomed in to contribute their energies to the working.

After each quarter has been called, the Ard Draoi walks around the interior of the circle of stones and says a chant, which, according to him, is an ancient rhyme passed on in the material from the Hereditary Irish Druid Tradition: “I walk within the nine and make this circle mine.” The members then form a smaller circle within the stone circle, usually focusing on a candle in the center. The high Druid picks up the chalice and pours a libation on the ground in honor of the Earth Mother. Fruit juice or mead or, alternatively, cider is chosen as a ritual libation because these drinks are natural. Mel explained: “Mead is a traditional drink. It’s probably the very first alcoholic drink that man ever made . . . when he took honey and put it with water and . . . honey and water will self-ferment into an alcoholic drink without using anything else . . . It’s natural, like cider is—another one. Cider will self-ferment. It doesn’t need any yeast. It doesn’t need any sugar. Just crush the apple up and pour water on top and it will self-ferment” (Interview with Mel, August 2003).

Mead is also associated with immortality in Celtic mythology, believed to be the drink of the gods in the Otherworld (Chevalier and Gheerbrant

1996, 644). Some food, usually a piece of cake or bread, is eaten at this point. The sharing of food in the center of the circle is symbolic in that it reflects how each individual is taking part in a group activity, a joining together for a particular purpose. A small piece of food is given to each person, which is consumed there and then, and the chalice is passed to each in a deiseal direction. If there is liquid still left in the chalice, it is passed around to each person once more. This ensures that all food and drink are eaten within the circle. Since the food is consecrated by virtue of being in the sacred space, it is not meant to leave the circle and return to the mundane world.

For the next part of the ritual, each member sits on a stone of the circle and is given something by the Ard Draoi to meditate on. For example, during the spring equinox ritual, he provided each person with a sprig of a different plant, such as woodbine and elder from the garden. Each person was asked to contemplate the nature of the sprig he or she had been given. After a few minutes of meditation, the members discussed the new spring growth and the way in which each distinctive plant grows in a certain way due to environmental conditions. Plants have a certain shape and grow in the way that they do due to the influence of the different elements—the water in their roots, the wind that moves their leaves and makes them sway, their roots embedded in the earth. The discussion then went on to how a similar process is at work with the spiritual growth of human beings and how the magical elements affect our growth and change. Much of the Owl Grove training deals with magical elements of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water and how individuals can hone their spiritual growth with respect to each of the four magical elements. The items that are meditated on and the topic under discussion at this point in the circle obviously changes for each festival, as the rationale behind this is that each person in the group reflects on the qualities of the particular season and on personal growth and change as the Wheel of the Year turns.

The next part of the working is to gather and harness the energy that was raised inside the circle so that it can be sent outward to achieve some goal. One way to draw up the energy is to have everybody hold hands in a circle and kneel down simultaneously, hands still clasped, to touch the ground. Each person concentrates on the earth energy entering their fingers and being conducted up through them. The energy may be visualized as a glowing sheet, like a pane of glass, that each person grasps and lifts up together. Everyone rises in unison and on the count of three “throws” the energy upward and out into the sky to go toward a designated place and bring healing to the people there. When the energy has been sent out, the circle is closed. This is done by closing each quarter, going from north in a *tuathal* (Irish for “counterclockwise” or “contrary to the course of the sun”); in Old

English and Scottish usage, *widdershins*) direction, and thanking the deities, spirits, and Sidhe of each quarter for their presence and guidance. The high Druid says a closing chant. The chalice and any other items used in the ritual are carried out, and the last person to leave the circle brings the owl statue, reopening the entrance to the circle to the mundane world. The members leave the circle in single file and walk three times around the standing stone before walking back into the house.

When the ceremony has finished, members of the group immediately partake of a feast in order to ground themselves. The food grounds the system and symbolically reconnects each person with ordinary life again after dealing with the energies raised in ritual. Vegetarian food is eaten, as the Ard Draoi and at least three other members are vegetarians. The food may also have a symbolic significance. For example, after the 2002 Lughnasadh celebration, everyone ate a piece of a “Lughnasadh loaf” that the group collectively made prior to the ritual. Each individual took a turn in mixing and kneading the bread. Consuming this reflected a sharing of something that had been communally created and somehow absorbing the energy of that intent to produce something together.

Sometimes the group will visit a sacred site after the ritual in the stone circle. At Lughnasadh, the group went to visit Lugna’s well in County Offaly, both because of the association, for them, that the holy well’s name has with the god to whom the festival is dedicated and also because of the energies of the place. (It should be noted that it is not known whether the site in question has any pre-Christian associations, and it is more likely that the holy well was named for some other person and is unrelated to the Celtic god Lugh.) Following the feast and the occasional trip to a sacred site, the celebration continues when a bonfire is lit in the fire pit in the garden. People gather around the fire and tell stories, chant, drum, and sing.

The members perceive what they do as working with energies to achieve some goal. In their discourse, there are often references to energies, sometimes the earth energy, of particular sites. Mel averred, “Energy is energy and you can put lots of different names on it. You can categorize it in lots of different ways, you know? If you want to be a bit highfalutin’ you can call it spiritual energy. All energy is energy—that’s all it is to my mind” (Interview with Mel, August 2003).

The training within the Owl Grove is a way of familiarizing new members with the techniques of working with and manipulating energy within ritual. New members must complete a training course for approximately a year and a day (sometimes less depending on their progress) before they can undergo initiation. The second and third years of training, after they have been initiated, build upon what they experienced and learned during their initiation. This cannot be explained in detail here, because Owl Grove

members take an oath of secrecy at initiation that enjoins them not to divulge the group's secrets. When they work with the information they have received, their personal rituals develop in their own ways. The training in the third year focuses on the ethics of spells and competency in dealing with energies in the ritual context. Mel explained that Druids *do* perform spells but that this is a secondary course of action within Druidry. According to him, spellcraft is a technique that both Druids and Witches acquire, but Druids only use this when they need to focus their energy for something very specific.

Mel made it clear that there are many differences between Witchcraft and Druidry and between Druidry and yet other Neo-pagan traditions. Although some Witches and some Druids practice spellcraft, there are still variations in their working methods. In the context of the Owl Grove, spells are cast but never bindings or protection rituals, which are an integral part of the practices of many other Neo-pagan groups. Preceding a ritual, the grove does a *weather working*—a spell to ensure that the weather will be good for the duration of their ritual. (There have always been dry conditions during Owl Grove rituals, but whether this is due to weather working cannot be authenticated!) The idea behind the spells done by the grove is that one can first make a change on the ethereal plane that is then manifested on the earthly plane when the person goes out and actually makes a physiological change. There is a notion of an imaginary Owl Grove on the spiritual plane: this is where the intent for a ritual begins, and the intent is then focused through an energy working. The energies are channeled and sent out on the material plane in order to make some specific change. Individuals can strengthen their resolve through focusing their intent, but they must still physically go out and do something in the world in order to make anything happen. Mel elaborated: “It’s the intention which is special. If your intention is to love, then obviously you’re going to manifest an energy which is gentle and loving. If you’re in a temper, you’re going to manifest a different type of energy or use the energy in a different manner. Then people would be ‘Oh! I don’t like that!’ you know, because they’ll feel the ferocity. That’s how energy is used . . . it’s with intent, intent of purpose” (Interview with Mel, September 2002).

Energy is manipulated using ritual techniques in order to achieve a certain effect. For example, many rituals involve the channeled energy being sent out to the sick in Africa; the energy of one particular ritual was sent out to manifest itself as peace and love to the people of Iraq when war was being waged on that country. Similarly, energy is sent out to individuals known to members of the group on a personal level who are ill or in need of emotional support. One member of the grove, Michael, talked about channeling energy in a ritual context: “It does help having a structured

procedure. It frees your mind and you are able to channel energies better in a structured way, I find.” He continued: “I’m working with the earth energies, the natural energies of the earth and sky, nature. There is an energy force in everything. You can harness it and channel it and it’s great working with it.” The work that the grove does is very important to its members and an integral part of their personal spiritual journeys. As Michael said: “To me, being a Druid means an outlet for my energy basically. It’s a pathway. Without it, I feel that I wouldn’t be complete. It’s my life really” (Interview with Michael, August 2003).

The ritual work carried out by the group must occur in a sacred place, where the energies can be harnessed and contained before being sent out for a specific end. The stone circle fulfills this need as a permanent sacred space regularly used by the group. In the philosophy of the Owl Grove, the entire planet is viewed as a sacred place, and each member of the group also has his or her own favorite sacred sites on the Irish landscape that they like to visit, where they can experience solace and tranquillity. As Mel jokingly said, “All places on earth are sacred, even St. Stephen’s Green” (Interview, August 2003). (Stephen’s Green is a public park in Dublin’s city center.)

The grove was once affiliated with the Druid Clan of Dana and when first formed was called the Owl Grove of Druid Clan of Dana. The clan is one of the “daughter” societies of the Fellowship of Isis, an international goddess spirituality organization that is presently based in Clonegal Castle near Enniscorthy in County Wexford, Ireland. The organization was founded at this castle at the vernal equinox of 1976 by late Rev. Lawrence Durdin-Robertson and his wife, Pamela (also deceased), and sister, Olivia. The Rev. Olivia Durdin-Robertson now administers the fellowship in the capacity of Arch-Priestess Hierophant. The fellowship was set up to restore the veneration of the goddess throughout this planet, and the name Isis is used in recognition of the notion of the divine mother and represents the goddess in all her forms. The Temple of Isis contains statues of Isis and Osiris and imagery from Egyptian mythology, but it also has many figurines, effigies, and paintings with images from different mythological pantheons and different areas of the world. Another offspring group is the Order of Tara, which is organized into priories that deal with environmental problems in their areas.

The Druid Clan of Dana was founded at Imbolc 1992 and is organized into groves around Ireland and in several other countries. The emphasis of the clan’s work is on developing psychic gifts. The clan is named after the Goddess Dana, mother of the divine race of Ireland, the Tuatha Dé Danann (people of the Goddess Anu/Danu). The classification of Druid groups into clans is among the principles and guidelines for groups that are part of the Druid Clan of Dana and does not necessarily stand for other

practitioners of Druidry or Druid groups not associated with the Fellowship of Isis. Some Druids refer to themselves as bards or ovates or arch-Druids in accordance with certain titles obtained through an order or initiation, but others prefer to simply use the term *Druid* or state that they are followers of Celtic Spirituality or Earth-Based Spirituality. The Druid Clan of Dana and the Order of Tara are worthy of mention in any account of Celtic Spirituality movements in Ireland, and many groves of the Druid Clan of Dana are active around Ireland.

In 2002, the Owl Grove decided to move on from the Druid Clan of Dana and form a separate association, the Hibernian Order of Druids.

Druid Identities in Ireland

Ireland is renowned for being one of the stalwart locations for Christian thought and is considered to be rich in Catholic traditions. Catholicism still keenly influences Irish culture today, and the country has a predominantly Catholic ethos. Modern Ireland is known for its religious disputes between Protestants and Catholics in the “troubles” of the North. Because religion has always been an important part of Irish identity, the Catholic Church has long had a strong influence over the lives of Irish people. Rather than being a backlash or response to Christianity, the Druidic movement in Ireland seems more concerned with reclaiming Irish heritage. Attitudes toward land and ecological conservation are important in the Druidic worldview and form the basis for the stance members take on reconnecting with or reclaiming Ireland’s sacred sites. On the whole, there does not seem to be a militant or politically activist bent to the principles of Druid groups in Ireland. The focus is more on culture and heritage and the importance of sacred places in Ireland as national symbols.

The subject of political activism causes heated debates at Druid gatherings and on Internet mailing lists in Ireland. Certain Irish Druids hold strong opinions on this issue, for as they see it, in order to take steps forward in areas of landscape conservation and safeguarding of sacred sites, Druids must enter a political forum in order to influence decision making with regard to environmental protection. Other Druids staunchly oppose this view, for they feel that politics and spirituality should not be interconnected and that if one has a deep connection to land and the spirits of place, important earth-healing work and practical restoration work can be done without recourse to any political body.

The North-South divide is reflected to some extent in the setup of Druid orders and groves in Ireland. The Hibernian Order of Druids and Conradh Draoiithe na hÉireann are based in the republic, and the majority of their

members reside in the southern part of Ireland. This is not to say that Druids in the North are not welcome in the orders; rather, it seems that other orders exist in the North, and more events are organized in that part of the country by British-based groups such as the Pagan Federation, the British Druid Order, and the Order of Druids in Ulster, based in County Derry.

The modern historical situation raised the question of whether the Owl Grove viewed itself as a specifically Irish or Celtic group and whether the identity that members hold in common is an Irish one, since they are living in the country, or a more distant Celtic heritage or affiliation. It seems that the bond that holds them together is Druid tradition and their identity as Druids, rather than a specific national or cultural identity. Mel stated: “I think the bond that connects the people in the group is a belief, knowledge of what we’re working and doing. The bond *isn’t* strengthened by the language or being Celts. The bond is strengthened by the thought and the action and the love we have for our own planet and the love that we have for nature and ourselves. That’s the bond” (Interview with Mel, September 2002).

Four of the grove members were born and raised in Ireland and live locally in the midlands. Some members have quite a good knowledge of the Irish language, and Irish is sometimes spoken when the quarters are being called, but the entire ritual is never in Irish. Two members are German, and Mel is English with Welsh heritage; these members do not speak Irish and would thus be excluded if the entire ritual were carried out in Irish. Mel stated that, although the Irish members are perfectly welcome to speak as much Irish as they wish during ritual practice, they do not do so unless they are specifically asked. One member of the grove, Marion, gives her opinion on the language issue:

[Having been] born in Germany and come to live in Ireland for the last sixteen years, I have connected to my Celtic roots through living a simple life close to nature. I do not speak Irish apart from a couple of *focal* [words] and even though I’d like to know Irish, I don’t think it’s necessary to speak Irish to connect with Gods and Goddesses or the fairy folk. Communication with deities and entities lies far beyond human languages, but I also do believe that an old language [such] as Irish is a good medium for the human to get in touch with other realms, if that is their way to connect. The way I connect is not so much with words, but rather with feelings and senses and images. (Interview with Marion, August 2003)

Members of the grove and many other Pagans have pointed out that, although they may not be from Ireland originally, they have a deep



Member of Hibernian Order of Druids, Ireland, 2003. (Courtesy of Jenny Butler)

connection with the country now. Having interviewed people from many different countries who follow various Pagan paths, the author has found that this sentiment has cropped up time and again. Since many Neo-pagans view their spiritual path as a nature-based one, they feel they can connect to nature in any area of the world. Several informants have imparted the belief that it is important to them to have some connection with the Sidhe of Ireland's landscape, as these are the nature-spirits or elementals of this land, in the belief that each place has its local spirit beings.

Mel has a Welsh surname, and he feels some empathy with the culture of Wales. His last name, in Welsh form, is Llwyd, meaning "dark gray" or "blue." Mel said that even as a small boy, he had always felt at home on mountains, places with heather or ferns and rocks and stones, moorlands, and other wild places that had the colors of gray or blue in their scenery. He feels some mutuality with these high places in Ireland, such as the Slievebloom Mountains near his home, and grove members often go there to practice ritual. Mel's feelings on the language issue reiterate other views that emphasize intuitive interaction with the land and its spirits rather than communication by verbal means:

The subtleties of the land, its energies, the sensing of the elements, flowing rivers, rain, birdsong, the fragrances of the earth, plants, grasses, trees, animals, the sound of the wind, the cosmic song of the stars at night and the shapes of the hills, all communicate in their own language; each having its own remarkable story and each having its own energy. I feel that as a Celt, I have an inherent ability within that enables me to communicate with the landscape. I know instinctively when I am standing on a place of importance, for I connect with the energies of that place. Perhaps in a similar manner so did the early Celtic invaders too, which is why their Druid priests used the stone circles belonging to an earlier civilisation. (Interview with Mel, August 2003)

The matter of cultural identity can be further examined in the stipulations for membership of some of the Irish Druid orders. The order founded by Mel was named Hibernian because this term comes from the Latin word for Ireland, *Hibernia*. The term has been used to characterize something as Irish and is also a poetic name for Ireland. One of the principles of the order is as follows: "The Hibernian Order of Druids accepts its membership from the indigenous peoples and inhabitants of Ireland, plus those who are Irish descendents living in other countries. The Order also includes the members of the Druid Groves that originate from The Owl Grove and/or are members of The Owl Grove" (HOOD).

The motivation for founding this order was Mel's realization that many of the people he was training on the path of Druidry might wish to go on to form their own groves, so he wanted to establish some structure whereby people could break away from the Owl Grove while still maintaining contact with it. He expounded on how the order works:

When people train hopefully they'll eventually form their own Groves. They may want to maintain contact with the Owl Grove, but obviously they can't be in two places at once, but if they belong to HOOD then all the High Druids of each Grove can get together a couple of times a year and exchange information and it's a form of camaraderie as well, you know, between them. That's what the idea of HOOD is about. And anyone else who wants to maintain a connection with us, providing they have gone through some form of training, is welcome to belong to it. (Interview with Mel, August 2003)

HOOD now has member groves in different counties of Ireland and in Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, and Scotland.

HOOD meets with *Conradh Draoiithe na hÉireann* at least once a year. The two orders gather at Tara at a specific time and join together to carry out a ritual. These gatherings are usually two-day events, and two rituals are practiced on each day, at midday and at sunset. CDÉ was founded on the night of the midwinter solstice in 2002 when Druids gathered on the summit of Tara. The association holds two gatherings per year—one is always at Tara, and the second is at a different sacred site in the country. The group website states: "*Conradh Draoiithe na hÉireann* is meant primarily for Druids who are permanent residents of the thirty-two counties of Ireland. It is a safe space for Ireland's Druids, and those on the Druid path, to meet one another, share their knowledge and spiritual insights, and grow together as a community."

Geographically, then, this means that both Druids of the Republic of Ireland and Druids in Northern Ireland are welcome to join. One of the aims of the association is the promotion of peace in Northern Ireland and of dialogue and cooperation among the Druids, including solitary Druids and autonomous Druidic groves, in all four provinces of Ireland.

Members of the convocation feel empathy with Celtic traditions of Ireland, and Druids elsewhere and those of the Celtic diaspora who also feel that Celtic tradition holds meaning for them are welcomed to join the association. One member of the convocation, the Druid Cathbad, stated:

I think it would be correct to say that we are a Celtic revival organisation, although I think that most members would say that they are interested in prac-

ting a Druidry for today rather than a replica of the Druidry of 2,000 years ago. As CDÉ is mainly an instrument for Druids to communicate and collaborate with each other, CDÉ itself has no strict “party line,” so to speak, in order to allow every member to make their own decisions and practice Druidry as they see best. (Interview with Cathbad, January 2004)

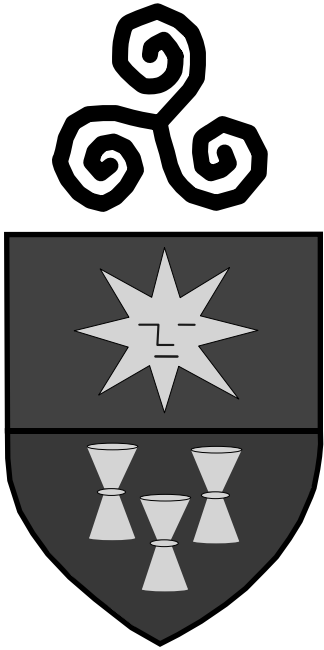
Cathbad also stated that “CDE’s members are people who live in Ireland, north or south. We prefer to define our membership geographically instead of nationally. If someone wants to be a member, and lives in Ireland, then that person would be accepted on their own merits, whether they were Irish or not” (Interview with Cathbad, January 2004).

Since the convocation accepts people on the basis of their residence in Ireland rather than on the basis of nationality, it would seem that the main aim is to develop the Druid tradition and to forge links with the Irish landscape rather than focus on individual members’ ancestry. This view is reflected in a statement made by Cathbad, who is originally from Canada:

I think that no one in CDE would object to a non-Irish person learning Druidry. What people emphasise in our discussions is the connection to the land, especially to particular landmarks or monuments, a local lake or mountain, and that sort of thing, rather than a connection through ancestry and the blood. The blood connection seems to me to be more important to Americans and others in foreign countries that seek an Irish or a Celtic Pagan path and yet do not live in Ireland or Europe. I remember how important it was to me before I moved here. (Interview with Cathbad, January 2004)

The convocation has a spokesperson who deals with media and public inquiries, a secretary, and a chairperson, all elected by the members. The symbol of CDÉ is a heraldic-style crest with the image of the sun on a blue background and three cups on a green background below. Directly above the crest is a triskele symbol. The website explains this depiction:

The green field with three cups represents the land and the Goddess with her many triple aspects. The blue field with the sun represents the sea and sky; the eight rays of the sun representing the God and the eight annual festivals in the Druidic ceremonial calendar. The arrangement together signifies the cooperation and mutual interrelation of this world and the Otherworld, after the manner of the proverb, “As above, so below.” Above the shield is a triskele, one of the most internationally well-known symbols of Druidry. (<http://www.Irishdruids.org>)



Representation of the symbol of the CDÉ Druid Order. (Used with permission by the Convocation of Druids in Ireland/Conradh Draoiithe na hÉireann)

Both orders (HOOD and CDÉ) meet at a site they collectively consider to be sacred and join together to practice ritual at this place at least once annually. Tara holds a central place in the worldview of both orders and is an evocative symbol for members of this Druid association.

The Position of Druidry in Irish Society

The Neo-pagan tradition of Druidry has its place within modern Irish society. As elsewhere, misconceptions about Paganism abound, and ritual practice is sometimes confused with devil worship and negative occult activity; this is largely due to melodramatic films and sensational literature portraying lurid details of supposed rituals, the Black Mass, brainwashing cults, and other tactics intended to shock. Of course, Neo-paganism has no connection with such activities, but the fact that some Druids and other Neo-pagans carry out rituals wearing robes and using

paraphernalia that appear strange to those unaccustomed to them may cause fear if people do not understand what Neo-paganism is. The general perception of a Pagan among the Irish public is of a person with no formal religious beliefs, an atheist, or even an individual who holds anti-Christian beliefs.

With Druidry in particular, the tree-hugging hippie stereotype is also in play, and in some cases, the notion of a Druid is muddled up with the popular image of Merlin of Arthurian legend and wizards of fantasy literature. This is especially true today with the release of the film trilogy *Lord of the Rings*, an adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's masterwork, which contains the characters of the Wizard Gandalf and Saruman, as well as J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books and the films based on them, which have characters who are wizards.

However, there seems to be an embracing of Paganism by the general public in Ireland, and this is in part due to positive media coverage. The Fellowship of Isis, for example, has a good relationship with the media, and Olivia Durdin-Robertson has done numerous interviews with the Irish press and has had many television appearances. One write-up on Huntington

Castle in Clonegal gave some history of the place and also the local legends and went on to quote Olivia; the article gave her title as “The Right Reverend Hierophant” of the Fellowship of Isis and stated the group was “reputedly the biggest Pagan organisation on the planet” (Rogers 2003). Another reporter writing on the Fellowship of Isis (Price 2003) introduced the piece by stating, “Those who have never entered the temple in Huntington Castle on Summer Solstice speculate of sacrifice and devil-worship behind its doors. In reality, a completely different experience exists.” The article was devoted to depicting the organization in a lighthearted way while dispelling any notions of Satanic activity in the temple. A feature on the summer solstice of 2002 gave the general idea of what Druids would be doing to celebrate the festival (O’Connell 2002). In a report on Drombeg stone circle near Rosscarbery in County Cork, reference was made to the fact that the stone circle is locally known as “The Druid’s Altar” and that there had recently been a Pagan wedding there (Quinlan 2002). In recent years, the Irish media seem to be making the effort to research Neo-paganism in a sincere way and to portray the movement in a truthful and positive light. The Tara solstice festival was another good example of progressive attitudes toward Paganism. The events throughout the day were a mixture of traditional artistic performances, such as storytelling, poetry readings, harp playing, and traditional Irish music, and Neo-pagan performances of dowsing by a Druid, drumming, circle dancing, and ceremonies for each element; it finished with an impressive ceremony of fire that evening atop the Hill of Tara.

Druids mingle with those of other faiths on creative projects, and there is interaction with popular culture as well, for many Neo-pagan artists and storytellers hold exhibitions and workshops that are open to the public in addition to specifically Neo-pagan events. Storytelling is an important part of the Druid tradition, as many of the ancient Druids were bards or master poets (*Ollúna* or *filid*, in Irish). Originally, the word *bard* signified “he who gives voice,” as it referred to the oral performance of poetry (Maier 1997, 32). Many Druids are also healers and may be known as homeopaths or herbalists in their wider communities (that is, outside of the Neo-pagan community).

Druidry and other Pagan paths are not legally or officially recognized as religions in Ireland. Druidry is not in conflict with other religious traditions either currently or historically in the Irish context. As has already been mentioned, there are Christian Druids in Ireland. The intermingling of Pagan and Christian traditions in the historical background of the country has endured to the present day. One undertaking that has arisen out of concern about environmental destruction are tree-planting efforts in Ireland, and these projects involve both Druid groups (including Conradh

Draoithe na hÉireann) and organizations devoted solely to tree planting, such as Forest Friends (Cairde na Coille). Forest Friends puts an emphasis on the importance of both trees and Celtic tradition in the heritage of Ireland, and Druids and followers of other spiritualities and religious traditions are involved in their tree-planting pursuits. Another example of a project with a common goal is the organization *Sláine*, which organizes the Holy Well Project. *Sláine* is a registered charity dedicated to documenting and restoring the sacred wells of Ireland. The objective is to reclaim and regenerate wells that have been considered to be sacred sites through time. Some examples of wells that have been cleaned and repaired by the group are the Well of the White Cow at Tara, Brigid's Well in Kildare, and Brigid's Well at Uisneach. There are wells dedicated to Saint Brigid all over Ireland (Logan 1992, 37), and she is viewed as both a Pagan goddess and a Christian saint; thus, these wells are sites of pilgrimage for both Christians and Neo-pagans. Both Neo-pagans and Christians are involved in tree planting, holy well restoration, and other environmental activities; these are contemporary instances of good relations between these two traditions.

Looking to the Future: Development of the Druid Movement in Ireland

In terms of the development of the Druid tradition in Ireland, the future bodes well. With the founding of the Hibernian Order of Druids and Conradh Draoithe na hÉireann in 2002 and the recent formation of similar orders, it would seem that they will increase in size and that communication between Druids around Ireland will continue to grow, with dialogue leading to the organization of additional events. In view of the fact that the Irish media have tended to present Paganism in a constructive manner and that many journalists have shown an interest in giving an accurate description of Neo-pagan activities in the country rather than promulgating negative stereotypes, it seems safe to say that future media coverage will be inclined to be sympathetic to Neo-pagan causes. It is the author's belief that Druidry, as a spiritual movement, will come to the fore and perhaps gain recognition as a religion in its own right in Ireland. Further, the author hopes that Druids will be granted authorized access to certain heritage sites such as Tara and that the Pagan origin of these sites will be given further consideration by the Department of the Environment and Local Government and the Irish Heritage Council. In consideration of their aforementioned actions regarding Tara, it may be safe to say that Druids will have an active role in environmental conservation and other issues of cultural importance in the country in the future.

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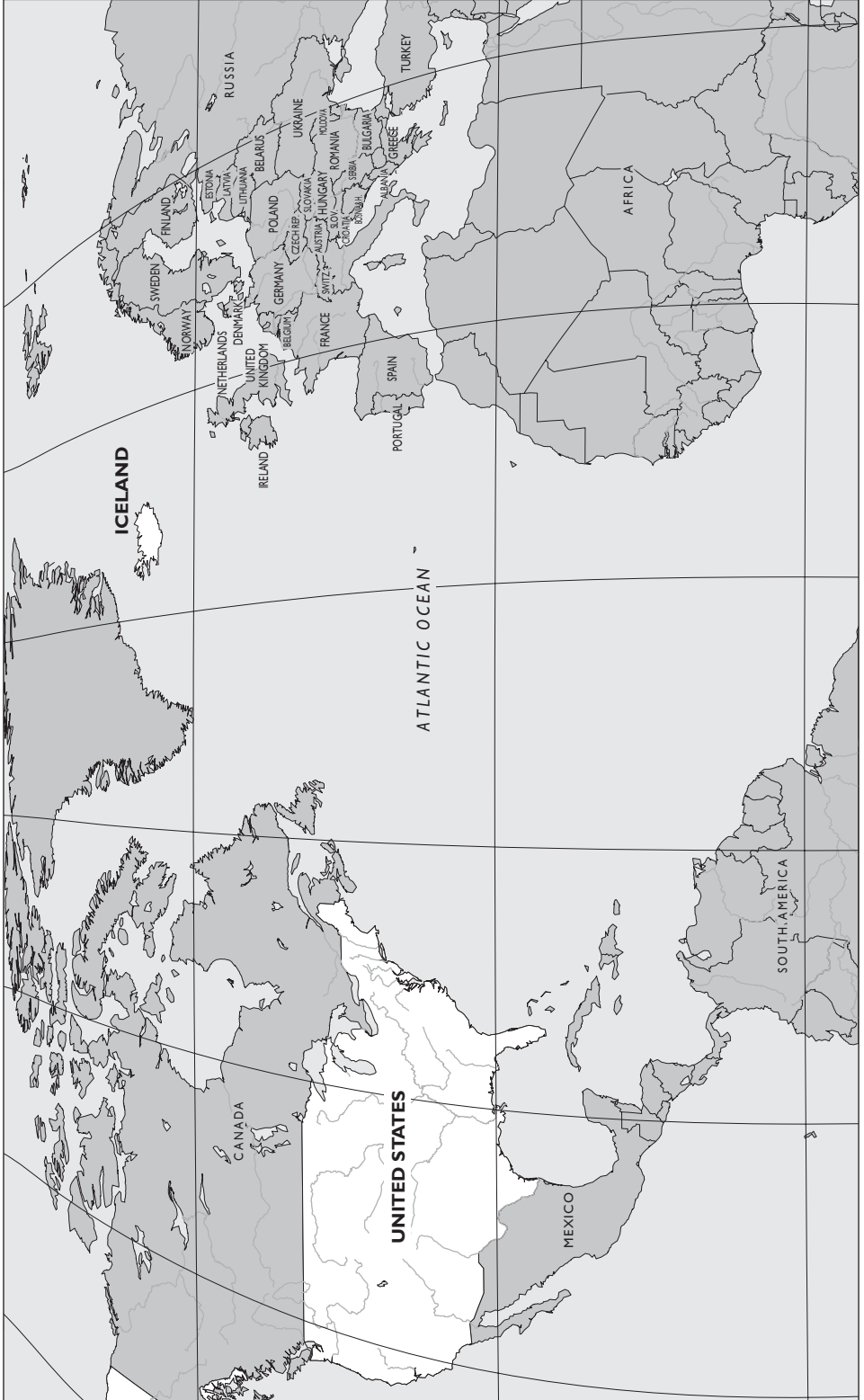
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Chapter Four

Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America

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In the early 1970s, groups of people in Iceland, the United States, and Britain simultaneously formed new religious associations devoted to reviving the ancient religious beliefs and practices of pre-Christian Northern Europe, particularly those of pre-Christian Iceland and Scandinavia but also the related traditions of the Germanic peoples of continental Europe and the Anglo-Saxons of England. In this chapter, the word *Nordic* will be employed to denote peoples and cultures of Northern Europe. *Norse* will designate the culture and religion of pre-Christian Iceland and Scandinavia in a general way, with *Old Norse* or *Old Icelandic* referring with greater specificity to the language and literature of those past times.

The Icelandic, American, and British Nordic religion revival associations of the early 1970s were not in contact with each other nor even aware of each other's existence. Each had separately arrived at the same inspiration—that the Pagan religious traditions of the Nordic past should be revived for the benefit of modern people.

In Iceland, the poet and farmer Sveinbjorn Beinteinsson and a group of friends, many of them also poets and devotees of early Icelandic literature, formed the association known as Asatruarfelagid, “the fellowship of those who trust in the ancient gods,” often abbreviated as Asatru (Strmiska 2000). In the United States, Stephen McNallen and Robert Stine formed the Viking Brotherhood, which was soon renamed the Asatru Folk Alliance. In Britain, John Yeowell and associates formed the Committee for the Restoration of the Odinic Rite (Kaplan 1997). These Nordic Pagan revival

organizations of the 1970s have since branched and split as larger numbers of people have become involved and introduced new ideas and sometimes divergent directions, while remaining united in their devotion to the religious and cultural traditions preserved in the ancient literature of Iceland and other Nordic nations.

Most modern Nordic Pagans speak of their religion as Asatru (believing in or trusting in the ancient gods) and of themselves as Asatrular (Asatru believers); alternately, they refer to themselves as Heathens (the ancient Germanic term for non-Christians) and their religion as Heathenry. The terms *Nordic Paganism*, *Asatru*, and *Heathenry* will be used interchangeably in this discussion. Nordic Pagan revival associations have also sprung up in many other lands, including Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Canada, and Australia. This chapter will provide a brief account of the history and development of the Icelandic and American forms of Nordic Paganism and offer a sketch of Nordic Paganism at the start of the twenty-first century, based on interviews and field research in both nations.

Previous studies of Nordic Paganism in the United States have tended to emphasize (and perhaps to overemphasize) certain racist and Neo-Nazi elements within the Nordic Pagan community (Kaplan 1997; Gardell 2003). The majority of modern Nordic Pagans are both enthusiastically devoted to Northern European cultural heritage and firmly opposed to Nazism and racism. The minority of Nordic Pagans with Neo-Nazi leanings are firmly denounced by most modern Nordic Pagans as members of fringe groups that they wish to have nothing to do with. The pride in ethnic heritage felt by Nordic Pagans should not be mislabeled as racism, nor should devotion to Nordic culture be flatly equated with Nazism.

Of the American Nordic Pagans interviewed for this article, one is a lesbian with an Asian lover, another participates in a Nordic Pagan association with an African American member, and yet another has adopted Korean children whom he encourages to investigate their Korean spiritual and cultural heritage and only to become Heathens if they feel a strong motivation to do so. These are hardly the profiles of would-be Nazi goose steppers.

A Brief History of Nordic Paganism in the United States

Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism in the United States has gone through several distinct stages and a series of schisms and conflicts since its beginnings in the early 1970s. It has entered the twenty-first century with a new level of organizational sophistication and a general consensus on the need to minimize conflicts and improve cooperation between different Nordic Pagan communities, whatever their positions on particular issues.

The first Nordic Pagan organization in the United States was the Viking Brotherhood, founded by McNallen and Stine in Texas in about 1972. This group metamorphosed into the Asatru Free Assembly (AFA), which operated until 1987 and then reemerged in the 1990s as the Asatru Folk Assembly, as it is known today. The AFA established many of the important organizational and ritual structures that remain operative in American Nordic Paganism to the present time, though later groups and individuals have continued to tinker with these structures and adapt and reinterpret them as they see fit.

Key Ritual Structures: The Sumbel and the Blot

Key among the ritual structures developed by McNallen and Stine are the Sumbel (alternately spelled as *symbol*) and the Blot, drawn from Old Norse–Icelandic literary sources such as the Eddas and Sagas and other Germanic texts and traditions. The Sumbel is a drinking ritual, typically performed indoors, that may take place at any time or occasion agreed on by participants. In this ritual, as a drinking horn full of mead or other alcoholic beverage is passed and poured into individual drinking vessels or drunk from directly, a series of toasts are made, offering verbal tribute first to the Norse gods and supernatural beings, then to heroes and ancestors, and then to others. Oaths may also be made during a Sumbel, as well as “boasts,” or promises of future actions that participants intend to perform. Such oaths and boasts are considered solemn and binding on the speakers, which underlines the significance of the Sumbel as something much more than a mere drinking party. The words spoken in the Sumbel are considered consecrated and powerful and are visualized as entering the Well of Wyrð, the matrix of time and fate in Norse mythology, to become part of the individual and collective destiny of those assembled on the occasion.

Mead, the beverage of choice in a Sumbel, is brewed from honey and herbs and is a traditional beverage of the ancient Germanic and Scandinavian peoples. The drinking horn from which the ritual beverage is poured or drunk is fashioned, in accordance with medieval tradition, from the horn of a bull or some other similarly large and impressive animal. Many Asatruar and Heathens have become skilled at brewing mead and in crafting drinking horns, which they display, sell, and, of course, drink mead or other beverages from at seasonal Pagan gatherings. This convention is a good example of how reviving traditional skills, crafts, and folk arts of past Nordic culture go hand in hand with reviving spiritual beliefs and activities of past Nordic religion in Heathenry and Asatru; cultural heritage and

spiritual heritage are not thought of as separate and distinct areas of life but viewed as different branches of the same tree.

The Blot is the other major ritual form worked out by McNallen and Stine from ancient sources in Old Icelandic literature and elsewhere. Though similar to the Sumbel, it is distinct in a number of ways. It is performed outdoors around a fire and under the open sky at times of annual holy days or feast days, and it involves certain ritual procedures that go beyond what is done in the Sumbel.

The Blot begins with invocations of the gods, similar to those pronounced in the Sumbel. Mead is once more involved, but whereas this is drunk from a horn passed around to the participants in the Sumbel, mead is contained in a sacred bowl in the Blot and not drunk but sprinkled onto the participants and onto altars and images of the gods by the priest or priestess, who performs this action with a sprig or branch of an evergreen tree dipped into the mead. At the conclusion of the rite, the mead is poured into the ground or into the fire as a final offering to the gods or ancestral spirits. A series of publications by McNallen (1986) offers suggestions about Blots for particular deities and occasions.

In past Nordic tradition, the Blot originally involved a ritual of animal sacrifice. Blood, the literal meaning of the word *Blot*, was caught from the slit throat of the slain animal in a sacred bowl and sprinkled onto participants and then poured or smeared onto images of the gods positioned on altars. Most modern Nordic Pagans have chosen to substitute mead for blood, while believing that they are preserving the same meaning of a distribution of life force between the participants and their gods. The ancient ritual would end with the participants feasting on the slain animal, cooked after its sacrifice. Modern Nordic Pagans likewise conclude their Blots with a feast.

Though the Sumbel and the Blot are the most well-known and widely shared forms of ritual in the overall Nordic Pagan community, there are others as well. These include *Seid* or *Seith* (Icelandic *Seiðr*), a Shamanistic practice involving trancelike, oracular states used for contacting gods and spirits (Blain 2002) and life cycle rites for births, comings of age, weddings, and funerals (McNallen 1986).

Key Organizational Structures: The Kindred, Godi, and Gythia

The AFA also introduced organizational structures, based on the Icelandic Eddas, Sagas, and other lore, that have proven enduring in the Nordic Pagan community. At the local level, Heathens who worship together may



*Autumn Blot. Law speaker reading a poem, outside Reykjavík, Iceland, September 1996.
(Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)*

form associations known as kindreds, also known as hearths or fellowships and by other names. The members of such an association are bound together by oaths of loyalty and mutual assistance, forming a supportive, often closely knit community. These local organizations range in size from as few as several members to as many as 100. An important characteristic of these associations is their generally democratic and nonhierarchical nature, with decisions made by discussion and consensus and leaders elected to various administrative posts, often on a rotating basis. Powerful personalities do, however, dominate, and there is a continuing tendency for dissatisfied minority factions to split away from the main group and form new associations. There is also a further category of Nordic Pagans—“solitaries” who practice rituals alone, as are also found in Wicca and other modern Pagan traditions.

Kindreds meet with other kindreds for regional meetings known as *Things*, an Old Norse term referring to the ancient Scandinavian practice, well described in the Icelandic Saga literature, of gathering together at regular intervals through the year to reaffirm laws, oaths, and contractual relationships; determine the leadership of local communities; mediate disputes; conduct rituals and commercial transactions; and feast and celebrate. For Nordic Pagans living in the United States today, many of the

legal and quasi-governmental functions of the ancient Thing have been taken over by the civic structures of American society, but the Things remain important occasions for solemn worship and reaffirmation of oaths as well as not-so-solemn feasting and celebration, games, and competitions. There are also workshops offering instruction in traditional Nordic crafts and skills and merchants selling wares such as drinking horns, hand-carved runes, medieval-style clothing, small metal hammers of Thor worn as medallions, and other Nordic paraphernalia. Several American Nordic Pagans from the New York metropolitan area who were interviewed for this article spoke of a regional gathering known as the East Coast Thing (ECT) as a seminal event in solidifying links between followers of Asatru and Heathenry in the area.

Nordic Pagan Thing gatherings are comparable in many respects to the Pagan festivals described by Sarah Pike in her 2001 work *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves*, but there are some important differences. First of all, where Pike's festivals are open to a wide variety of different Pagan traditions, Things are for Nordic Pagans only, though within this framework there are to be found subgroups of Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, and Scandinavian-Icelandic Pagans. Pike mentions ritual nudity and, in particular, naked dancing around bonfires as popular elements of many Pagan festivals (Pike 2001, 182–217). Such bacchanalian revelry rarely if ever takes place in Things. Nordic Pagans generally disdain public nudity, firmly stating their wish for all their religious activities to be fully accessible to families and children. They tend to associate public nakedness and the related possibility of free-flowing, polyamorous sexuality with Wicca, a form of modern Paganism that most Nordic Pagans reject as an all-too-modern, made-up religion with overly loose morals, lacking any substantial basis in an actual pre-Christian religious tradition.

There are also national gatherings of Nordic Pagans from across the United States modeled on the *Althing*, the ancient Pan-Icelandic quasi-parliament that was held each summer in the spectacular natural landscape of Thingvellir in the early period of Icelandic settlement. The American Althing is an annual event, as is another large-scale national gathering called the *Trothmoot*.

The AFA also introduced a kind of Nordic Pagan clergy modeled on the Icelandic *godar* (*goðar*). In ancient Iceland, the *goði* (Icelandic *goði*, female equivalent *gyðja*, here anglicized as *gythia*) was both a priest offering worship to the Nordic gods and a powerful community leader, often a wealthy landowner with a large retinue of retainers and servants. The *goði* or *gythia* in modern Paganism is expected to be knowledgeable in the lore of ancient texts and proficient in Sumbels, Blots, and other ritual practices, though particular Nordic Pagan communities have varying ideas about the

kind of training and credentials required of restore “a godi or a gythia” (important).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as Jeffrey Kaplan has chronicled, the AFA was bedeviled by the persistent efforts of white supremacists and Neo-Nazis, including members of the American Nazi Party, to infiltrate the organization and steer it into an overtly racist direction. Whereas McNallen and Stine were dedicated to a celebration of Scandinavian-Germanic cultural heritage and a revival of spiritual and ritual elements of that heritage, the Neo-Nazis were intent on hijacking the AFA agenda to promote a religious justification of white supremacy and Germanic superiority. After many exhausting clashes with such Neo-Nazi infiltrators and financial and organizational difficulties, McNallen and Stine pulled the plug on the original AFA in 1987. However, they eventually introduced a new organization with the same initials as the old: the Asatru Folk Assembly (Kaplan 1997, 18–20). An important lesson drawn from these early experiences with Neo-Nazis is a widespread recognition of the need to carefully screen potential members to keep out people with extreme political or racial views, as well as the mentally unbalanced. For this reason, many kindreds only allow people to become members if they are already known to someone in the group who can vouch for their character and appropriateness. Therefore, someone interested in joining an Asatru kindred without knowing any of its members would need to begin by making the acquaintance of a kindred member, who could then invite him or her into the kindred at a later date.

Though the disbanding of the original AFA might have appeared to be a bad omen for the future of Asatru in the United States, McNallen and Stine had planted seeds that would take firm root. Those seeds would give rise to a veritable forest of seedlings and saplings in the sense of Asatru and Heathen organizations both large and small that are now, some two decades later, growing to maturity. Two new Asatru umbrella organizations—the Ring of Troth, later to be known simply as the Troth, and the Asatru Alliance—were founded in the 1990s. Together with the AFA’s new incarnation as the Asatru Folk Assembly, the Troth and the Alliance have succeeded in attracting new generations of Americans to Asatru/Heathenry, with the advent of the World Wide Web and Internet discussion groups in the mid-1990s greatly facilitating the spread of modern Nordic Paganism. Though these various organizations have sometimes been rivals and even enemies, it is indisputable that they share many common features. All have a singular devotion to the same Nordic cultural and spiritual heritage, studying the same literary sources from Iceland and other Nordic nations, worshipping the same gods, observing the same rituals of Sumbel and Blot, and taking equal pride in re-creating the lifestyle of Nordic people of the past.



Autumn Blot ritual, outside Reykjavík, Iceland, September 1996. (Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)

Divisions and Disputes: The Folkish versus Universalist Debate

The disputes that have raged between these three divisions of Nordic Paganism in the United States, as well as among dozens of smaller local associations and nonaffiliated solitary worshippers, have generally centered around conflicting definitions and interpretations of the Nordic heritage that all these various organizations and individuals are dedicated to reviving and upholding. A key focus of debate is the issue of whether this heritage is seen as something primarily cultural, preserved in the myths, texts, arts, languages, and other cultural expressions of the ancient Norse-Germanic peoples, or whether it is understood as something genetic or racial, encoded in the genes or DNA, collective unconscious, or racial memory of people of Northern European ancestry. The two views are often mediated in a third position in which the transmission of Nordic heritage is understood as something both genetic and cultural; inherited by some from their ancestors as a genetic predisposition that is activated by cultural stimulation but also passed on and shared via cultural communication to people of unrelated ancestry. There is also a fourth position, which may be termed a more theological perspective: that the Nordic gods exist as actual,

supernatural entities and reach out to humans they wish to become Heathens, transmitting Nordic spirituality directly to those that they choose, regardless of genes or culture.

The position that is taken on this genetic/cultural divide determines the stance that each organization and individual member takes concerning who is entitled to join the revival of Nordic Paganism. That is, whether the Nordic heritage is understood as something passed through genes and ancestry, through culture alone, or through some combination of the two affects whether Nordic Pagan groups limit their membership to people of Northern European ancestry or open their doors to anyone who has a spiritual interest in the Nordic cultural heritage.

In the internal discourse of American Asatru/Heathenry, these two positions were long debated as “folkish” versus “universalist” versions of Nordic Paganism. Nordic Pagan associations were described as folkish if they restricted membership in Asatru or Heathenry to Northern European “folk,” that is, people of Northern European ancestry, with some reference to nineteenth-century Romantic ideas of each nation possessing a collective “folk-soul.” The universalist label applied to those who believed in allowing anyone to join a Heathen or Asatru association, regardless of racial or ethnic background, if the person demonstrated a sincere interest in Asatru—if, in a phrase encountered many times in the course of interviews, people felt a definite “pull” to the ancient Nordic gods.

The AFA and the Asatru Alliance have tended to favor the more ancestrally oriented folkish view, and the Troth has more often stood on the open-to-all, feel-the-pull, universalist side of this debate. Some critics have mocked the universalist-oriented Troth as “Wiccatru,” meaning an unholy combination of Asatru and Wicca. However, a neat division of these organizations and the many smaller groups and persons affiliated with these large associations into folkish versus universalist, racist versus nonracist groups is not accurate, however tempting it may be for those seeking neat categories and classifications. The issues involved in the folkish-versus-universalist debate are not settled points of doctrine in any of these organizations but are in fact under continual discussion in *all* of these communities. An appropriate comparison could be made with the never-ending debates in Judaism about who is entitled to be a Jew and under what conditions and with what restrictions a non-Jewish person may convert to Judaism.

Owing to the decentralized structure of authority in Asatru and Heathenry, with the AFA, Troth, and Asatru Alliance only being umbrella organizations, not hierarchical authorities delineating a strict party line for all to follow, individual kindreds and persons take a wide range of positions on this and many other issues, regardless of the stances of such leading figures as Steven McNallen of the AFA, Valgard Murray of the Asatru Alliance,

or Diana Paxson of the Troth. A further complexity is the fact that members of different Nordic Pagan communities are often in friendly communication with each other, regardless of the supposed ideological divisions between their different associations. Even when disputes flare up in e-mail discussion groups or other channels, the commonalities among diverse Nordic Pagans or Heathens generally far outweigh the issues that divide them.

It should be noted that even among the more exclusive or folkish Nordic Pagans, the concern with promoting the cultural and spiritual heritage that they see as a cultural and/or genetic inheritance from Northern European ancestors is not an assertion of superiority over other peoples with other ethnic traditions, nor is it a call for hatred against other peoples and their traditions. As a writer in the AFA publication *Runestone* explains:

It is a sad comment on our times that whispers raised in pride by European-descended people will draw accusations of “racism,” whereas the angry shouts of other groups will not . . . WE ARE NOT racists (unless being of European heritage and not hating yourself is racist). We are opposed to racial hatred and intimidation, regardless of who practices it. We salute honorable men and women of all racial, ethnic and religious groups. The AFA sympathizes with the efforts of all cultural and racial groups to maintain their identity and promote their legitimate interests . . . Having said that, we might add that we are not pitiful ethno-masochists, cringing before the court of the politically correct, ready to apologize for living. We are proud of the countless generations that gave us birth, and we will stand, unflinchingly, as their sons and daughters. (“The Asatru Folk Assembly: Building Tribes and Waking the Spiritual Path of Our Ancestors,” Asatru Folk Assembly website)

In contrast, an East Coast Asatru organization called Raven Kindred North promotes the view that although Nordic Paganism is *about* Northern European heritage, it is not *for* European people only. The group’s promotional literature states, “Asatru is for anyone who wants to live with honor and worship the Eddic Gods. Anyone who wants to become Asatru can, regardless of gender, race, color, ethnicity, national origin, or any other divisive criteria. Being of European ancestry is NOT a requirement” (North).

To sample a third, still slightly different view, the following is a statement from the promotional literature for the Asatru Alliance: “Asatru is the native/organic religion of the peoples of Northern Europe prior to the Christian domination of Europe . . . Membership in the Alliance is encouraged for those who actively promote and believe in the Aesir and Vanir [the two

main groups of gods in Norse mythology] and our collective European Heritage. Anyone interested in joining the Asatru Alliance should contact their Kindred of choice for acceptance” (Asatru Alliance website).

European Ambiguities

When Nordic Pagans in the United States speak of their European origins or ancestors, there is a certain ambiguity in terms of what Nordic Paganism is, where it came from, and whom it is for. It is common for Nordic Pagans to describe Asatru or Heathenry in very broad and general terms as being the religious expression of the cultural heritage of “Northern European” peoples or even, as in the *Runestone* passage noted earlier, of “European-descended” peoples. Considering the diversity of nations and language groups that have existed in Europe and even Northern Europe from ancient times to the present, the lack of precision about *which* particular linguistic or cultural group the modern religion is derived from or related to is striking. There seems to be a tendency among many Nordic Pagans to “essentialize” Northern Europe and sometimes Europe in general as the “land of our ancestors,” without actually explaining *which* ancestors in *which* land, speaking *which* language, and so forth. As most Nordic Pagans center their religion on the worship of Odin, Thor, and other gods found in the Old Norse–Icelandic literature, what seems to be occurring is a use of the religious heritage of one particular part of Northern Europe as a convenient, shorthand way of respecting the collective religious heritage of a more diverse set of past peoples and cultures, that of pre-Christian Northern Europe or even Europe in general. The general vagueness of American Nordic Pagan views of the Northern European “homeland” is a poignant commentary on the distance that divides American Heathens and Asatru followers from the lands of their spiritual ancestors, but it also helps to mediate conflicting definitions of Nordic heritage and divergent loyalties toward different specific regions of Northern Europe.

However, it should be noted that some Nordic Pagans are highly knowledgeable and articulate about the regional varieties of ancient Northern European culture and religion and travel to meet with their Pagan compatriots in Iceland and other nations. Those Heathens and Asatruar who acquire substantial knowledge of the texts, traditions, and languages of the various peoples of pre-Christian Northern Europe are greatly respected in their communities, and they often publish articles in Asatru or Heathen magazines as well as compete in lore contests at Things and other important occasions.



Hand-manufactured goods on display at a Viking historical re-creation festival at Hafnafjordur, Iceland, June 2002. (Gísli Gudjónsson, www.gudjonssonphotos.com)

Sources of Nordic Paganism

Nordic Paganism is a Reconstructionist form of Paganism. The primary source materials are literary texts written in medieval Iceland in the historical range of 1100 to 1300, in the Germanic-Scandinavian language variously known as Old Norse or Old Icelandic, which is indeed quite similar to modern Icelandic. These texts are believed by modern Nordic Pagans to preserve Pagan beliefs from long before Iceland's conversion from Norse Paganism to Christianity in the year 1000, an event that will be discussed in a later section. Several categories of texts are important to modern Nordic Pagans. First, there is the collection of largely mythological poems known as the *Poetic Edda*, with individual Eddic poems providing accounts of the past creation and future destruction of the world, the nature of the Norse universe, and the adventures and misadventures of the various gods, as well as the exploits of certain nondivine heroes and heroines. Further information on the same topics is given in a supplementary text, the *Prose Edda*, written by the medieval Icelandic scholar and statesman Snorri Sturluson.

The leader of the Norse gods is Odin, the one-eyed god of wisdom, war, magic, and poetry, among other powers and functions. Other prominent

Norse deities include Thor, the reliable protector of humankind who brandishes a hammer to smash malevolent giants and other foes; Tyr, god of war and oaths; Frigg, the wise wife of Odin; Baldur, the son of Odin, fated to first be slain by his own brother and then return from death to rule the world; Loki, the sometimes harmful, sometimes helpful god of guile and trickery; Ægir and Ran, god and goddess of the sea; Freyja, the goddess of fertility, love, and war; her twin brother Freyr, also associated with fertility; Njorthur, god of seafaring, fishing, and commerce and father of Freyja and Freyr; and Hel, the goddess of death. Other deities are described in less detail in the Old Norse literature, and other classes of supernatural beings such as Elves and Landspirits, worshipped in both ancient Norse tradition and modern Nordic Paganism.

The *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda* are the main sources of information on the Norse religion of pre-Christian Iceland and Scandinavia, but an additional category of texts, novel-like narratives known as the Sagas, are equally important for providing a down-to-earth view of Icelandic life and society in the early centuries of Icelandic history. Of particular significance are the so-called Family Sagas, which tell of families, feuds, and political maneuverings among the early generations of Icelandic settlers following the first Viking arrivals in the last third of the ninth century CE. It is from the Sagas that modern Nordic Pagans derive much of their understanding of Norse institutions such as the Thing and the godi and ritual activities such as the Blot. The Sagas also greatly influence modern thinking about the morality and ethics of the Pagans of the past, with the heroes and heroines of the Sagas serving somewhat as role models, much as Jews or Christians might view leading persons of the Old or New Testament.

Although the Eddas and Sagas are by far the most respected and influential texts consulted by modern Nordic Pagans, other texts and sources of information are widely shared and discussed. The *Heimskringla*, also written by Snorri Sturluson, is a semihistorical, semimythological account of ancient Norwegian kings that provides information about gods, ritual practices, and life and society on the Scandinavian mainland (as opposed to the Icelandic focus of the Sagas). Skaldic poems, an archaic Icelandic genre from Viking times, provide vivid accounts of warrior heroes and gods.

There are also non-Norse, non-Icelandic texts. The medieval Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, which tells of Scandinavian warrior life, is a valued literary treasure from England. More fragmentary Anglo-Saxon texts, such as the *Nine Spells Charm* (Rodrigues 1993), provide insight into the Anglo-Saxon variants of Norse Paganism—for example, the Norse Odin worshipped as the Anglo-Saxon Woden in England and the poem *The Dream of the Rood*, which blends Christian and Norse Pagan motifs in strange and startling ways. A fragmentary German text, the *Merseburg Charm*, tells of



Asatru woman at a Viking festival in Hafnafjordur, Iceland, June 2002. (Gisli Gudjónsson, www.gudjonssonphotos.com)

spells and incantations containing mythological information. The German epic *Nibelungenlied* is popular as an illustration of warrior ethics. German and Scandinavian folk and fairy tales are also valued as expressions of Nordic sensibility toward life and nature. The *Gesta Danorum*, a history of the Danes written in Latin by an antiquarian monk, Saxo Grammaticus, provides alternate and sometimes strikingly different accounts of Eddic myths and gods. The Roman historian Tacitus's *Germania*, an account of German tribes on the fringes of the Roman Empire, is also studied with interest as the earliest documentary text related to Germanic-Scandinavian peoples. Most Nordic Pagans read these texts in English translation, but scholarly Pagans study these documents in their original languages.

Various nontextual sources of information about past Nordic life and culture are highly valued. Archaeological remains in the Scandinavian nations—from the ancient kings' tombs in Denmark and Sweden to Viking tombstones and runic inscriptions on the Baltic island of Gotland to the site of the original Icelandic Thing parliament at Thingvellir—are sites of Nordic Pagan pilgrimage. Discussions of the history and significance of such sites are followed with intense interest in both popular and scholarly media, from documentary programs on the Discovery Channel television network to archaeological journals. Runes, the ancient Scandinavian writing and symbol system, receives intensive interest because of the widespread belief among modern Nordic Pagans that the runes possess esoteric, ritual significance.

Although it is doubtless true that modern Nordic Pagans take an extremely positive, even romanticized view of past Nordic history and culture, theirs is not an entirely uncritical view. They seek to reconstruct only select aspects of the worldview and lifestyle of the Vikings and other past Nordic peoples, and they acknowledge that there are other aspects, such as slavery and wanton violence, that they are all too happy to leave in the past. A good many Nordic Pagans follow scholarly debates about Nordic history and are conscious that the contemporary understanding of the Nordic past is continuously evolving through the clash of multiple perspectives and interpretations, like modern Nordic Paganism itself.

Worldview and Values in Nordic Paganism

The Nordic Pagan view of the world and sense of moral values is strongly influenced by the ancient texts, such as the Eddas and Sagas, but this is not a matter of slavish obedience to a set of absolute dogmas declared by the ancients. Nordic Pagans consult and reflect on the old texts and whatever other information they can find about past Nordic beliefs and ways of life,

but they revel in their freedom to think through these matters anew and reinterpret and refit old traditions to modern conditions as necessary. That is, Nordic Pagans, like other Reconstructionist Pagans, are involved in a dialogue with the past, seeking not so much to imitate the past as to learn from it, for the purposes of the present and the future. In this way, they may be said to resemble the Viking explorers of 1,000 years ago who carried their ancestral gods and traditions to new lands and established new societies that did not simply mirror their previous way of life but engaged with new and previously unexpected possibilities as well. A few examples of how modern Nordic Pagans both respect and reinterpret the traditions of old will serve to illustrate the point.

In the Eddas and related Old Norse texts, there are a number of descriptions of the ancient Nordic view of the universe. The different accounts vary on certain details but agree that the Norse cosmos is divided into various levels housing different orders of beings, such as humans, gods, elves, dwarfs, and giants, and also the dead, who are themselves described as divided into different locations. The relationship between these different worlds and their different occupants are not always clearly explained, and such explanations that are given vary, but the general principle of a multi-level cosmos peopled by many types of beings, both human and other, holds firm.

Though the gods of most religions are generally defined as immortal beings immune from death, there is a poignant mortality ascribed to the gods of Norse mythology. In Ragnarok, the catastrophic battle of gods and demons that destroys the world, three of the most famous Norse gods die in combat against demonic opponents. As described in the poem *Voluspá* and elsewhere in the Eddas, Odin dies fighting against Fenrir, a monstrous wolf who will also devour the sun. Fenrir is the child of Loki, as is Thor's adversary the Midgard Serpent, a dragonlike being so large that in its home beneath the ocean, it encircles the entire earth (Midgard). Thor slays the serpent, only to die soon after from his wounds. Freyr's opponent is the fire giant Surtur (sometimes shortened to Surt), who first overcomes the god of fertility and then burns the universe to ashes with his sword of conflagration. After the earth is totally decimated and sinks into the ocean, it rises again, renewed in freshness and fertility, with the new ruler of the world being a reborn Baldur, son of Odin, accompanied by his brother and slayer, the blind god Hoth.

Few Nordic Pagans see the myth of Ragnarok as a literal prophecy of future events; rather, they see it as a symbolic warning of the danger of destruction if humans act unwisely in relation to each other and to nature. The death of the gods, particularly Odin, is viewed as a poignant medita-

tion on the inevitability of death and the need to live with honor and integrity until that day arrives.

In a number of important texts, such as the Eddic poems *Grimnismal* and *Vafthrudnismal* and the commentary on the Eddic poems known as the *Prose Edda*, the different worlds of humans, gods, and other beings are said to be supported and connected by the branches of a great “World Tree” known as Yggdrasil. The Nordic gods are said to hold their daily congress at the base of this tree, gathering together to debate and decide matters much like the ancient Scandinavians in their Thing meetings. The tree itself is tended by three wise female beings known as the Norns, who carve runes (the ancient Norse script used both for communication and magic) that guide the destinies of both gods and humans.

Most modern Nordic Pagans do not generally endorse the view of the universe presented in Norse mythology as a literal description of the nature of our world but regard it more as a symbolic expression of the existence of a higher realm of being beyond our ordinary, everyday experience and of the interrelatedness of that higher world or worlds and our own. Where there is a wider span of views is on the issue of the nature of the Norse deities.

Some Nordic Pagans believe the Norse gods to be actual supernatural beings, and others see the gods as culturally coded symbols of important aspects of life and human nature, with Odin representing wisdom and mystical insight, Thor symbolizing valor, Tyr integrity, Frigg women’s intuition, Freyja female strength and sexuality, and so forth. That is, some see the gods as existing “out there,” whereas for other Nordic Pagans, the gods exist “in here,” possessing reality on an imaginative, psychological level, inside the minds and spirits of those who pay heed to them. There are, of course, intermediate positions between these two and alternate perspectives as well, but the two views are representative of much of the thinking about the nature of the gods within Asatru and Heathenry. What unites all Nordic Pagans, whatever their different understandings of the gods, is their common conviction that the Norse myths and related Nordic traditions provide a coherent set of values for how to live in our world in an honorable and successful manner.

Old Norse religious and mythological texts do not provide any definitive statement of Pagan ethics, though the Eddic poem *Havamal* (*The Sayings of the High One* [Odin]) contains a good deal of pithy advice for how to live with integrity and survive in the midst of adversity. The core of Icelandic society for most of its history has been the farmer, whose lot was never easy in the often harsh conditions produced by Iceland’s far northern climate and isolation, and *Havamal* provides something of a tough Icelandic farmer’s kind of unsentimental, down-to-earth folk wisdom. Some characteristic sayings include the following:

To his friend a man should be a friend
and repay gifts with gifts;
laughter a man should give for laughter
and repay treachery with lies (v. 42)
A farm of your own is better, even if small;
everyone's someone at home;
A man's heart bleeds when he has to beg
for every single meal (v. 37)
Average-wise a man ought be,
never too wise;
for he lives the best sort of life,
he who knows a fair amount (v. 54)
Silent and thoughtful a prince's son should be
and bold in fighting;
cheerful and merry every man should be
until he waits for death (v. 15)
Fire is best for the sons of men,
and the sight of the sun
his health, if a man can manage to keep it,
living without disgrace (v. 68)
Cattle die, kinsmen die,
you yourself shall die
I know one thing which never dies:
the reputation of each dead man. (v. 77)

We do not find in this text any absolute ethical standard or aspiration to saintliness or moral perfection, as in religions such as Christianity or Buddhism, but only the simple but firm determination to live a life of enjoyment, accomplishment, and integrity within an acceptance of human limitations. This grounded and pragmatic view of life is profoundly humanistic without denying the importance of the sacred or the supernatural. One seeks to be on good terms with other people, with the natural world, and with the supernatural world as well, without shrinking from conflict or from defending one's rights.

The Sagas celebrate tough, shrewd heroes such as Egill Skallagrímsson of *Egils Saga*, Gunnar of Hlíðarend of *Njáls Saga*, and Gísli Súrsson of *Gíslis Saga*, who fight on against the odds and do not back down, even at the cost of death. The Sagas contain equally stouthearted and strong-willed heroines, such as Gudrun Ósvífrsdóttir of *Laxdaela Saga*. Such steadfastness reflects the attitude of the gods in facing the final battle of Ragnarok. Even though they are fated to fall in combat against demonic forces, they prepare in full earnest and make their maximum effort. The sense of living a

dignified life without any hope of a miraculous salvation is central to the ethics and worldview of the ancient Norse texts and is taken up in modern Nordic Paganism as well.

Nordic Pagans in the United States have developed the list of Nine Noble Virtues as a brief, easy-to-remember summary of their overall approach to ethics. The Nine Noble Virtues may seem to outsiders like a kind of Viking version of the Judeo-Christian Ten Commandments that comes up one short, but the number nine has a mystic significance in Norse mythology. Nine is the number of worlds encompassed by the cosmic tree Yggdrasil, the number of nights during which Odin hangs himself on the World Tree in a Shamanistic myth related in *Havamal*, and the number of steps taken by Thor before he dies after slaying the mighty Midgard Serpent. The Nine Noble Virtues (often abbreviated as NNV) are courage, truth, honor, fidelity, discipline, hospitality, industriousness, self-reliance, and perseverance. Such is the version promoted by Edred Thorsson; an alternate list of strength, courage, joy, honor, freedom, kinship, realism, vigor, and ancestry has been espoused by AFA founder Steven McNallen. The McNallen version of the NNV puts more emphasis on family lineage and ethnic identity than Thorsson's, but the two are otherwise quite similar.

Nordic Pagans vary in their attitudes toward the NNV, in whichever version. As Asatru or Heathenry has from its beginnings been a nondogmatic, nonauthoritarian, decentralized religion, some Nordic Pagans are opposed to the promotion of something that looks to them rather like a doctrine or creed. Others see the NNV as a valuable tool for stimulating awareness and promoting discussion of ethics among Nordic Pagans. In an essay on the Nine Noble Virtues, Massachusetts Asatru leader Mike Smith reflected:

Yes, about 6 or 7 years ago, I was one of them folks who would proudly repeat them [the NNV] over and over like a mantra . . . But now, I think they do more harm than good in the long run. My reasons for this are rather simple. One, is that no one can take a single word and all interpret it the same . . . I've personally heard more than 300 different definitions and descriptions of each and every "virtue" . . . Basically, the NNV are sort of a "cheat sheet" or the really crummy "Cliff's Notes" that are VERY loosely based on the Havamal. If, in high school or college, reading the "Cliff's Notes" or renting the movie never got you an "A+" on that literature test . . . then why do the same for something as important as your religion? (Smith 2003b, 26–27)

Smith's account of his transition from an initial enthusiasm for the Nine Noble Virtues to a critical awareness of their inadequacy encapsulates a journey from a relatively simple and uneducated version of Asatru to a more sophisticated and scholarly one, based on a progressively greater

knowledge of Old Norse texts and Nordic cultural heritage. Many committed Asatruar and Heathens experience a similar process of development.

Though thoughtful Nordic Pagans such as Smith may reject the NNV as simplistic or misguided, the interviews conducted for this article demonstrated a very strong concern with ethics among Asatruar and Heathens. Above all, those interviewed expressed a clear commitment to living with a sense of honor, integrity, and honesty; working hard to improve one's lot in life, both materially and otherwise; contributing to the betterment of one's community; and protecting and caring for one's home and family. Though such ethical concerns are hardly unique, what surely *is* unique among Nordic Pagans is that their frame of reference for discussing, reflecting on, and acting on these ethical concerns comes from their understanding of ancient Nordic culture and lifestyle, as derived from the Eddas, Sagas, and other sources. If some modern American Christians articulate their approach to ethical matters in the form of the question "What would Jesus do?" their Nordic Pagan counterparts frame the question as "What would the Vikings do?" or "What would the heroes of the Sagas do?"

Nordic Pagan ethics are therefore firmly grounded in Nordic cultural heritage, as best as this can be reconstructed; this is also the case with ritual procedures, organizational structures, and the attitudes taken toward the Norse gods. In all of these areas, we find Nordic Pagans using building blocks from the past to create new religious structures for use in modern society. Debates continue over many issues, but what holds the often quarrelsome community together is a shared belief in the spiritual and moral value of Nordic heritage, which Nordic Pagan individuals and communities continually reexamine and reinterpret from any number of perspectives, based on the availability of information, their knowledge of history and languages, and their personal motivations. For some, the ancient lifestyle is most important, for others the worship of the gods, and for still others the moral integrity they associate with the Vikings and other Nordic peoples of the past. But all agree that there is something of great spiritual value in the Nordic past, which they are determined to revive for the present time and then carry on into the future.

Profiles in Nordic Paganism

A closer look at some individual Heathens and Asatru followers will provide a more three-dimensional understanding of the diversity of beliefs and practices within Nordic Paganism, as well as why modern Americans choose this religious path and what it means to them.

Profile 1: Krei Steinberg

Krei Steinberg was interviewed in January 2004 in Manhattan. She is a gregarious and articulate thirty-year-old Caucasian woman who was born in Florida, schooled in Boston, and is now working as a librarian in the New York City area. Krei calls herself a “Euro-mutt,” with reference to her mixed European ancestry combining German, Hungarian, and other ethnic strands, including Jewish religious identity in past generations. She considers the German ancestry to be the one most important to her because she was very close to her German grandmother during her own childhood. Krei has visited Germany, Hungary, and other parts of Europe, including Iceland, both as a child and as an adult. She has been a Heathen for nearly thirteen years, and after an intensive training program not unlike the training that a Christian minister might receive, including courses in counseling at an area college, she is now a gythia.

How did Krei come to be a Nordic Pagan? She reports that it came about during her first year of college in Boston, when she was eighteen. In a life-threatening crisis that she chose not to describe in detail, Krei called on the Norse goddess of death, Hel, and said, “Get me the f*** out of this . . . if you help me with this, I will do . . . I will be there for you. For the rest of my life. Miraculously, I escaped any real violence . . . and this led me into Heathenry” (Interview with Krei Steinberg, January 2004). From that time on, Krei reports that she has felt a deepening bond with Hel and that this has positively impacted her life.

Though this crisis situation was obviously a catalyst, there were certain factors in her earlier years that may have planted the seed of Heathen interest in Krei. As a child, her German grandmother often told her German folk- and fairy tales, and her interest in European folklore and culture, particularly Germanic traditions, was further sparked by childhood visits to her grandmother’s brother in Germany. Krei also reports that even as a child, she always felt aware of death, and she has had premonitions of others’ deaths that have often turned out to come true. This background may also help to explain Krei’s affinity for the Norse goddess of death.

Apart from the folklore passed on from her grandmother, Krei’s childhood home was decidedly nonreligious, if not antireligious, as her parents were committed atheists with a critical attitude toward religion (though her great-great grandfather was a rabbi in the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn, New York). However, a close female friend of her mother was a Wiccan. As an adult, Krei is very scornful toward Wicca, which she sees as an artificial and insubstantial religion, but her childhood acquaintance with Wicca may have opened her eyes to Pagan possibilities. Krei also encountered

Afro-Caribbean religious traditions in Florida, which she says impressed her in a positive way. It is notable that of the different religious influences in her childhood milieu, there were Jewish, atheist, Wicca, and Afro-Caribbean components, as well as her grandmother's German folklore, but little if any Christian influence.

It would not, however, be accurate to say that Krei was oblivious to spiritual possibilities during childhood. She recalls various spiritual experiences as a girl, such as a time when she felt herself accompanied by an invisible presence in a forest area that she thought might have been a god of some sort. As a teenager in the years before college, Krei began reading books promoting various forms of modern Paganism, including Asatru, but she was dissatisfied with a perceived lack of authenticity in much of what she read.

In college, Krei met other students with interests in alternative forms of religion and spirituality and found herself increasingly drawn to Nordic Paganism over the other options under discussion among her circle of friends. She delved into the rich libraries of the Boston area to research Germanic mythology and folklore in the broad sense of Germanic, from the Icelandic Eddas and Sagas to the kind of German folktales she remembered from her grandmother, and began to experiment with rituals of worship of the Norse gods. The emergence of Asatru and Heathen discussion groups on the Internet in the mid-1990s provided new sources of information and support, further kindling Krei's growing devotion to Heathenry.

Her initial decision to commit herself to Heathenry may have been occasioned by a personal crisis, but her deepening involvement came about through months, if not years, of intensive research. Much of this study was done on her own, but when Krei decided to become a gythia after moving to New York City in 1997, she followed an intensive training program supervised by a now-defunct local branch of the Scandinavian-based Nordic Pagan group called Forn Seðr, meaning "Ancient Tradition." The training involved in-depth study of ancient Norse literature, lore, and rituals, including language study and research papers, which Krei suggests was probably equivalent to a master's graduate program.

The training also included classes in counseling and social work in a local university and volunteer service in a range of community agencies to obtain the necessary knowledge of mental health issues and psychiatric and community services. The classes had become part of the training because of the need for godi and gythia, as community leaders, to be able to assist people with emotional and social problems and refer them to professional psychiatric services and social service agencies as needed. The training lasted four years and was carried out in tandem with full-time employment as a librarian.

To this day, Krei keeps an extremely busy schedule between her regular job and her *gythia* duties to provide religious services; the latter includes presiding over or assisting in Blots and other rituals, holding classes for those who wish to learn more about Nordic heritage and Heathenry, and counseling and providing other forms of assistance to members of her religious community. It is therefore not surprising that she speaks with passion about the Heathen commitment to hard work, self-betterment, and community service. Krei expressed scorn for some Wiccans she has known in the New York area, who, she asserts, were too lazy to work but instead made fraudulent claims for government disability assistance on the basis of carpal tunnel syndrome.

Krei traces what she sees as many Wiccans' lack of ethical integrity back to Wicca's lack of any core religious and cultural tradition that could provide a more definite sense of morality and ethics. She also feels that Christianity has a serious moral flaw in its idea of forgiveness for all through the sacrifice of Jesus. "In OUR community, if you do something wrong to someone . . . you PAY FOR IT" (Interview with Krei Steinberg, January 2004). Krei clarified that she does not mean resorting to vigilante justice but referring offenders to police and legal authorities.

Krei completely rejects the idea that involvement in Nordic Paganism should be restricted to those of a particular racial, ethnic, or ancestral background. In her view, participation is strictly a matter of feeling a connection to the Norse gods. She worships her own ancestors but sees this as somewhat separate from her devotion to Hel and other Norse deities. She disagrees with "tribal" Nordic Pagans who advocate forming extremely close-knit, somewhat insular Heathen communities—"tribes" that would ultimately function as economically and politically self-sufficient communities largely independent from the rest of American society (somewhat like a Pagan version of the Amish): "I do NOT want to live in a ninth-century *Thing* system in twenty-first-century New York City!" (Interview with Krei Steinberg, January 2004). Krei sees Heathenism as having a strictly religious purpose, that is, worshipping the Norse gods and respecting the related cultural heritage, which she suggests is a form of worship in itself.

Profile 2: Mitch Zebrowski

Mitch Zebrowski is a fifty-year-old anesthesiologist of mixed Polish, Russian, German, Dutch, English, and Irish descent. He lives with his family in a comfortable suburban home in Delaware, where he was interviewed in January 2004. He is married for the second time, with two adopted children from his first marriage and one daughter born during his second. Mitch is

also a military veteran. He first joined the Asatru Folk Assembly, as a solitary Heathen, in the early 1990s. On forming a kindred in the later 1990s, he joined the Asatru Alliance, which only accepts members from kindreds.

Asked about his original motivation for getting involved in Nordic Paganism, Mitch pointed to two different factors. One was the cumulative effect of intense spiritual experiences of nature that he has had throughout his life, which he describes as “epiphanies.” Hunting has been a cherished part of his life since his teenage years and has become an important part of his Heathenry as well, in ways that will be described. The other experience was the death of his grandfather. Looking at his grandfather’s dead body laid out in a coffin, Mitch had a sudden, urgent feeling that “this . . . is not my grandfather. He is somewhere else now” (Interview with Mitch Zebrowski, January 2004). This intuition about his grandfather led him to contemplate the possibility of other realms of existence, where ancestors and also gods, whom he considers “elder kin” of a sort, might reside.

Mitch noted that many “folkish” Heathens believe in the deification or transformation of ancestors, which fits well with the folkish concern with ancestry and lineage. For himself, he expressed interest in an idea suggested in some Norse texts and elaborated by modern Nordic Pagans that in death, each person’s self divides into several different spiritual essences, which then disperse in different directions. However, Mitch concedes that there is no definite doctrine of the afterlife in Heathenry or Asatru, and he expresses his personal belief that “part of me will live on with ancestors or be reborn in my family line” (Interview with Mitch Zebrowski, January 2004).

While declaring himself to be somewhat in the folkish camp of modern Nordic Paganism, Mitch notes that his family situation as well as his own thinking on the relationship of Heathenry to ancestry shows how inaccurate it is to simplistically equate folkishness with racism. His two adopted children are Korean by birth, and when asked if their racial background would bar them from ever becoming Heathens in his brand of Nordic Paganism, Mitch answered in a manner that partially included and partially excluded people such as his non-Nordic children.

He explained that although he saw Heathenry as being mainly for people of Northern European ancestry, it is possible for persons with different ancestral backgrounds to become Heathens if they meet several conditions: (1) they must demonstrate a sincere reverence for Norse gods and spirituality; (2) they must come to Heathenry after having first investigated their own ethnic heritage and made an informed choice of Nordic Paganism over their own ancestral religious traditions; and (3) they must apply for acceptance into a particular kindred group, demonstrate their good character and sincere intentions to that group, and meet any other



Mitch Zebrowski with his wife, Lisa, and daughter, Kimerly, Summer 1999. (Courtesy of Mitch Zebrowski)

admission requirements held by that kindred. Mitch expressed the view that these requirements represented a barrier to people of non-European ancestry that was “high, but not absolute.”

Furthermore, he stated that even though he thought it conceivable that people of, for example, Asian or African ancestry could become Heathens, he considered it “unlikely” because very few people with such ancestry would, in his view, take a great interest in Nordic cultural heritage and the Norse gods. This point of view depends on an assumption that ethnic ancestry is clearly defined and accessible, an assumption that seems increasingly problematic in today’s increasingly intermixed American population. Mitch seemed to indirectly acknowledge this when he mentioned feeling that his adopted Korean daughter had intermingled her soul with that of Mitch’s family, suggesting that family bonds of love and caring were forces that could transcend genes and genealogy. In discussing this point, he pointed to a Norse tradition of adopting outsiders into one’s family line to show that the old ways were more flexible about ethnicity and ancestry than some might think.

Unlike many Heathens who have been in and out of various kindreds, which themselves tend to have a short life span as members move to other regions or break away to form new fellowships, Mitch was a solitary worshipper for a long time until forming a small kindred composed of his wife, his teenage daughter, and a family friend. Other Heathens often visit and join in with Blots and other activities. Mitch explained that his busy schedule as a doctor and a father made it difficult for him to commit more time to running a kindred and organizing ritual events.

Mitch’s wife had been an Episcopalian prior to his entry into Heathenry, and she continues to participate in Episcopalian church services even while joining Mitch in practicing Nordic Paganism. In the same way, Mitch’s family observes a double set of winter holidays, celebrating the Norse Pagan holiday of Yuletide from December 21 to December 31 and pausing on December 25 for Christmas. Some might see such religious flexibility as blasphemous, but there is in fact a precedent in Old Norse texts such as *Landnamabok*, which describes a number of early settlers who maintained a dual faith in both the Norse gods and the recently introduced god of Christianity.

In the late 1990s, Mitch embarked on a project that represents a quite interesting and controversial extension of Nordic Paganism. On discovering that a handful of other Heathen men in his Pagan network shared his military background, he initially bonded together with them in a kind of “warrior brotherhood,” focused on the lore and rituals of military training in ancient Northern Europe. As several of these men shared Mitch’s interest in hunting, their discussions began to shift from warrior traditions to hunt-



Mitch Zebrowski with Valgard Murray, Summer 2003. (Courtesy of Mitch Zebrowski)

ing lore of ancient Northern Europe, and from this developed the Brotherhood of the Sacred Hunt (BOSH), which is dedicated to reviving ancient Nordic hunting rituals. Among the ancient Germanic tribes, hunting appears to have been a rite of passage into manhood, and Norse texts such as the *Volsunga Saga*, the parallel Eddic poems, and *Gisli's Saga* contain many references to hunting practices and related rituals, such as Sigurd gaining magical powers of perception after tasting the blood of the slain dragon Fafnir. A special significance attributed to fierce animals such as wild boars is evident in the boar-design helmets found in graves of Scandinavian kings and warriors (Davidson 1988, 49). The horns of aurochs used as ceremonial drinking vessels likewise indicate religious lore attached to hunting. Inspired by such traces of past Nordic beliefs and practices, as well as the hunting traditions of other Northern European peoples such as the reindeer-herding Saami or Laplanders, the members of BOSH practice hunting in a highly ritualized manner, including ceremonial expressions of respect to the spirit of the animal to be killed.

BOSH is not the sort of hunting party that goes off into the woods armed with rifles and six-packs to casually shoot unthreatening animals such as deer or ducks from a safe distance while enjoying a slightly inebriated camaraderie. BOSH hunting expeditions are dangerous encounters with large, powerful animals such as wild boar and bison that are not hunted with rifles

at a distance but are stabbed to death at short range with metal-tipped wooden spears. BOSH members run considerable risk of personal injury and even death should the animals decide to fight rather than flee or should the spearing go awry. The life-or-death stakes of the encounter with the animal are viewed as absolutely central to the spiritual significance of the event.

The hunts are planned months in advance and involve several weeks of intensive training that is both physical and spiritual in nature. First, there are nine days of fasting, nine being a Norse number of high significance, as mentioned earlier. To accommodate the realities of modern life such as jobs and other duties, the nine days need not be consecutive but may be stretched out over a period of weeks.

The next stage of preparation is a ritual of dedication to the spirit of the animal to be hunted. Each BOSH member cuts his hand or arm to allow a small amount of blood to flow into a bowl of mead. The blood is then offered to the animal-spirit along with a declaration of gratitude for the life to be taken, and a solemn oath is made to perform the hunt with honor and dignity and kill the animal as quickly and cleanly as possible to minimize its suffering. A third phase of preparation involves a night vigil spent in meditation on the animal-spirit, while wearing a mask representing the animal to be hunted. The hunters also practice using the heavy spears to be employed in the hunt and undergo various exercises to increase their strength and agility.

The hunt is carefully planned with the consent and cooperation of the relevant authorities at the state or local level and/or with private landowners who provide land and animals for hunting on a fee-for-service basis. Hunts are conducted inside fenced hunting areas of several hundred acres, either within public parks or on private lands. The animals to be killed are bought in advance from gamekeepers or other suppliers, but this does not mean that the animals are docile or that the hunting will be without risk. The bison and wild boar used in BOSH hunts are large, powerful, and fast moving, able to turn on a dime and snap the hardwood spears, inches thick, that have been stuck in their sides. BOSH members are legally required to sign waivers of responsibility for their possible death or injury in their hunting encounters.

Mitch recalls a time when he came within a hair's breadth of being skewered by a bison; the beast came close to his face, looked him in the eye, and then turned away. Mitch felt the bison-spirit had decided to spare his life, and he later expressed his gratitude in ritual. BOSH members believe that in the hunt, each hunter must risk his life to prove his worthiness to the animal-spirit, who then permits the animal to be slain.

The hunters move in a pack and attack their prey together, bringing the animal down and killing it as quickly as possible to spare it from unneces-

sary suffering. After the animal has been slain, each hunter dips his spear in the animal's blood and uses this blood to trace a rune on his forehead, while offering ritual invocations of the animal-spirit and expressions of gratitude. The animal's body is carved into pieces, which are then cooked and eaten in a feast or distributed for later use among the hunters and their families.

Those who do not participate in the kill are not permitted to participate in the posthunt ritual reaffirming their brotherhood but must hunt again until they successfully kill an animal. Continuing membership in BOSH depends on actively participating in the hunts. If a member does not join in a hunt in a four-year period, his membership may be suspended.

BOSH has had some success in reaching out to the community to provide hunting training to at-risk or delinquent youths, who have, according to Mitch, generally responded well to the physical and mental challenges of the hunt and seemed to earn new self-respect and maturity from their experiences. In this way, BOSH has begun to fulfill its purpose of reviving ancient Nordic hunting rituals for the benefit of modern society.

Profile 3: Mike Smith

Mike Smith, twenty-eight, lives with his wife and two children in central Massachusetts and works in a payroll company. He was interviewed in New Haven, Connecticut, on a snowy night in January 2004. Mike has indisputable Scandinavian ancestry, with Swedish grandparents who immigrated to the United States in the 1890s. He describes himself as having been a “nerd” and a religious searcher in his high school years, reading widely about eastern and other religions before turning toward Asatru after having a very striking dream at the age of fifteen, in 1990.

He dreamed that he was in the form of a wolf, running freely through a wintry tundra landscape. After tracking, killing, and feeding on a deer, Mike the wolf journeyed on to find a mountain with huge oaken doors. Taking human form once more, he opened the doors and ascended a stone staircase, which led to another set of massive doors. Inside, he warmed himself by a great fire burning in the center of the room. Next to the fire sat a one-eyed, white-bearded old man wearing a blue coat and a gray hood, who Mike realized was Odin. Looking directly into Mike's eyes with his single, piercing eye, the old man shouted accusingly, “Why have you not looked into your ancestry, your blood, your very heart? Why have you turned your back on us?” Understandably taken aback, Mike meekly replied, “I don't know . . . I didn't know you really existed.” The dream-Odin exploded, “THAT IS NO EXCUSE!”

After further taunting and challenging Mike, Odin finally calmed to tell him, “Yes, you’ll do just fine . . . Heed my words of wisdom . . . A new age will arise. The gods of antiquity will become the gods of the future . . . You must awaken the epic state of your mind.” After Odin offered some further instructions about the religious path Mike should follow from that day forward, the dream ended (interview with Mike Smith, January 2004; also described in Smith 2003b, 8–10).

Mike began to seek out books and magazines on Norse mythology and religion and to haltingly perform rituals of worship, much like Krei Steinberg in her first steps into Heathenry. He contacted Edred Thorsson (also known as Stephen Flowers), who is a gifted scholar of Norse mythology and Nordic culture, a leading figure in the Ring of Troth organization, and the author of *A Book of Troth*, one of the most influential American Asatru writings. Thorsson advised him to continue studying Norse mythology and Nordic cultural heritage but to wait until he was eighteen to join the Troth, so that he would be making an informed decision as an adult. When he turned eighteen in 1993, Mike joined the Troth as a supporting member, but he was unable to attend any Troth ritual gatherings, known as Trothmoots, because they tended to occur in the western United States where most Troth members lived.

Mike has since come to feel that the Troth is overly open and flexible in its membership policies, as anyone who wishes to join can do so simply by subscribing to Troth’s publication, *Idunna*, without having to explain his or her intentions or in any way demonstrate a commitment to Nordic Paganism. The AFA and the Asatru Alliance, the other national organizations, also allow anyone interested to subscribe to their publications (the *Runestone* and *Vor Trú*) and thereby receive information about kindreds and events, but they do not permit membership without a more rigorous screening process, as discussed earlier. Mike nonetheless continues to support the Troth as a subscriber and occasional contributor of articles to *Idunna*. His critical yet continuing relationship with the Troth demonstrates how splits between Nordic Pagan organizations and individuals rarely result in the total severing of relations, as the shared commitment to Nordic religion and culture tends to overshadow lesser doctrinal differences.

In the mid-1990s, the new medium of the Internet allowed Mike to locate other Nordic Pagans in the Massachusetts area. In 1997, he became a member of Raven Kindred North (RKN), an Asatru organization that had been formed in the early 1990s by students at the Amherst campus of the University of Massachusetts. He recalls being nervous prior to his first face-to-face meeting with RKN members, for fear that they might be strange or unbalanced people. After meeting them for dinner at a Mexican restaurant

in Worcester, Massachusetts, his worries were laid to rest, and Mike blurted out, “Thank the gods that you’re normal!”

Mike was delighted to finally, after many years of searching, find a functioning Asatru community with which to share rituals and discuss lore. He sees an important turning point in the development of the larger regional Asatru/Heathen community to be the birth of the East Coast Thing, which came about when Nordic Pagans who had been attending the open-to-all Pagan festival called Freespirit decided to organize a festival that would be for Nordic Pagans exclusively.

The first ECT took place in August 1999 in a Maryland state park, under careful arrangement with state authorities. Close to ninety Nordic Pagans from various kindreds in the Midatlantic and New England states attended, and the gathering has now become a much-anticipated annual event for Nordic Pagans in the region, as discussed earlier. It was at the ECT that Mike first met Cat Burke, a woman who would eventually become his wife and the mother of his two children.

Cat is of mixed Irish and Belgian descent, and their children’s names bear witness to both Mike’s Nordic, Swedish ancestry and Cat’s Celtic, Irish roots. Their elder child, a daughter, is named Freyjadis, named for the Norse goddess Freyja and female divinities known as Dis or Disir. Their son’s name, Tiarnan, is Irish in origin. As Asatruar, Mike and Cat worship only Nordic, Norse-Germanic gods, not those of Celtic traditions. Though a case could certainly be made that the Celtic peoples of Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, Wales, and Brittany are just as “Northern European” as their Germanic, Scandinavian, and Anglo-Saxon counterparts, Nordic Pagans generally see Celtic Paganism as a separate religious tradition with its own rich mythology and lore, lacking the linguistic, historical, and cultural linkages that knit the various Nordic religious traditions together.

From a strictly “folkish” perspective, one might ask whether Mike, having been instructed by his dream-Odin to follow the ways of his ancestors, has erred in his religious duty by marrying a partially Celtic woman and giving a Celtic name to his son. Such a question would, however, assume that strict lines of genealogy and purity of Nordic DNA are of paramount importance for Nordic Paganism, and this notion is not what Mike Smith feels he was called by Odin to uphold. He defines Asatru as the worship of the Norse gods, first and foremost, along with respect for related cultural traditions. Though people of Scandinavian or other Nordic ancestry might be especially inclined by their cultural identity and family traditions to respect Nordic culture and worship the Norse gods, they are not the only people on earth who can feel the “pull of the gods” and seek knowledge of their ways. Mike speculates that there could be some genetic component in people of Nordic ancestry that would give rise to a natural predisposition or talent for

Nordic Paganism, but he does not see this as any reason to exclude people with other ethnic backgrounds. Like Mitch Zebrowski, Mike takes the view that people of non-Nordic ethnic roots should be permitted to join Nordic Pagan rituals and communities, provided they are able to demonstrate their sincere reverence for the gods and ways of the Nordic past.

Mike left Raven Kindred North to found his own Asatru organization, Athelingulf Fellowship, in 2001. The main motivation was his desire to perform Nordic Pagan rituals with the highest possible degree of fidelity to original Norse practices, as known from texts, archaeology, or other sources. Mike felt especially dissatisfied with the widespread practice of substituting mead for blood in modern Blots, considering that the word *Blot* has the literal meaning of blood, and he was determined to reintroduce animal sacrifice and put the blood back in Blot. He also felt it important for modern people to regain knowledge of the linkage of life and death and the place of human beings in the natural order.

Mike and his associates not only researched the ancient Norse and other texts describing sacrifices but also investigated with great thoroughness the methods of killing animals used by professional butchers and by members of other religious communities, such as Muslims and Jews. A Nordic Pagan farmer from New Hampshire, who raises free-range poultry and livestock, supplies animals and participates in their sacrificial killing. Athelingulf now regularly practices animal sacrifice Blots several times per year.

Prior to the day of sacrifice, the animal victim is treated well and lives in a free-range environment. The ritual proper begins with the lighting of a sacred fire, followed by a hallowing of the ritual area by carrying a flaming torch around the perimeter if the site has not been previously sanctified and an invocation of the gods to be honored with the sacrifice. The animal is then sanctified by holding over it a special ritual hammer, evoking the magical hammer of the god Thor, which was able to revive dead animals, cause rain to fall, and fend off the enemies of earth. The ritual participants then each go to the animal, place their hands on it, and thank it for giving its life for their benefit. The animal may also be asked to bear messages to the gods or the dead. During all of this, those handling the animal attempt to keep it as calm and relaxed as possible.

The killing is done by a quick, forceful slitting of the throat, with the animal's spurting lifeblood caught in a special bowl. Some of the blood is then sprinkled onto the participants or wiped on their foreheads; the remainder is poured over a stone into the earth, in a location near a tree, with the invocation, "From the gods to the earth to us; from us to the earth to the gods; a gift for a gift." The animal is then cooked and eaten.

Athelingulf Fellowship has also developed or reconstructed other forms of rituals, such as the *Forn*, a ritual of votive offering to the gods that is an



Mike Smith conducting an Asatru wedding ceremony. (Courtesy of Mike Smith)

alternative method of making offerings from the Blot. In the Forn, objects either taken from daily life or specially crafted for the occasion are intentionally destroyed by burning, smashing, burying, or other means. Through their destruction in our world, the items are conveyed to the world of the gods. This ritual is based on the abundant archaeological evidence from Northern Europe of weapons and other items that were bent or otherwise damaged to the point of uselessness, then burned in fires, buried in pits, or deposited into bogs or rivers.

Many other rituals are described in Mike Smith's writings (2003a). As a serious Reconstructionist, Smith generally takes pains to explain the textual, archaeological, or folkloric basis for each ritual, as well as openly admitting elements that he and his associates have created and introduced. His attitude in this regard is typical of many Nordic Pagans, who make great efforts to follow the paths of past Nordic tradition but do not hesitate to carve out and explore new paths as needed. The extent to which the old ways are or should be followed and new ways invented and introduced is always a matter of debate, but Nordic Pagans generally agree on the need for both reconstruction and experimentation to connect the ways of the past to the world of today.

Profile 4: Galina Krasskova

Galina Krasskova was interviewed by telephone in February 2004. At the time, she was a thirty-one-year-old resident of Brooklyn, New York, originally from the nearby state of Maryland. She works in the financial service industry. Galina is a gythia in the Anglo-Saxon-based “Theodish” form of Heathenry. An aspiring ballet dancer until an injury short-circuited this ambition, Galina remains physically active by practicing martial arts. She has Russian and Lithuanian ancestry on her father’s side and Irish, Swiss, English, and German ancestry through her mother.

Galina’s grandmother was a highly devout Methodist who later converted to Catholicism. Galina imagines that her grandmother might well have become a nun if she had been raised Catholic. She feels that her grandmother’s intense religiosity influenced her own involvement with Paganism by introducing her to emotional modes of spirituality that have become central to her own religious practices.

Galina recalls reading books of Greek and Norse mythology as a child and setting up a play altar to a Greek goddess when she was eight or nine. After exploring different religions as a teenager, she became involved in a syncretistic religious group centered on Egyptian deities, the Fellowship of Isis, after moving to New York City to pursue her ill-starred career in ballet. As the religious organization was open to members exploring other deities and traditions, Galina began to explore Nordic Paganism by praying to different Norse gods and contemplating the runes. What caused her to completely shift her allegiance to Heathenry was an intense experience of going into a trance and being possessed by the god Odin, a state she describes as both spiritual and physical.

Galina was aware that similar possession states are described in Afro-Caribbean religious traditions such as Voodoo and Santeria as being “ridden by the god.” She found it extremely helpful to study Afro-Caribbean attitudes and practices as a way of better understanding her own experiences of possession by Odin. Galina has cultivated these trance states, in addition to her other devotional practices, and knows of other “women of Odin” who also experience the “riding” of the god.

Not surprisingly, Galina supports the efforts of Troth leader Diana Paxson and others to revive and refine Norse oracular, divinatory, and trance practices known as *Seidr* and *Spa* by consulting and at times borrowing from other religions’ Shamanistic traditions (Blain 2002). Though Galina’s approach to Nordic Paganism is accepting of a certain degree of eclecticism, this openness is carefully grounded in a bedrock foundation of ancient Nordic texts and culture, particularly those of Anglo-Saxon England. She expresses an intense dislike of Wicca as overly eclectic, historically founda-

tionless, and ethically flimsy, much as Krei Steinberg does. Galina emphasizes that Heathenry is defined not only by devotion to the Norse gods but also by conducting oneself in accordance with ethics and values derived from Nordic heritage.

Galina's Anglo-Saxon sect is well respected within the overall Nordic Paganism community for its scholarly approach to ancient texts, including the learning of ancient languages. It is also one of the subgroups within Nordic Paganism that most vigorously champions the idea of tribalism, that is, the ideal of small, self-sufficient, and separate communities dedicated to Nordic and particularly Anglo-Saxon lore and religion. Galina embraces this ideal but is somewhat ambivalent about another element of Anglo-Saxon Heathenry—an intensive concern for genealogy and the continuity of ethnic heritage. She thinks that the lengthy discussion of past lineage is less important than building up Heathen organizations and communities and further refining ritual practices in the present time. She also believes that membership should be open to anyone who has a sincere interest in Nordic culture and religion, not only those who have the right genes or family history. Her African American friend and fellow godi is a case in point.

Galina believes strongly in the importance of Heathen ethics, which, for her, largely means a form of warrior ethics focused on such virtues as perseverance and discipline, as well as honesty and integrity. Practicing martial arts and living in the sometimes dangerous environment of Brooklyn, Galina feels keenly the importance of being ready to protect one's person, home, and family, and she said that in situations of conflict she "does not back down." Like many other Nordic Pagans in the United States, she supports the right of citizens to arm themselves with guns for self-protection. This conviction is one of the several reasons why Nordic Pagans in the United States tend to be politically libertarian or conservative.

Like her friend Krei, Galina regularly volunteers in her local community and sees community service as an ethical priority for the future of Nordic Paganism. She hopes Heathens will establish local service agencies to rival those of the Catholic Church and other mainstream religious organizations. She has begun the Fighters' Guild for other Heathens involved in martial arts, and the group's activities include community service.

Profile 5: Lavrans Reimer-Møller (aka Larry Miller)

Lavrans is a professor of radio communications at the New England Institute of Art in the Boston area; he is in his sixties and lives with his Swedish wife in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A California hippie in the 1950s and

1960s, Lavrans rode the counterculture wave of religious experimentation through a number of phases. A long fascination with occult traditions led him to investigate the Nordic-Germanic runes and drew him in turn to Norse mythology and Nordic culture, which he prefers to refer to as “Germanic.” Having Nordic-Germanic ancestry (half German, one-quarter Danish, and one-quarter Scotch-Irish), Lavrans found the Germanic Heathen milieu very welcoming and spiritually satisfying. He renounced his other spiritual interests in the early 1990s and now devotes himself entirely to Nordic Paganism, which he prefers to term “Germanic Heathenry.” Lavrans publishes a widely respected Heathen magazine, *The Marklander*. It is available on the Internet, which he playfully refers to as “Cybergard,” the tenth realm of existence beyond the nine mentioned in Old Norse literature. Lavrans is deeply committed to the careful reconstruction of past Nordic-Germanic religion and culture and has enjoyed crafting his own versions of medieval paraphernalia such as the Anglo-Saxon lyre, a stringed musical instrument similar to the harp.

In terms of the folkish-versus-universalist debate, Lavrans takes a somewhat middle-ground position. Acknowledging that a person’s genetic makeup might conceivably contribute some affinity for Nordic-Germanic Paganism and even more so a preservation of Nordic ethnic heritage in a family with Nordic ethnic roots, Lavrans does not believe in excluding people with non-Germanic ancestry from becoming involved in Heathenry or Asatru if they feel inclined to do so. From his vantage point as an editor of an Asatru publication engaging with a wide variety of views, Lavrans estimates that about one-third of Nordic Pagans or Germanic Heathens are “folkish” in an exclusive, Nordic Paganism/Germanic Heathenry manner reserved only for those with Northern European ancestry; one-third are on the opposite end, feeling that Asatru and Heathenry should be open to anyone with interest, regardless of race, ethnicity, or ancestry; and about one-third occupy a middle-ground position similar to his own.

Lavrans stands out in the Asatru-Heathenry community for his political views, which place him on the liberal end of the American political spectrum, unlike many Heathens and Asatruar. This distinction has led to heated disputes, often voiced through Internet discussion venues, about such issues as homosexual rights, gun-control legislation, and the importance of government-funded social programs versus cutting taxes and reducing the size of government—mirroring the debates in mainstream American society. People on different sides of these issues have gone so far as to accuse one another of being “Nazis” and “Commies,” a sure sign that the debate had wandered very far afield of anything related to worshipping the Nordic-Germanic gods or reviving past cultural practices.

A consensus is emerging in terms of putting political differences aside in relation to religious matters and not allowing them to poison Nordic Pagans' shared devotion to the gods and traditions of the Nordic past. This situation can be nicely illustrated through an anecdote. Lavrans and Mitch Zebrowski had engaged in many liberal-versus-conservative political arguments through the Internet prior to meeting in person. When Lavrans saw Mitch for the first time at one of the East Coast Thing regional events, Lavrans approached him and asked, "Are we cool?" Mitch answered in the affirmative, and the two online antagonists went on to participate in the Thing as religious comrades. Despite their past disputes, they did not want their political spats to pollute the religious environment that they had come to honor. In his interview with Michael Strmiska, Mitch noted that such an attitude is in keeping with Nordic-Germanic lore as far back as the *Germania* of Tacitus, in which it was observed that Germanic tribesmen, when approaching a temple or other location marked off as a ritual area, would all be obliged as a sacred duty to remove their weapons and leave them outside and to refrain from any conflict or bloodshed for the duration of ritual festivities (*Germania*, ch. 45).

Nordic Paganism in the United States continues to grow and change. Its disputes and controversies demonstrate the difficulty of adapting beliefs and practices from medieval times to modern society, particularly the challenge of defining *who* the religion is for. The question is indeed highly pertinent for a religion that was originally situated in an ethnically homogeneous cultural situation but is now being introduced into a cultural context of ethnic intermixture and heterogeneity.

Nordic Paganism in Iceland

Turning to Iceland, we find Nordic Paganism functioning in a context quite different from that in the United States. Many of the ancient texts and traditions sacred to Nordic Pagans are cherished components of national cultural heritage. Icelanders are especially proud of the Eddas and Sagas written in Iceland from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, as became evident during Iceland's struggle for independence from Denmark when nationalist intellectuals demanded the return of the original parchment manuscripts to Iceland. One finds the names of Norse gods and Saga heroes everywhere in Iceland, as personal names, street names, business names, and more (Strmiska 2000). Not all Icelanders would agree with worshipping the ancient gods, but very few would not know their names. Nordic Paganism in Iceland therefore has a secure foundation in the national cultural heritage and might even be said to be patriotic.



View of mountains in Iceland, May 1996. (Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)

Due to its remote location and history of isolation, with no large-scale immigration since its early settlement period over 1,000 years ago, Iceland is ethnically and genetically homogeneous to an extraordinary degree. For Sveinbjorn Beinteinsson and the other founders of Asatruarfelagid, the issues that were so contentious in the American context—who the religion is for, who should be included and excluded, and whether Asatru should be folkish or universal—hardly even came up for discussion. The founders were all Icelanders sharing the same ethnic identity and the same ancestral and cultural heritage, devoting themselves to the same gods known from a common body of literature and folklore. Icelandic Asatru did not emerge from any need to reclaim lost ethnic identity or forgotten cultural heritage but from a desire to reenergize the spiritual dimension of an already agreed-upon cultural heritage.

Icelandic Asatru shares the same basic worldview and many of the same ritual practices as its American counterparts, with certain differences that arise from the different historical and cultural contexts. One difference is in the choice of textual sources. Where American Nordic Pagans draw on a wide variety of Nordic-Germanic textual sources, consulting Anglo-Saxon, Old English, and other non-Icelandic materials as well as the Icelandic ones, Icelandic Asatruar rely mainly on their rich



A man takes a drink from a horn at a Sumbel. In this ritual, a drinking horn is filled with mead or another alcoholic beverage and then passed around. It is either drunk from directly or poured into individual drinking vessels. A series of toasts are then made, offering verbal tribute first to the Norse gods and supernatural beings, then to heroes and ancestors, and, finally, to others. (Gísli Gudjónsson, www.gudjonssonphotos.com)

heritage of Old Norse–Icelandic texts and traditions, with secondary use of Scandinavian materials and very little use of the Old English or Anglo-Saxon. For this reason, the drinking ritual known as the Sumbel among American Nordic Pagans is not known by this name in Iceland. The *practice* of this ritual is in fact known in Iceland as a part or variation of the Blot, but the word *Sumbel* is more prevalent in the texts of ancient England and occurs only a few times in the Eddas and Sagas of Iceland (Bauschatz 1982, 72–78).

Another intriguing difference is that American Asatruar and Heathens tend toward a more devotional form of worship and a more emotional conception of the Nordic gods than do their Icelandic counterparts, perhaps influenced by the highly emotional forms of Christianity that have become increasingly prevalent in the United States in recent decades. American Nordic Pagans want to feel an intimate relationship with their gods, not unlike evangelical attitudes toward Jesus. Icelandic Asatruar, by contrast, are more focused on devotion to their past cultural heritage rather than to particular gods.

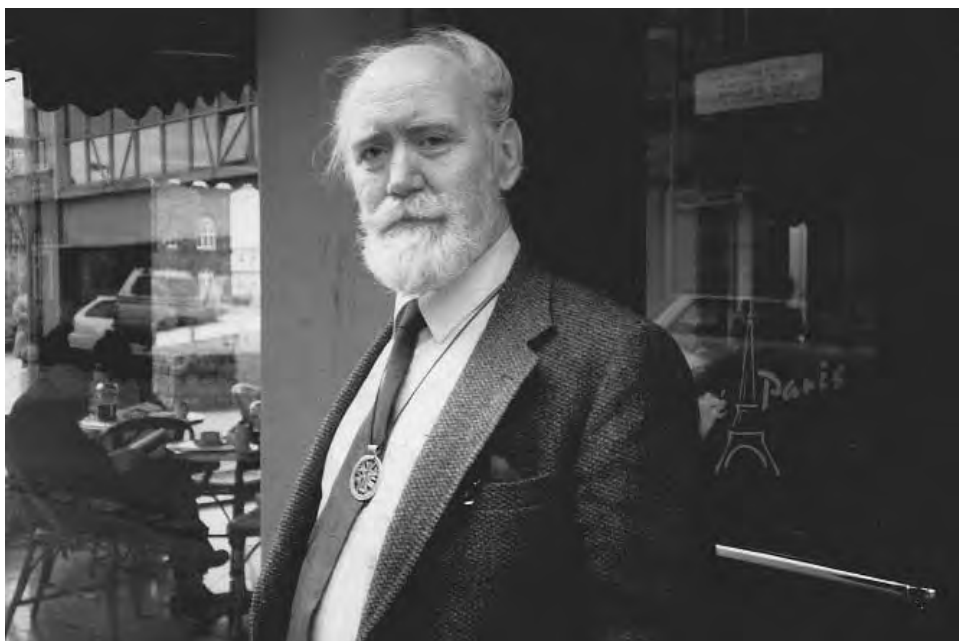
Beginning with Sveinbjorn

When Asatruarfelagid was first established as a religious society in 1972, the membership consisted of no more than twelve men. The society was meant to be a loose organization of people who believed in the old gods and other deities associated with the old Heathen times before Christianity. Sveinbjorn Beinteinsson, a farmer and poet from Hvalfjordur, had been chosen to be its first *Allsherjargodi* (chief priest), a position of Pagan authority unknown in the United States. The Allsherjargodi presides over Asatruarfelagid meetings, Blots, and other such religious events; performs life cycle rituals such as weddings and funerals; and acts as a spokesman for Asatruarfelagid. Other godi may perform similar functions, but the Allsherjargodi is respected as the figure of highest authority.

Sveinbjorn was a gracious and learned older man with a long white beard; one young Icelander noted that his appearance was not unlike an Icelandic Santa Claus. Living a simple life on a farm without electricity and eschewing modern luxuries except for a battery-powered radio, he exuded an aura of past tradition (Strmiska 2000). Sveinbjorn was ideal for his task as a performer of ancient rituals but a little eccentric and shy in his role as a media spokesman. A kind and easygoing man, he got along very well with other members of this young Pagan group. His religious views were liberal toward other religions, including Christianity, and his own funeral ceremony involved Christian as well as Heathen components (Strmiska 2000).

Tolerance toward other religions is an important issue to most members in Asatruarfelagid. In interviews with those members, negativity or bitterness was rarely expressed toward Christianity or other religions. American Nordic Pagans display a much more antagonistic attitude toward Christianity, which they tend to see as an oppressive enemy. The Asatruarfelagid attitude reflects the more relaxed religious and social climate in Iceland, where very few people attend religious services of any kind, let alone wish to argue about religion, as opposed to the more divisive and contentious state of religion in the contemporary United States. However, conflicts do occasionally arise between Icelandic Christians and Asatruar, as will be discussed.

Sveinbjorn was skilled at composing poetic verse in the styles of olden times, which he also enjoyed performing. Indeed, CDs of Sveinbjorn reciting Eddic poems as well as his own *rimur*, a form of late medieval Icelandic poetry that Sveinbjorn enjoyed re-creating, are still available. Despite his advanced years and general avoidance of modern culture, he enjoyed performing his poetry in public venues, even getting onstage with rock bands and chanting traditional verse over the clash of electric guitars. With his long white beard and stubborn preference for premodern ways, Sveinbjorn left a lasting impression in peoples' minds in Iceland and gave Asatruarfe-



Asatru leader Jormundur Ingi Hansen in front of Café du Paris, Reykjavik, Iceland, 1998. (Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)

lagid a reputation for weirdness and eccentricity, which both attracted and repelled the public. Members of Asatruarfelagid were therefore viewed as social misfits to some extent, but as time went on, the religion became more accepted.

From Jormundur to Hilmar

When Sveinbjorn Beinteinsson died in 1993, the man chosen to succeed him was also a white-haired, older gentleman steeped in the ancient literature and skilled in the performance of rituals. This man was Jormundur Ingi Hansen. He was different from Sveinbjorn in that he was also skilled at dealing with the media. A charming raconteur who enjoyed public speaking, Jormundur represented Asatruarfelagid remarkably well to both the Icelandic and the international press. He was also very helpful to members of Asatruarfelagid and other Icelanders who requested his assistance in representing the society and explaining what the old religion stood for.

In some ways, Jormundur Ingi Hansen was a victim of his own success. As Allsherjargodi, he wanted to act as a chairman, cashier, promoter, and

religious leader, as Sveinbjorn had done before him. However, with growing popularity bringing an ever-increasing number of members, the workings of Asatruarfelagid had become more complex and time-consuming than in Sveinbjorn's time. For that reason, the board of the Asatruarfelagid began choosing members to take on the roles that Jormundur wanted to deal with single-handedly. An internal power struggle commenced almost as soon as Jormundur was elected Allsherjargodi in 1993.

Tensions continued brewing within Asatruarfelagid, and during the summer of 2002 dissatisfied members persuaded the majority of the board of directors to sack Jormundur as Allsherjargodi. At first, he refused to accept the situation and claimed that he was still Allsherjargodi. Further arguments erupted within Asatruarfelagid when members loyal to Jormundur tried, without success, to reinstate him. Yet even though Jormundur bitterly disapproved of his dethroning, he did not try to split the society or establish his own breakaway sect. The problem was dealt with by continuing discussion within the organization's board of directors, and it was kept away from public debate. An agreement was reached that the next Allsherjargodi would be Hilmar Orn Hilmarsson, a well-respected musician and composer in his forties who had been an active member of Asatruarfelagid from his teens.

Thus, when Hilmar was initiated as the new Allsherjargodi in a ritual at Thingvellir, the site of the ancient Icelandic Thing meetings, on June 27, 2003, no shadow was cast on the ceremony by Jormundur's followers. Both camps knew that negative media coverage of this disputed transition would not be in Asatruarfelagid's best interest. Despite the bitter feelings surrounding the situation, Hilmar received Jormundur's endorsement and full support (*Morgunblaðid* newspaper [henceforth Mbl.] January 6, 2003).

Thirty Years of Asatruarfelagid

Members of Asatruarfelagid were in a celebratory mood in 2003 because thirty years had passed since the society was first established. Beginning with only 12 members, the society had steadily grown to include 777 people (Hagstofa Islands [Icelandic National Bureau of Statistics] 2004). Today, its ceremonies and rituals have become well established. Asatruarfelagid has moved from being viewed as a small group of eccentrics into a large organization of generally respected people whose religious beliefs and practices have been accepted by Icelandic society as a whole. It has even become somewhat fashionable to be a member of the society. Some very well-known people in the media and the music industry are not shy about admitting



Procession of Asatru members with Hilmar Orn Hilmarsson on his way to be initiated as Allsherjagodi at the site of the ancient Althing parliament at Thingvellir, Iceland, June 2003. Hilmarsson is the man in the middle holding the pinecone. (Gísli Gudjónsson, www.gudjonssonphotos.com)

their membership and adherence to the old religion, which has also boosted the public image of Asatru.

The transition from leaders who were devoted to Old Icelandic literature to an Allsherjargodi who is a popular musician and recording artist may prove to be of great importance to Asatruarfelagid. In 2002, Hilmar produced a CD called *Rimur og Hrapp (Rimur and Rap)*, which mixed old Icelandic songs and poetry with Icelandic adaptations of hip-hop and rap, with one track even featuring the voice of Sveinbjorn Beinteinsson reciting poetry over a modern electronic soundscape. One Asatruarfelagid member stated that he and Hilmar always tried to compose new musical pieces for each Asatru ritual event (personal communication, January 5, 2004). It seems that music may become increasingly important in Asatruarfelagid ceremonies and rituals and attract new generations of Icelanders to the worship of the gods of old.

When Icelanders think of a religion, most associate it with some impressive and sanctified architectural structure that functions as a site of religious rituals. Asatruarfelagid lacks a central religious temple, or *hof* in Icelandic. Constructing a *hof* has been high on the members' wish list for many years. As a token of the acceptance that Asatruarfelagid has enjoyed in recent years, the mayor of the country's capital, Reykjavík, has invited the Asatru society to establish *hofs* in their towns, as have the mayors of two other towns. What these leaders are aiming for is to tap into Asatruarfelagid popularity among Icelanders and foreigners to attract tourists to their locales. Asatruarfelagid has been granted a building site in Reykjavík but still lacks funds to begin construction. The town of Njardvik, southwest of the capital, is building a Viking center and asked Asatruarfelagid to build a temple there. At Akranes, north of Reykjavík, the Settlement Museum has offered Asatruarfelagid land on which to construct a *hof*. Individuals in other places around Iceland have also expressed their interest (Mbl., October 8, 2003). It should be noted that efforts are also being undertaken by American Nordic Pagans to construct *hofs* in the United States, as an appeal for financial support in the Asatru Alliance publication *Vor Trú* demonstrated (*Vor Trú*, Vol. 66, 2004).

In the elections for the Icelandic parliament in 2003, a *god*, or priest of Asatruarfelagid, named Sigurjon Thordarson was voted in as a candidate of the Liberal Party. Sigurjon is the first *god* since the fourteenth century to take a seat in the Icelandic parliament (Mbl., May 8, 2003). Yet despite the rising popularity of Asatruarfelagid and the increasing respect it enjoys in Icelandic society, there is still resistance from certain quarters. Not surprisingly, one such source of opposition is the Christian community in Iceland.

A Summer of Anniversaries and Animosities

In the summer of 2000, the Icelandic state and the National Lutheran Church celebrated the millennium anniversary of Christian faith in Iceland. To briefly explain the historical background of this celebration, Christianity had become, by a vote at the Althing, the official religion of all Icelanders in the year 1000, according to the generally accepted account given in the early Icelandic text, *Íslendingabók* (*The Book of the Icelanders* [this is conventional translation]). This development came about as the result of several factors. At that time, there was a risk of civil war because of tensions between the growing number of people adhering to the new religion of Christianity and the more traditional people who wanted to hold onto the old Nordic Pagan ways. Furthermore, the Norwegian king at the time, a zealous Christian who was not opposed to using force to spread the Gospel, had taken the sons of some chieftains of the most powerful families in Iceland hostage, with Christianization as the price of their liberty. The king had also threatened to cut all trading ties with Iceland and isolate the struggling country politically as well as economically if Iceland continued to refuse to accept Christianity.

It was this set of grave and gathering dangers both within and without the country that brought the Althing parliament together in the year 1000. Discussing the best way to prevent bloodshed and economic ruin and even consulting an oracle, the parliamentarians agreed to officially declare the Christian religion as the faith of all Icelanders and to restrict the old Pagan religion to private observances. In later times, Norse Paganism was prohibited completely. Iceland's conversion to Christianity was therefore a multi-dimensional event, open to many interpretations (Strömback 1975; Aðalsteinsson 1978; Jochens 1999; Karlsson 2000). Was it a peaceful and democratic process or an unfree decision made under threat of force, the religious version of a "shotgun wedding"? Was it a triumph of religious freedom allowing the Christian faith to prosper or the death of religious pluralism, with one religion given sanction and the other voted out of existence? These questions remain matters of debate.

For many in Iceland, the year 2000, marking as it did the thousand-year anniversary of Iceland's embrace of Christianity, was not the time to ask such questions; it was time to party. Both politicians and church leaders were in a festive mood, and large sums of money had been made available to ensure that the Christian millennium celebration would be as grand as possible. Thingvellir, the location of the ancient Althing parliament where the vote had been taken in favor of Christianity, was chosen as the best spot for the event.

Thingvellir is a nearly sacred place to the vast majority of Icelanders. Beyond its importance in Icelandic history as the site of many events described in the early literature, it is a source of national pride for having functioned as the site of a semidemocratic government body at a time when the rest of Europe was ruled by tyrannical kings. The Iceland of the Saga age had no kings; its highest governmental authority was the Althing assembly of chieftains at Thingvellir. Thingvellir symbolizes the uniqueness of being an Icelander and is accordingly a unifying force in Icelandic nationality. It has been kept as unspoiled as possible throughout the ages, with no large buildings allowed to be built that could endanger the sacred naturalness of the impressive landscape. To accommodate the thousands of people expected to participate in the millennium celebrations, temporary shelters, platforms, and sanitary facilities were erected at Thingvellir. The event organizers, especially church leaders, went to great lengths to present an inspiring spectacle of a unified “Christian Iceland.”

These efforts put the Christian millennium celebration on a collision course with the members of Asatruarfelagid, who were planning to celebrate their Thingid summer solstice festival in Thingvellir on June 22, just as they had in years past. Thingid is the fourth in a series of five major rituals during a yearlong ritual cycle observed by Asatruarfelagid and is understood, because of its location, as the most sacred and solemn of them all.

As part of that year’s Thingid festivities, a special series of land and fire ceremonies dedicated to the god Baldur was to be brought to a close. This ceremony had first been celebrated in Reykjavík, the capital city, in May, after which it had been conducted in the towns of Skagafjörður, Egilsstaðir, Hofn, and Hjørleifshofdi in the weeks leading up to Thingid. These sites formed a sacred ceremonial ring around the whole of Iceland, with Thingid intended as the site of the ritual that would close the ring and bring the ceremonies to fulfillment. At the very place where Christianity had officially replaced the Pagan faith 1,000 years ago, the rite would renew Iceland’s ancient beliefs and thus, from the viewpoint of Asatru, make the country whole again.

However, when Allsherjargodi Jormundur Ingi Hansen appealed to the national government for the right to celebrate the Asatru festival Thingid at Thingvellir close to the time of the Christian millennium celebration, the government agreed to allow Thingid in principle but then found many ways to block it in practice. Toilets and sanitary facilities installed with taxpayer money for the Christian celebrations were not available for Pagan use, and the same was true of dining facilities. The composer and future Allsherjargodi Hilmar Orn Hilmarsson complained that he could not perform a special musical piece composed for the occasion because

the organizers of the Christian celebration had neglected to install the needed audio equipment. He noted with bitter humor, "It is possible that work methods have changed in Iceland in those six years that I have lived in Denmark, but before that, it didn't take a week to install a sound system" (Mbl., June 22, 2000). The only reason given for these logistical shortcomings was that the facilities were intended for the use of guests and participants of the Christian celebration and not by a non-Christian religious group.

The media made public the disagreement between the millennium committee and Asatruarfelagid, which led to a public outcry over the apparent intolerance demonstrated by the National Lutheran Church and government leaders, despite the spending of public funds for a celebration supposedly intended for all Icelanders. It came to light that other Icelandic religious groups, Christian and non-Christian alike, had also been barred from participating in the millennium celebrations, and they joined in the public brouhaha. Many of the critics lamented that this historic milestone could have been an excellent opportunity for Icelanders of all faith groups to come together in unity and celebrate their Icelandic heritage in peace and harmony but that this had been spoiled by the one-sided decisions taken by the millennium celebrations committee.

Members of Asatruarfelagid, however, were not deterred from their Thingid festival and went on with their celebrations as planned on June 22, 2000, despite not being able to use most of the facilities that had been erected at Thingvellir for the Christian celebration. Perhaps partly because of unusually fine weather but more likely because of media coverage of the controversy over arrangements at Thingvellir, more people participated in the 2000 Thingid festival than at any other Asatruarfelagid event since the group was established in 1972. Over 1,000 people showed up, some 400 more than the total membership of Asatruarfelagid at that time, and participants in the Thingid celebration later agreed that the event had been very memorable and enjoyable.

Though the Christian millennium celebrations were also successful, they were somewhat less well attended than had been expected, and organizers expressed some disappointment (Mbl., August 17, 2000). In the days leading up to the official Christian events, the press harshly criticized Iceland's government and National Lutheran Church leaders for their tremendous spending on the millennium celebrations coupled with their mean-spiritedness toward non-Christian groups such as Asatru. Many Icelanders appear to have concurred with this criticism and manifested their disapproval by staying away from the main celebration at Thingvellir and participating instead in local festivals in their hometowns.



An Asatru woman at a Viking festival in Hafnafjordur, Iceland, June 2002. (Gísli Gudjónsson, www.gudjonssonphotos.com)

Reflections on Icelandic versus American Nordic Paganism

The Thingvellir controversy demonstrates the high level of respect that Asatruarfélagid has achieved in Iceland. The organization has less than 1,000 members out of a population approaching 300,000, but Asatruarfélagid can make a claim to the nation's affection and sympathy, even among Christians and members of other religious groups, that is far out of proportion to its small size. Because the traditions and activities of Asatru are inextricably linked with the country's earliest history and cultural heritage, Asatruarfélagid could not be denied a place at Thingvellir, anymore than the nation's libraries could ever be expected to throw away their copies of the Old Icelandic texts with their tales of Odin and Thor and Freyja.

In this, we find a quite important distinction between Asatru in Iceland and Nordic Paganism in the United States. In both cultural contexts, Nordic Pagans represent a marginal group outside the social mainstream. Icelandic Asatru, however, is rooted in the national cultural heritage in a very clear and direct way, which lends it influence, respect, and resonance that extend far beyond its numbers. In contrast, American Asatruar and Heathens cannot present their Pagan religion as something quintessen-

tially American but only as a striving for a Northern European heritage from which they are separated by many different kinds of distance. For this reason, although Nordic Pagans in the United States may well be able to carve out a safe and respected niche for themselves in the country's religious landscape, their religion is unlikely to ever receive the large-scale public approval and support that *Asatruarfelagid* enjoys in Iceland. However, the situation of Nordic Paganism in the more culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse context of the United States may stimulate new directions for Nordic Paganism that might never come into being in the more homogeneous cultural setting of Iceland.

Insofar as Reconstructionist Paganism involves both reviving past religious traditions and adapting them to the conditions of the present time, it is to be expected that the Icelandic and American forms of Nordic Paganism will develop in different directions, given their very different situations, even while they preserve a common devotion to the religious traditions of the Nordic past.

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Chapter Five

Heathenry, the Past, and Sacred Sites in Today's Britain

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Heathenry and Religious Studies

In Britain, *Heathenry* is the most common name used for an emergent religion based on the old gods, goddesses, and spirits (*wights*) that were part of everyday life in Northern Europe before the coming of the Christian era. Thus, Heathenry is, in some sense, a reconstructed religion. People often discover Heathenry through finding the mythology of Northern Europe and attempting to learn more about the culture and spirituality of this part of the world. In doing that, they are attempting to “reindigenize” their perceptions and worldview, to develop a spirituality that works in today’s cultures but connects with history and prehistory.

Many people today think that *heathen* is a derogatory term, meaning “without religion” or “not knowing God.” Indeed, the word has been used in this way. But *Heathen* is found in all the Germanic languages in reference to people who were of the old religion at the time of Christian conversion. For instance, in the Icelandic stories of the conversion, we find the terms *kristni* and *hedhni*—Christendom and Heathenry—and *heidhin*, *heidhinn*, *kristin*, and *kristinn* to describe a Heathen woman and man and a Christian woman and man in a simple, matter-of-fact way. This is one reason that the terms *Heathen* and *Heathenry* are being reclaimed by Heathens to simply describe themselves and their community.

Heathens tend to read rather a lot. In fact, Heathenry has been described by one U.S.-based group involved with teaching others about Heathenry (www.asatru-u.org) as “the religion with homework.” The stories of the gods are found in the literature and folklore of the “Germanic” peoples

of Northern Europe (notably Scandinavia, Iceland, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and parts of the British Isles). The pieces of this literature most frequently mentioned are the Icelandic Eddas and Sagas, as well as some parts of the Old English (OE) corpus of poetry and healing charms. It is important to realize that these works were written after the conversion of Northern Europeans to Christianity (which happened from the fourth to the twelfth centuries of the common era, depending on the area considered). Some Heathens, especially in Scandinavia and also in Britain, claim they are keepers of old traditions and customs, but for the most part, Heathenry is a religion constructed today from partial material.

This chapter is mostly about what Heathens do and how Heathenry is developing in Britain, but my own perspective on this requires me to say something about myself and about the disciplines in which I work—how I know about Heathenry. I am writing this chapter as a participant within Heathenry in Britain. I am also an anthropologist engaged in reflexive research on paganisms, identity, and sacred sites (prehistoric monuments with meaning for pagans) in Britain, and I have written an ethnography of Shamanic practices (*seidr*) within Heathenry, which people are developing based on accounts in the Sagas. In this chapter, I write as both participant and researcher. I will indicate something of the development of Heathenry, the kinds of ritual practices involved, and some of the issues and debates dealing with the growth of Heathenry today, particularly issues around identity, ethnicity, and who can “be Heathen” in Britain today and the problems these issues pose for modern Heathens. Some of my earlier research was conducted in Canada and the United States, and this will be partly reflected in the chapter, although my present research is based in Britain.

With my colleague Robert Wallis, I have been exploring the relationships of emerging paganisms—including Heathenry—with the land in Britain and drawing on sociological and anthropological theory to examine pagan/Heathen identities (Blain and Wallis 2004; Wallis and Blain 2003). Some of this work will be discussed later in the chapter.

Heathens in Britain use a variety of names for their religious practices and community, among them Asatru, Odinism, Northern Tradition, and Norse or Saxon paganism. But increasingly, they use simply Heathenry. Although most will agree that they themselves are in some sense pagan, many do not use the term as a description. The word *neo-pagan* is not much used within Britain, though some Heathens use this term to refer to “eclectic” pagans who draw indiscriminately on practices and indeed deities from around the world. I will not use the term “neo-pagan” in this chapter to describe Heathen groups of practices, as doing so might result in too great a confusion of meanings and indeed would tend to discourage Heathens from reading the chapter.

Within newly emerging paganisms today, there is an increasing trend toward what has been called reconstructionist religions. These religions take a wide variety of forms, and the term itself can be misleading, encouraging confusion with, for instance, *reenactment*. I will discuss reconstructions, briefly, and then look at the forms of reconstruction with which I have most familiarity within Heathenry, which are the rituals of *blot* (pronounced bloat) and *symbel* (alternately spelled as *symbol*) and the creation and development of the oracular seidr ritual. My interest in the last relates to how something that began as a deliberate construction has come, within particular communities, to embody specific relationships of people, landscape, and spirits; how it is aligned with other Shamanistic practices; and how consciousness created through ritual processes leads to revised understandings of self and others.

My work is allied with developments within ethnography and religious studies, particularly reflexive research (see Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000) and autoethnography (Reed-Danahay 1997; Ellis and Bochner 2000). How I came to it and where I see it going is explained in my chapter in *Researching Paganisms* (Blain, Ezzy, and Harvey 2004). This work has been undertaken as insider research within Heathen and pagan communities and groups, and it is currently expressed, in part, via the Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights Project, which investigates the use and understanding of sacred sites such as Stonehenge in Britain by different segments of society. Dimensions of this research range from the investigation of the concept of construction to readings of the medieval texts on which some constructions are based to participating in a variety of ritual contexts, including deep-trance séances, and debating the theoretical frames for analysis—for instance, the extent to which performance analysis is useful or problematic (Blain and Wallis, forthcoming) for people studying the emergence of Western paganisms and reconstructed religions today. Because of my involvements with reflexive ethnography and autoethnography, it is important to stress that the descriptions here are my own accounts: they are personal statements from an anthropologist who is also a practitioner of seidr and heathenry. This chapter, therefore, gives information not only about Heathenry today but also about some emerging methodologies in the ethnography of Western paganisms.

Heathenry and the Past: Reconstructing Religion for Today

Polytheist reconstructionist pagans distinguish themselves from eclectic pagans or Neoshamans, who often draw on a variety of deities, practices, and

the like from several cultures and times. They also usually distinguish or distance their practices from those developed through Wicca (for development of which see Hutton 1999). Interestingly, Wiccans and eclectic pagans often do not perceive the differences but describe the reconstructionist ritual practices in Wiccan terms, which tends to increase the distrust reconstructionists feel for eclectic pagans and “American-style” Wiccans; an example of this will come later.

The term *reconstructionist* is problematic on a number of levels, but it is used by many within the communities—and rejected or critiqued by others. Basically, reconstructionists work from the principle that documents or artifacts from the past hold clues to religious or spiritual practices and relationships with deities or spirits and in particular to worldviews or religious philosophies. These practices and worldviews and relationships can be used or adopted meaningfully within today’s world. Reconstruction of this sort is different from reenactment: within reenactment, people display the forms or processes of the past for a number of purposes that are not concerned with the performers’ own spirituality or their daily life. Both reenactors and reconstructionists, though, share a concern for locating practices, deities, and so on within culture and time and for being able to offer some documentation for what they do. So far, I have pointed to ritual practices and perhaps given a picture of rather “intellectualist” groups or individuals who attempt, in one way or another and somewhat pedantically, to shape their rituals to previous accounts or seek authenticity in practices or artifacts. This picture may be accurate for a few Heathens or Asatruar, but most would disown it. These reconstructionists are not, by and large, seeking to recapture a lost world—rather, they ally themselves with earlier, half-known understandings of land, spirits, and people in order to construct relationships within a cosmology that is, in some sense, known, described, or realized within everyday interactions. The correctness of the reconstruction is not, therefore, the point, although people can find themselves getting drawn into the details of the past and attempting to show that what they do is authentic. A British Heathen commented on this tendency: “One thing I do know is that you can get into the historical or archaeological correctness of this too much and miss out on the true point of being a heathen. Something I’m definitely guilty of :)” (Neal, on UKheathenry e-mail list, August 1, 2003).

In Britain, such reconstructionists include, in addition to Heathens, people following various Celtic or British, Roman and Greek, Eastern European, or other paths for which evidence can be found, including some Druids. As mentioned, however, many dislike the term *reconstructionist* and prefer to think of themselves as members of polytheist traditions who are drawing on the past to help them create something that has meaning within postmodernity.

Of course, it is pointed out that we cannot know much of what earlier people thought, and pagans, whether associating themselves with particular cultures of the past or with more nebulous periods in time (the Neolithic, the Bronze Age), for the most part acknowledge this. Today's practices, therefore, often incorporate descriptions or elements from, for instance, North or South American or Siberian cultures. In this, they may be allied with experimental archaeology. An example is the speculative reconstruction of sweat lodges from archaeological interpretations of the burned mound, in which several Druids participated; sweat lodges have become an established part of Shamanic Druid practice, extending to other Druid groups.

Today's practitioners point out that they are attempting to reach what they consider the centrally important points of religion either at one time or over time in a particular place—for instance, an understanding of how people approached their deities or how spirituality arises from the land—and work with this to create something that works within today's environment. The extent to which they base practice on evidence varies considerably.

Polytheists looking to Celtic sources therefore turn to Roman descriptions of indigenous British religion, to much later (Christian) writings such as those of Gerald of Cambridge, and to collections such as the *Carmina Gadelica*, a collection of songs, charms, and invocations from the West Highlands and islands of Scotland that was gathered in the late nineteenth century by Alexander Carmichael (1928). Although these writings and collections are Christian, many pagans regard them as having a pagan “feel” and giving some sense of what earlier pagan charms would have been like.

Heathens are drawing on material from Northern Europe, the Icelandic Eddas and Sagas, English healing charms, and archaeology and folktales from Britain and Scandinavia. Boundaries between such groups are not clear-cut—some practitioners draw on both Celtic and Germanic sources and are given support in this by recent trends in archaeology that suggest group or tribal boundaries in the past were not clearly delineated and indeed that the assignment of various tribes as Celtic or Germanic was more a Roman administrative convenience than a distinct cultural or religious divide.

In particular, the mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda* (see translation by Larrington 1996) tell of the cycle and organization of the worlds (in the poem *Völuspá*, translated as the speaking of the seeress, and *Vafthrudnismál*, in which a giant called Vafthrudnir enters a riddle contest with Óðinn); of culture and how people should conduct themselves within the community (*Hávamál* [*The Sayings of the High One*]); of magical practices (also in *Hávamál*); of the beings of the Nine Worlds (*Alvismál*, the words of the dwarf Alvíss, who has a riddle contest with Thor); and of various tales of the gods Freyr, Thor, and others. There are also heroic poems that tell of ancestors, notably the heroic legends of Sigurd, Brynhild, and Gudrun. These

legends may be more familiar as the story of the Germanic hero Siegfried, immortalized by Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungen*. However, this composer, working with a different version of the story, turned it to his own ends, including concepts of race and nationalism that are not generally shared by Heathens today.

The *Prose Edda* written by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson in the thirteenth century (1995, with translation by Faulkes) gives a more systematic account of the creation and fate of the Nine Worlds and some further stories about the goddesses and gods, particularly Thor. British Heathens use the Icelandic material in part because it has survived. The poems themselves are considered to be part of the great medieval literature of Northern Europe and related to English literature in addition to that of Scandinavia and Iceland. The remaining Old English poetry has some references to Heathenry and to Heathen rituals (notably in *Beowulf*), and this too is avidly read both for details and for the cultural context of indigenous British and Northern European spirituality.

Heathen Worldview: The Wyrd of the Worlds

Part of the work I do as an academic researcher involves looking at the shared discourses of Heathenry—the ways of talking that enable a “discursive community” of shared meanings and implications. I have found the following in this research:

- References to myths and stories of the Aesir and Vanir—“the lore,” found in the Eddas and Sagas and some other medieval writings. Heathens will make reference to particular stories or poems and explain to others where these can be found.
- Polytheism, or a sense of gods or wights as discrete individuals, each with its own agenda. That is, Heathens do not usually consider that different goddesses are aspects of each other but instead see them as individual beings who can be spoken to.
- Cultural specificity or locatedness of myths or deities and ways of approaching these, including ritual forms (sparsely described in the lore). This means that the stories and poems—the understanding of the goddesses and gods and of the earth—have come from a particular period in history and particular places in the world. In a sense, the telling of the poetry and stories is rooted in culture and place.
- The possibility of direct communication with deities or wights; not only can they be spoken to but they will also often speak back.

- The possibility of manipulation of consciousness or “reality” by the wights or deities or through magic inspired by them, including *galdr* (sung spells), runic magic, and seidr or Shamanistic magic.
- A sense that spirituality is not separate from everyday life but informs it. For instance, Heathens will talk about their gardening, how they are raising their children, their volunteer work in the community, or how they deal with people at their workplaces, linking these to examples in the lore.
- A sense of individual merit and responsibility, combined with community worth. In particular, ideas about fair play, taking responsibility for one’s own actions, and honoring the motives and actions of others are seen to come from the lore.
- An elaborate concept of soul and self, personal *ørlög*, and overall *Wryd*. People’s personal destinies are shaped in part by what is past, in part by what they and others are now doing, and by the vows they take and contracts they enter into.
- The Elder Kin (deities) and other wights also are subject to the workings of *Wyrð*.

I have introduced a number of concepts and names here. Some of these come from studies of religion, some from other disciplines (such as anthropology), and some specifically from Heathenry. I will go on to explain what is meant by *Wyrð* and seidr and who the Aesir and Vanir are. Just now, it is important to consider that this shared vocabulary and understanding gives Heathens a way of talking to each other about the world, based on shared ideas—just as engineers or biologists can hold a conversation about what makes a piece of the world tick or as members of other religious groups can do. A shared discourse enables the communication of a philosophical approach rather than only fact, and Heathens can use this shared vocabulary and discourse to discuss points of theology and cosmology (how things are related) and help them make decisions about their everyday lives as well as their ritual practices.

The shared discourses include, most obviously, shared deities—the Elder Kin known from the Icelandic Eddas as the Aesir and Vanir, two families or clans of gods and goddesses. Some Heathens define Heathenry in terms of relationships with these deities; some point to a stronger importance of other nonhuman beings such as ancestral spirits and land-wights (*wight* from the Old English *with* meaning “a sentient being” or “entity,” whether corporeal or spiritual) for personal spiritual practice. Many heathen households acknowledge a house-wight or brownie (a term from Scottish folklore), and portions of food and drink are given to the brownie, sometimes on a weekly basis, often at major events, or simply when particularly pleasant

food or drink is to be served. The assistance of the brownie may be invoked, for example, when brewing or for house protection. In general, there is the idea that the physical and spiritual space of the word is shared with other beings, be they wights, ghosts, ancestors, or deities and that various components of the world—houses, trees, fields, rivers, animals, and plants—have spiritual as well as physical components. This animist viewpoint is often found in indigenous spiritualities. I will return to this topic later.

Many Heathens in the south and west of England prefer to use Old English names for their deities. Others, particularly in Scotland or the north of England, tend to use Norse names, and some use a mixture of both Norse and OE. (This geographic distribution is very approximate, and names used seem to be a matter of personal preference.) The stories of the goddesses and gods and hence their Norse names are known from the *Poetic Eddas* and *Prose Eddas*, but for many deities, Old English names are also known. Some exceptions are Freyja (a title meaning “Lady”) and Idunn, for whom there do not appear to be Old English names, and Hredha and Eostre (mentioned by the early English Christian cleric and writer Bede as worshipped in March and April, respectively) who are not paralleled in the Eddas. Some OE names, however, have survived in the days of the week—Tuesday or Tiwesdag for Tiw (Icelandic Tyr), Wednesday or Wodnesdag for Woden (Ódhinn), Thursday or Thunorsdag for Thunor (Thor), and Friday or Frigesdag for Frige (Frigga).

Often, Heathens or other pagans will refer to following a “Norse pantheon” or a “Saxon pantheon,” though it may be more appropriate to think of deities of past Heathenry as specific to places and times, some with considerable overlap—thus, Woden is also the Norse Ódhinn, High German Uodan, modern German Wotan, and Dutch Wodan, as well as a being earlier known as Wodanaz—but others may be more restricted geographically. An example of the latter is Nehalennia, a deity of the Netherlands who may also have associations with East Anglia but is little known elsewhere.

Many Heathens today have particular affiliations with one or several deities but little interaction with others. The old writings, in particular the historical writings of the Norwegian kings and the Icelandic Sagas, indicate that past patterns of affiliations may have been similar: the family of the Norwegian *Jarls* (earls) of Hladhir had two goddesses whose worship was specific to them, according to the chronicler Snorri Sturluson, and particular Icelandic individuals owed allegiance to Freyja or Njördh or Ódhinn.

Heathens, as polytheists, speak of their deities (and other wights) as specific individuals—like humans in that they have rounded characters and are not reducible to mere attributes. For instance, Woden is known for his interest in knowledge and wisdom but is not simply considered the god of knowledge. The descriptions of Ódhinn in the Eddas indicate some trick-



An illustration depicting the Norse god, Óðinn. (Christel Gerstenberg/Corbis)

ster characteristics, over 100 names by which he might be known, and, in the great poem *Hávamál*, a recognition that he may not always be right and does not always have his own way. He is neither all-knowing nor infallible, though he seeks knowledge where it can be found, and his own Wyrð is bound up with the Wyrð of the Nine Worlds.

Heathens in Britain pride themselves on their abilities to deal directly with their gods—to negotiate, bargain, or even argue with them—and gods, like humans and other wights, are both subject to and active in the

shaping of Wyrð, the combination of destiny, community, and creativity that links action, thought, and society, shaping lives and laying down personal ørlög, the “elder law” that has come from the past. The cosmology of Heathenry is based around ideas of Wyrð and the World Tree, Yggdrasil. On the tree’s branches (or under them) are the various different worlds inhabited by different beings. The tree is tended by the three Norns, known also by the Old English name Wyrðae—Urdh or Wyrð, Verthandi or Werthende, and Skuld or Scyld—whose names mean approximately “Being,” “Becoming,” and “Should” or “Obligation”; they dwell by a pool at the roots of the tree. These Norns spin and weave or, in some accounts, carve both ørlög for people and the Wyrð of the Worlds. As mentioned, gods and goddesses likewise have their Wyrðs and are involved in the Wyrð of human and nonhuman people and communities.

I know an ash tree, called Yggdrasil,
 a high tree, glittering with shining earth.
 From there come the dews that fall in the dales—
 Tree stands evergreen above welling Wyrð.
 There come the women, greatly knowing
 Three from the lake beneath the tree.
 Urdh one is called, Verthandi another
 on slips carving—Skuld the third.
 Laws they allot, lives they shape
 For human children, human ørlög.
 (*Völuspá*—“the speaking of the seeress,”
 vv. 19–20, translated by author)

These concepts of Wyrð and of personal responsibility are central to how most Heathens see themselves within the world or, one could say, within the Nine Worlds. All beings, including the deities, are part of Wyrð, and hence, how one behaves and the kinds of relationships one forms with human or other-than-human people (including spirits, gods, plants, animals, land-wights, and so on) becomes in turn part of Wyrð. This notion is not the same as karma (at least as interpreted by many neo-pagans) but relates to ways in which people are connected with others and in which actions, thoughts, promises, and vows become part of the creation of the Wyrð of one’s self and others. Wyrð therefore is spoken of as a network or a web (a woven tapestry).

These shared discourses of Heathenry indicate a possibility for Shamanic work involving altered consciousness and spirit negotiations with other beings—gods or wights—but they do not mandate it. Although some Heathens or Asatruar are involved in the construction of seidr, or Shamanic

magic, many others do not associate themselves with this work, for numerous reasons (Wallis 2003; Blain 2002a). It should be pointed out that Heathenry is not, in itself, magical practice as such. Heathenry informs daily life and what people do in their families or communities. Rituals may honor gods or people, for instance, by making an offering, without engaging in what other pagans call a working. Many Heathens do not attempt magic but, in need, will go to those who do, including seidworkers, rune workers, and practitioners of *galdr*.

Who Are Heathens?

The number of Heathens in the United Kingdom today is not easily determined. During the 2001 census, a mere 300 people registered as Heathen in England and Wales. However, many Heathens have since commented that they responded to the call of the Pagan Federation (PF, a British organization with claims to represent pagan interests generally) by describing themselves simply as “pagan,” and some did not answer this optional question at all. Several are known to have written “pagan—Heathen,” and it is not known how this was coded within the census. (Approximately 40,000 people registered as “pagan,” belonging to a variety of traditions or paths.)

Heathenry is becoming better known in British pagan circles, and it is common for a pagan *moot* (a regular gathering, often social but sometimes including discussions or talks) to have two or three Heathens as regular participants. However, many Heathens do not associate with moots or even with pagan conferences or do so only sporadically. This is because of historical factors and the way paganism has, in Britain, paradoxically come to usually refer to ritual and magical practices derived from Wicca (a constructed religion of the mid-twentieth century—see Hutton 1999 for a history of Wicca in Britain). Most Heathens work in small groups or families, often known as kindreds or hearths, and are not members of any organizations. However, the Internet has greatly assisted networking among Heathens, and in Britain, the e-mail group “UKHeathenry” and the networking organization “Midgard’s Web” are attracting increasing numbers. Recently, Heathens and other reconstructionist pagans have created the Association of Polytheist Traditions (APT) in an attempt to give a voice and presence to polytheistic spirituality within the patchwork of religions in Britain today.

Earlier research on Heathenry (for example, Harvey 1997) focused on obvious organizations with a defined (paying) membership—the Odinic Rite (which later split into two groups) and Odinshof, rune groups that formed in the 1990s around the rune mistress Freya Aswynn, and the *Troth*, which, though based in the United States, developed a British branch in

the 1990s. Each of these groups has a history, but their very different histories do not encompass the history of Heathenry in Britain; indeed, they seem atypical of most Heathen experiences. However, the founding of the Odinic Rite in 1973 (around the same time as the Icelandic Asatru Fellowship, or *Ásatrúarfélagidh*, and the U.S. Asatru organization known as the Asatru Free Assembly) indicated increased visibility for Odinism.

The source material for Heathenry has been somewhat of a problem in Britain. Whereas in the Scandinavian countries, schoolchildren are familiar with the Sagas and Eddas, this has not been the case in the United Kingdom, although they were a contributing factor to the modern myth cycle of J. R. R. Tolkien. Tolkien, who was a renowned scholar of Old Norse and Old English though a staunch Christian, adopted some of the stories, many personal names, and many components from the worldview of the Eddas, thus maintaining folkloric traditions of borrowing from the past and eventually bringing the Northern European literature back into view for many people in Britain and elsewhere.

Norse mythology was studied in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries academically as part of the literature of Northern Europe, and it became part of the Victorian Romantic movement, with the names of deities and some of their attributes becoming known, though the people who had told the stories of those gods were romanticized as “Vikings” or “noble savages” and the deities themselves were seen as glorious warriors or beautiful and generous women. The coat of arms of the city of Sheffield, granted first to the Sheffield Borough Council in 1875, has as its supporters Vulcan, the Roman smith god, and Thor, the hammer-wielding Norse god who, though not himself a metalworker, was apparently seen as sufficiently close in his hefting of his hammer to be appropriate for the developing metalworking industry of the city. But though the literature could be read by linguists and the gods could be appropriated by those of a Romantic turn, modern English is very different from Old Norse or even Old English, and the poems themselves were only available in translation—or retold as Romantic stories for children.

Furthermore, the selective adoption of elements of Germanic and Norse mythology as part of the propaganda of the Third Reich during its rise in Germany meant that after World War II, many people in Britain came to think of the mythology as in some way tainted with Nazism. (One must add here that this adoption was symbolic rather than actual, as can be demonstrated by examining Nazi leaders’ writings.) Despite many good translations of the mythology (for example, Larrington 1996) and retellings of the material (for example, Crossley-Holland 1981), some of this thinking has persisted. However, since the 1970s, much light has been cast archaeologically on the Viking period and earlier Anglian and Saxon communities of Britain, and the idea that northern mythology and cosmology hold keys not

to a long-ago past but to how people lived with the land in Britain and Northern Europe is gaining some ground. As a result, Heathenry is becoming more acceptable today.

Nonetheless, issues of “warrior kindreds” and of “blood and soil” continue to be points of contestation. First, Heathenry today may be seen by other pagans as male dominated and tending to a glorification of violence. The romantic storytelling of the Victorians is in part responsible for this image, but some sections of Odinism appear overwhelmingly male. Further, there are claims that Odinism is “the natural religion of the Indo European people.” These parallel findings of Mattias Gardell (2003) for some Asatruar in the United States. Most British Heathens distance themselves from such claims by taking issue with them. They point out that the Indo-European people are spread across the world and have developed many religions including numerous versions of Christianity, that *Indo-European* may be a useful term linguistically but does not seem appropriate within a multicultural and “mongrel” society such as that of Britain, and that many people whose roots are not Indo-European may be drawn to Heathenry.

The main proponent of such claims today appears to be the Odinic Rite (the quote in the last paragraph is from the group’s website), and the split in the Odinic Rite into runic and Edda organizations (the latter now the Odinic Fellowship, which claims Odinism as “England’s native and national religion”) may in part be based on interpretations of such claims. Both groups use the tag line “Faith, Folk and Family,” though other Heathens do not in general do so. People who have joined and left the Odinic Rite stress that most members are not at all racist, at least as *racism* is popularly defined, yet they themselves left because they did not want to be associated with thinking that might lead to the promulgation of racist ideas. There is a question here of what is meant by *racism* (see Gardell 2003, 29), but in general, the division in Heathenry is between those who claim that people have natural divisions into races, with Heathenry being “natural” to “Europeans,” and those who see divisions as historical, with Heathenry arising in particular climates and cultures.

Many Heathens therefore see Heathenry as intrinsic to the landscape of Northern Europe—indigenous to place but not tied to blood or race categorizations. They find references to a folk soul or indeed folk religion as something to be avoided as simply not part of Heathenry either today or in the past, and they are worried by references to the Odinic Rite by known extreme right-wing or racist organizations.

The tendency in Britain today is for small groups of Heathens to develop Heathenry for themselves, assisted by networking organizations and in particular by Internet communication, creating kindreds unaffiliated with any organizations but in communication with each other.

The Pagan Federation has few Heathen members, although an increasing number of Heathens are working with PF members to develop mutual links. The Pagan Federation was initially a Wiccan organization and is gradually becoming more representative of paganisms in today's Britain. But the set of principles that new members are asked to sign proves difficult for almost all Heathens. The second principle, expressed currently (and rather ungrammatically) as "If it harms none, do what thou wilt," conflicts with animist ideas of individual spirits that relate to plants, animals, and earth as well as people or deities, and Heathens point out that harming others involves what we eat or how we build our houses, as well as, for instance, getting a job that another person might have wanted. Heathens would rather affirm that they take responsibility for their own actions. The third principle refers to "both the female and male aspect of Deity" and so proves difficult for polytheists, who deal with many gods or other spirits.

However, the close links now being developed and the evolution of "Pan-polytheist" organizations just as the Association of Polytheist Traditions may result in greater visibility for Heathenry, greater awareness that Heathens are responsible members of their societies, and greater grounds for negotiation between Heathens and other pagans in today's multivocal Britain.

Rituals of Heathenry

The most evident ritual forms observed in Britain are the blot and *sumbel*. The first of these is a ritual of offering, the second a ritual of toasting, which some Heathens liken to toasts at a wedding or a Burns Supper. Whereas toasting has a formal aspect to it—a glass or drinking horn is filled; a deity, ancestor, or friend is named; and the toast is drunk—a blot can be very simple indeed. Anything may be offered, and the offer can be as simple as taking part of one's food and setting it aside or, more usually, pouring a drink of mead or ale for a particular deity. No words are needed. A blot is not necessarily a magical action but a simple offering, and the most common offerings are probably those people make to their housewights (household spirits) or to land-wights (spirits of the land) as an act of recognition.

Many groups, though, use a blot as a way to construct community and so devise their own formal or semiformal rituals. Various blots can be found online or for sale from organizations, and blot "scripts" may be passed around. There seem to be two major attitudes toward group blots. One is that they are essentially a group-bonding ritual. A reason for a particular blot or indeed a calendar of blots is established, and people then either use

a well-tried format, inserting a poem or a reading appropriate for the time of year or the particular deity honored, or create a new script. The other is that they honor a particular deity or deities, and people will ask the deities what they want to have in the blot. If a group has planned to do a blot, members will therefore ask first which deities want to have the blot made to them and then how they should go about it. Inspiration may come in different ways, with some hearing the deities speak or being shown a focal point of the blot and others becoming aware of what they should do.

Scripted blots may have particular formats of words spoken by a leader (a gothi or gydhja, priest or priestess), with other words to be recited by everybody or by particular individuals. The leader will hallow sacred space, invite local wights to participate, and call to the Aesir and Vanir to be present. An intention is declared, an offering (usually of drink) is made to the particular deity who is to be honored, members of the group may ask for a gift in return, and a sung, or galdr, spell (often chanting one or more rune names, sometime reciting a verse) is used to raise or focus power to achieve the ends of the group.

Inspirational blots tend to have a keener focus on the particular deity or wight who has requested the blot, with group members asked to draw on their own knowledge of the being in order to take part. Although the blot has an outline (or order of events), individuals are expected to contribute from their own knowledge, and they may spend a considerable amount of time devising what they will do, possibly in conjunction with other members. Neither of these approaches is more right than another. Heathenry in the United Kingdom takes many forms, and people will often move through a more scripted blot approach to a more inspirational focus or merge elements of both forms in order to assist new group members.

Sumbel, or sýmbel, is a ritual of toasting. A formal blot will often include a short sumbel, in which all those present sip from a drinking horn passed around the group, in the deity's name. An ancestor or wight or a friend may be toasted similarly. A formal sumbel is usually a separate event, where the group engages in at least three rounds of toasting, often to the Aesir and Vanir, to ancestors and heroes, and to their own deeds and intentions. More rounds may be added as required.

Blots (pluralized as *blótar* in Old Norse) and sumbel provide ways for practitioners to show their relationships to Wyrð and to Heathen cosmology, as well as engage with other beings—deities and wights—in ways that form part of the discursive practices of Heathenry already mentioned. That is, in addition to sacred rituals, they are *identity practices* that demarcate the practitioner as specifically Heathen. However, though they connect practitioners with other worlds and with divinity, they are not necessarily magical practices.

Magic, Runes, and Seidr

Other ritual forms include magical practices such as runic divination, galdr singing, and seidr (Shamanic magic). Many Heathens use the runes of the Common Germanic Futhark (twenty-four runes); others use Anglo-Saxon Futhorcs with from five to nine extra runes, up to thirty-three in the case of the Northumbrian Futhorc; and a few may also use the Scandinavian and Icelandic “Younger” Futharks. (The names Futhark and Futhorc relate to the sound of the first six “letters,” and the difference in spelling addresses a difference in sound arising over time and place.) Rune magic may involve galdr singing of rune names, carving *taufr* (charms), or drawing runes in the air or on materials, in addition to using runes on small slips for divination. Many Heathens use runes in some of their work, drawing them for personal guidance or engraving their own ritual objects or indeed household items. However, some heathens are known as rune specialists, and others seek them out for teaching or for readings.

Galdr, already mentioned, may refer to chanted runes but often refers to sung spells of some kind. These include both “new” poems and chants and those from parts of the Eddas or from the Old English healing charms.

Two Old English charms, in particular, are pointed to by Heathens as a source of ritual ideas: the Acerbot (field blessing for unfruitful land) and the Nine Herbs charm, seen by practitioners as thinly Christianized records of old Heathen practices. Some practitioners believe the field blessing may have been performed by a Heathen priest and later a Christian one (this perception may conflict with academic analysis today, however).

For instance, one heathen ritual based on the Acerbot starts with these lines:

Eastward I stand, favour I ask:
I ask the great lord, I ask the mighty drihten,
I ask the holy warder of heavens,
Earth do I ask and sky, and the fair sacred lady
And heaven’s might and high halls,
That I may this galdr, by the drihten’s gift,
Speak clearly by my firm will,
Grow up the crops to our worldly needs

Here, the speaker is asking the *drihten* (or *drighthen*, meaning war leader or god potentially seen as Woden) to empower him to recite the galdr correctly so that it may have its effect of helping the land and the farms.

The Nine Herbs charm (a charm against poison) may be seen as a possible example of Shamanic healing, with each of the nine references to the

herbs setting up a particular set of meaning and relationships between people, land, gods, and, of course, plants. This charm describes actions by Woden, but it addresses plants—the nine herbs by which it is known—directly. It seems particularly interesting as an example of Shamanic song, in which the herbs and indeed disease spirits are addressed directly; the Shaman proclaims his or her own power, and a god—Woden—is indexed for his exploits rather than directly asked for assistance. In fact, some heathens may attempt to use the charm Shamanically (Blain 2004).

Remember, Mugwort, what you did reveal
 What you did arrange at Regenmeld.
 You were called Una, oldest of the herbs.
 You have might against three and against thirty
 You have might against venom and against infection
 You have might against the loathing faring though the land . . .
 I alone know the running streams, and they enclose nine adders.
 Let all weeds spring up as herbs,
 Seas slide apart, all salt water
 While I blow this poison from you.

(Based on translations by Rodrigues
 [1993] and Pollington [2000])

Heathens have tended to see such material as basically Heathen with some “corruption” by Christianity, which they have been stripping away. But the texts may instead be products of a Christian era that incorporate Heathen/Shamanic understandings of land and plants. Today, they are being “Heathenized” by action and ritual use and by constant inscription of meaning, including an engagement with commentary (for example, Pollington 2000) and subversion and revision within politicized contexts in which the scripted “original” (itself a translation or interpretation) is claimed as authenticating practice that is reinvented in today’s contexts.

However, some Heathens are producing new sacred songs of their own, and these may be designed with magical intent. For instance, in a ritual of land protection, the god Frey asked for a song, which was produced and designed to celebrate or confirm the wholeness of the land under threat. The song combined images of the land through a year cycle, with references to the god and stories and folklore referring to him.

The third area of magical practice is *seidr*, which is Shamanic work. This type of magical practice was referred to in the Sagas and possibly reflected in some of the Eddic poems. *Seidr* appeared to be a way (or set of ways) for people to connect with deities and spirits. There have been considerable arguments within Heathenry about *seidr*, notably on whether it is “good”

magic: in the Sagas, it is usually described as being performed against the hero of the story.

Further, some have difficulties with inherent ambiguities of gender and sexuality that appear in certain descriptions (see, for example, Blain and Wallis 2000; Meulengracht Sørensen 1983). However, growing numbers of Heathens in Britain and elsewhere are attempting to reconstruct seidr practices for protection, for healing (Blain 2002b), and notably for divination, which is usually called oracular seidr.

Constructing Seidr

The most complete description in the Sagas comes from *Eiríks Saga Rauða* (*The Saga of Erik the Red*). In the saga, a farm in Greenland faces famine; a seeress is invited to prophesy and comes to the farm. Her costume is described in detail, from her cloak and staff to the laces on her shoes. A special meal is made for her, and a platform (*hjaltr*) is prepared on which she will sit to prophesy. The next day, she makes what preparations she needs, sits on the *seidhjallr* (seidr platform), and a woman (the heroine of the saga) sings to call the spirits. The seeress speaks of the end of the hard times and prosperity for the community, and she also prophesies for individuals, notably the young woman who sang so beautifully that more spirits attended than ever before, enabling clearer vision or more detailed knowledge. Some, both Heathens and academics studying the literature (for example, Borovsky 1999), have considered that the seeress would not only see future prosperity but also work actively with the spirits to *create* it.

This account has formed the basis of attempts to reconstruct seidr in Britain and indeed around the world. In particular, some attempts focus on oracular seidr—calling to spirits, gods, or ancestors to help foresee possible outcomes to situations or actions (which is not quite the same as predicting the future). Some British Heathens use a format derived by the U.S. group Hrafnar (the Ravens), but most have developed their own forms of working seidr.

Hrafnar's oracular seidr arose when a woman in the western United States was searching for something for the women to do when the men were playing "Viking games" at festivals or other events. She knew the description of the Greenland seeress, and with a group of friends she began to attempt the reconstruction. Most details were, of course, missing: what song was sung, how the ritual was structured, what preparations the seeress made. She and some of the group members had experience with other forms of Shamanistic practice—for instance, from Harner "core Shamanism" workshops—and so they filled in what they could, using drum and

chant in writing a song to summon the spirits. They set the central “seeing” within a ritual that included calling on land-spirits and Ódhinn and Freyja, the deities who are described in the old texts as making seidr. When the first seeress sat on the “high seat,” a raised chair to represent the seidhjallr, she “saw” for the community and the individuals within it.

Experimenting further, they developed songs to call spirit animal helpers and build in safety measures to protect audience members who might venture onto unfamiliar territory. The oracular seidr ritual they have developed takes all participants on a “guided meditation” that explores part of the cosmology and ends at the gates of Hel’s realm, the place of the ancestors, where wild hemlock flowers all year long, at the East Gate where Ódhinn summoned a *völva* (seeress) to answer from her grave. But there, the audience stops and waits while the seeress journeys further, in a deeper level of trance or altered consciousness, to seek answers for participants’ questions.

Elsewhere (including in the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Iceland) people were experimenting with similar concepts, particularly the idea of altered-consciousness work involving song and staff, and often in quest of knowledge on behalf of a group or community. These practitioners often make use of a high seat—the raised platform as described in *The Saga of Erik the Red*—and may follow a pattern fairly similar to the Hrafnar work, with questions from the community posed to seek responses from the seeress. Much British seidwork uses singing to assist the seeress and looks for inspiration both to the Icelandic Sagas and Eddas and to Old English healing charms. Not only Heathens but also various other pagans, including people following Shamanic paths, are experimenting with seidr of this sort.

Seidr is also used for other purposes, including healing, protection, and developing links with land and ancestors. Many British practitioners see this work as related to indigenous Shamanic practices dating to the Iron and Bronze Ages of Northern Europe and potentially even further back. Other obvious links for seidr as Shamanic practice are with Saami Shamanism (Dubois 1999; Price 2002). (The Saami, sometimes also called “Laplanders,” are the nomadic reindeer-herding people indigenous to the northernmost regions of Scandinavia and northwestern Russia.)

Although Heathenry has been described by some practitioners as a deity-centered spirituality, Heathens look to the elder kin of the Aesir and Vanir, the goddesses and gods of the Northern mythology, whereas seidworkers tend to focus increasingly on wights of land, plants, animals, and ancestral practices relating particularly to place and context. In particular, ideas of specific local knowledge are coming to the fore, linking again with Shamanic practices and knowledges in Shamanic cultures, where local knowledge and local spirits are key (Pettigrew and Tamu 2002; Fridman

1999). I have participated in seidr events in Britain, Canada, and the United States, and in Britain there has been a distinct difference, which seems to relate to the importance of land-spirits.

Researching Heathen Religion Today

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I am a Heathen, and so I have been involved in the development of Heathenry in the United Kingdom. I know about seidr by taking part in it, by finding what works and what does not, by trying to find ways to evaluate methods and techniques, and by talking to other people in the Heathen community in Britain and elsewhere (often through the Internet).

I am also an academic researcher and lecturer. As such, I am interested in how people construct religion and meaning and in why increasing numbers of people are investing in the past by looking at literature and archaeology and seeing spiritual meaning in places and poetry. In association with a colleague, I am investigating how some pagans—notably Heathens and Druids—feel themselves associated with the land and inheritors of its spirituality, and I am making some comparisons between today’s “new” pagans and Heathens, on the one hand, and indigenous spiritual groups in other parts of the world, on the other. As an anthropologist studying Heathenry paganisms and sacred sites in Britain, therefore, I am looking at:

1. People’s conscious creation of “identity” and “self”: developing self-consciousness and community consciousness within pagan practices
2. How people re-embed personal spirituality within landscape and mythology/cosmology
3. New directions and theories in the anthropology of Shamanisms (going beyond symbolic anthropology and performance theory)
4. And, therefore, the evolution of groups or communities of what we are describing as “new-indigenes”

I am relating this to the theorizing of spiritualities within postmodernity, asking questions about the emergence of self-styled new tribes but examining focuses of *place* and *material* (literature, archaeology) and spirits (particularly specific deities, ancestors, and Disir) in terms of their importance for practitioners and playing off theoretical concepts of shifting, fluid “neo-tribes” against indigenous understandings of landscape and spirits. This research began in my explorations of seidr, and it is continuing through working with understandings of ancestors and landscapes more generally.

It seems that the involvement with pagan or Heathen understandings of spirit and cosmology, within reconstructionist frameworks derived from the literature, creates not only long-standing interest in history and archaeology but also worldviews that challenge conventional assumptions about people and life. In other words, re-embedded spiritual communities (however virtual or thinly spread they may be geographically) work on assumptions about people, spirits, and cosmology that are unusual today; people form discursive communities in which understandings of self and spirits—and transformation—are debated; and the relations of human people and spirit people are increasingly not a matter of ritual or even lifestyle but of everyday living.

Although some pagans term themselves the tribes or the new tribes, social theory offers the concept of neo-tribes (Maffesoli 1996), emerging as fluid groupings with shifting boundaries. Maffesoli was referring to liquid formations of identity within postmodernity; in applying this concept specifically to Heathens and pagans in the United Kingdom, we are drawing on ideas from landscape archaeology and anthropology, including the importance of place and spirit, and the concept of ancestors as people living on and working the land (not necessarily blood relatives) and dealing with its energies and spirits. We have adopted the term *new-indigenes* to describe those emerging pagans and Heathens who ally themselves with land and attempt to relate to it in practical and spiritual ways. Indeed, *new-indigenes* seems a particularly suitably term for the increasing number of Heathens who problematize issues of ethnicity (such as the rather simplistic blood-and-soil arguments that are still sometimes heard) and who, whatever their origins, locate their spirituality with respect to land, history, and prehistory. Our Sacred Sites Project (www.sacredsites.org.uk) has paid particular notice, therefore, to Heathen and Druid interactions with prehistory and to questions of how sacredness is inscribed in the land—or of how land inscribes sacredness in people.

Conflicts and Issues

Within Britain, increasing numbers of people are attempting to locate their spirituality with respect to the landscape and the old stories and deities linking spirituality directly to land, land-spirits, and older inhabitants, including investigating ancient sites and practices there today. Some tensions or contestations arise between the Heathen and reconstructionist communities and other pagans, and others arise within Heathenry.

We have seen that land-wights and ancestors are becoming increasingly central to both seidr practice and Heathenry in general. This fact becomes

evident in looking at how people relate to the landscape—not only to ancient sites such as Stonehenge or Sutton Hoo but also to their own streets and gardens and houses. Heathenry is an animist spirituality, and the landscape is living; the rocks and trees have spirits and agency, and various sacred sites have their guardian wights. In Iceland, I was told how a land-wight is a spirit that has rock or earth for a body. This relationship of people and living landscape has similarities with indigenous religions, and it becomes something that, as an anthropologist, I attempt to analyze and, as a Heathen, I attempt to explain to other people, including other pagans.

Symbolic anthropology and theories of performance have proved useful in theorizing animism and Shamanisms. These have been critiqued: in particular, analyzing Shamanisms as symbolical manipulation or as performance does not take seriously practitioner accounts of the realities in which they work to make meaning through Shamanic activity (Goulet and Young 1994; Blain 2000; Blain, Ezzy, and Harvey 2004). I am drawing particularly on the work of researchers and theorists such as Schieffelin (1998) and Schechner (1993) to look at ways that performance analysis can be broadened to include the construction of meaning between practitioner and spirit-helpers, and we have applied this approach to examining identities within Neoshamanisms, specifically Heathen Shamanic practice, or seidr. The concept of performance, however, is problematic for practitioners who understand it in a colloquial rather than an analytic sense and thereby take exception to being called fake (Blain and Wallis 2004). There are, though, many attempts to examine or define Shamanism—and *performativity* gives the sense of direct agency and intentionality in creating transformation in practitioner or community that resonates with the experiences and observations I have gained. We speak, therefore, of *active accomplishment of meaning* rather than simply performance.

Further analytical or practical tensions arising include issues of appropriation by practitioner or by researcher; other practitioners' views of Shamanic practice, in particular issues of spirits and control; and issues surrounding gender and sexuality, which may be linked with the area of control. I have already mentioned issues arising between so-called reconstructionists and other pagans. An example illustrates some tensions between reconstructionist understandings and practices and eclectic pagan perspectives of these.

During the most elaborate form of the oracular seidr ritual, the group Hrafnar do some scene setting involving a protection ritual followed by an attempt to help attendees locate themselves within a Heathen mind-set. The group members devised something that to them seemed to fit and that would make non-Heathen attendees feel comfortable. They demarcated a sacred space and asked for protection of this space from Nordri, Sudri, Austri, and Vestri (the four dwarfs who are said in Norse mythology to hold

up the sky); they asked the particular deities Odin and Freyja, who themselves were said in the lore to perform *seidr*, to guard and assist the work; and then, after some singing, they narrated a guided meditation to assist people in adjusting to the situation. None of this activity was seen as essential, none was reported from older descriptions, and most of it was put in place for the sake of giving non-Heathens something they could relate to. However, other pagans may see such extra parts as essential—indeed, as what the ritual is about. An eclectic pagan commented, “Oh, it’s just the same, isn’t it, you cast a circle, call quarters, invoke the Goddess and the God and then do a pathworking.” Heathens (and other reconstructionists and Neoshamanists) therefore often find themselves explaining their spirituality in opposition to Wicca, which has (somewhat paradoxically) become a dominant paradigm.

Within Heathenry, however, there are issues specifically concerning *seidr*, notably those of gender and sexuality referred to earlier and also of relationships between *seidworkers* and spirits of land or place. Most *seidr* in the past was described as being performed by women, and women constitute more practitioners today. However, in one of the best-known accounts of any type of *seidr* work, the *seidr* is performed by a male, in this case Óðhinn, the master magician, among the Aesir (gods) interpreted by the thirteenth-century writer Snorri Sturluson as an invading king who used shape-shifting to gain knowledge for himself or others. I quote from an online version most easily available to practitioners, filtering Snorri’s thirteenth-century account through a nineteenth-century translation that in itself indicates some of the suspicion with which men doing *seidr* could be regarded. Óðhinn was expert at:

the art in which the greatest power is lodged . . . what is called magic [*seiðr*]. By means of this he could know beforehand the predestined fate of men, or their not yet completed lot; and also bring on the death, ill-luck, or bad health of people, and take the strength or wit from one person and give it to another. But after such witchcraft followed such weakness and anxiety [*ergi*], that it was not thought respectable for men to practice it; and therefore the priestesses were brought up in this art . . . His enemies dreaded him; his friends put their trust in him, and relied on his power and on himself. He taught the most of his arts to his priests of the sacrifices, and they came nearest to himself in all wisdom and witch-knowledge. Many others, however, occupied themselves much with it; and from that time witchcraft spread far and wide, and continued long. (Sturluson c. 1225)

This extract implies that *seidr* practice was valued differently in men and in women. The word *ergi* is translated in this nineteenth-century discourse as

“weakness and anxiety.” Other translations might be “cowardice” or “effeminity.” Although exact translation is complicated, the passage clearly indicates that *seidr* was something that was not appropriate for men in this society to be doing. (For a detailed account of the use of *ergi* within the medieval literature, in particular as an insult, see Meulengracht Sørensen 1983.) In one of the poems of the *Poetic Eddas*, Loki raises the accusation of *ergi* against Óðhinn.

But you once practiced *seið* on Samsey
and you beat on the drum as seeresses do
in the likeness of a *vítki* you journeyed among people
and I thought that showed an *ergi* nature.

(*Lokasenna*, 24. Translation based on Larrington [1996, 89],
but I have retained words bearing on *seidr* and *ergi*.)

Today’s *seidworkers* are both male and female. They dispute meanings of *ergi*, with some saying that women and gay men may be more drawn to *seidr*. The word and its contestations indicate ambiguities relating to *seidr* and *seidworkers* and the embeddedness of *seidr* within political and gendered dimensions. For today’s *seidworkers*, the term raises possibilities of finding ways of relating to the worlds that are not those of hegemonic masculinity, an abnegation of ego that, according to some *seidworkers*, is a requirement for a male of today’s world in engaging with Shamanistic practices (Blain and Wallis 2000).

These references to *ergi* raise problems for people who think of Heathenry or Ásatrú as the religion of Viking warriors and especially for those who have sought for a religion that would enable them to wave battle-axes or play Viking games. Most Heathens accept, though, that individuals will find their own expressions of spirituality and, of course, that the cultures of Heathenry in the past did not only include warriors but also farmers, poets, spinners, weavers, fishers, teachers—and Shamans. Yet for some more right-wing practitioners, this becomes very problematic. One possible meaning of *ergi* is “gay” or “homosexual,” and one right-wing group in Britain holds that same-sex preference is “antifamily” and hence reprehensible. Few Heathens would take this line, and Heathenry is in general a religion that does not discriminate on lines of either gender or sexual preference. The tensions remain, however, and occasionally surface within the community.

Indigenizing Religion

In the United Kingdom, Heathenry is developing from the practices and readings of individuals and small groups into a network of people dis-

cussing their relationships with land, wights, and Wyrð. In the process, earlier connections or associations of blood and soil and misuses of the mythology during the twentieth century are increasingly less relevant within the community. As Heathenry moves away from the stereotypical warrior religion ideas of nineteenth-century Romanticism, people become more free to explore the diversity of cultural and spiritual practices. Today's Heathenry includes those who work in groups (kindreds or hearths) or on their own, those who blot the gods at monthly events or festivals, those who make seidr or perform rune magic, and those who honor ancestors at sacred sites. It includes poets and artists, teachers and police officers, parents, community workers, office workers, students, shop assistants, manual workers, healers, craftspeople, and songwriters. In short, it is a diverse and vibrant community of people, scattered thinly across Britain, who are finding ways to communicate and develop their ideas.

Political issues have not disappeared, however. Right-wing use of the images, particularly warrior imagery, still persists as an embarrassment for today's Heathenry. In particular, the focus on heritage shared by many Heathens can lead to alliances that may prove unfortunate. One right-wing political party makes considerable play of protecting heritage and treasuring the diverse richness of our ancient British traditions. This discourse is seductive for people who are concerned about environment and heritage, as are most Heathens (and probably most people within the United Kingdom, for that matter). But most Heathens go far to disassociate themselves from any taint of racism, and they recognize that Britain has absorbed influences and people from all over the world. Indeed, they point out that the land of Britain has welcomed many to its shores and that these immigrants have themselves become part of the landscape and the heritage celebrated today. There is a growing recognition that the best defense against further appropriation of symbols and phrases by the far right may be the increasing visibility of their use by moderate and even left-leaning Heathens today.

The emphasis on seidr in this chapter is deliberate. Seidworkers have been somewhat marginalized within Heathenry, but their work is now becoming more obvious. The Heathen reconstructionist community is coming to see seidworkers as people who are perhaps tricky, distrusted, and acknowledged at once to be both avoided and encouraged—those who move between the worlds and who challenge conventional meanings, who negotiate with alarming entities, whose bringing of healing threatens other possibilities (Blain 2002b). The process of transformation involves a relation with earth and with its spirits and with the surrounding human communities. Such Shamanic work is neither apolitical nor value-free, and seid folk increasingly find themselves caught within processes that link people,

place, and practices through obligations to land and spirits, as well as to those humans who seek them out. For me, it is not surprising that those who tend to have right-wing approaches to heritage seem most worried by seidr (and particularly by the ambiguities of gender and sexuality that are associated with it).

A challenge for Heathenry as a new-indigenous religion is to link spirituality with the land in ways that avoid the clichés of nationalist discourse. A focus on the living landscape and the animist/Shamanic approaches to earth and spirits may aid this endeavor, particularly where ancestors are related to spiritual approaches or to landscape rather than genetics. So may a recognition that Heathenry, like other religions in Western society, is intrinsically political and that a Heathen worldview connects with causes such as heritage or the environment that crosscut conventional politics and require careful and serious thought. The interconnectivity of Wyrð and the wealth of mythology and imagery give scope for creative developments of identity. Today's Heathens are not those of the past, but they can shape meaning and relationships that make sense in the modern multivocal society. The very complexity of that society gives scope for Heathenry to reemerge, one of many possible religions within the landscape of Britain today.

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Online Resources

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- Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights Project. Directed by Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis. The project concerns "Paganisms, archaeological monuments, and access" issues in the United Kingdom and provides numerous links to pagan organizations, events, and controversies. At <http://www.sacredsites.org.uk>.
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Chapter Six

The Revival of Ukrainian Native Faith

ADRIAN IVAKHIV

Paganism in the Ukrainian Context

Ukrainian Paganism is part of a larger movement of religious revivalism and creativity that harkens back to the pre-Christian beliefs and practices of ancient Slavic peoples. This movement is commonly identified by the term *Ridnovira* (or *Ridna Vira*), which translates as “Native Faith.” Although interest in pre-Christian religion can be found throughout the pre-Soviet and Soviet eras, the Native Faith movement did not emerge in Ukraine until the final years of the Soviet Union (the late 1980s), and it has undergone its most dramatic growth since the early and mid-1990s. Today, several thousand Ukrainians consider themselves Pagans, Ridnovirs, or followers of ancient Slavic or Ukrainian Native Faith.

This chapter will begin with an overview of what is known about religion in the period preceding mass Christianization in the territory of today’s Ukraine. Next, the modern revival of Slavic and Ukrainian Paganism will be examined and the different strands of today’s Native Faith movement will be investigated. In the process, several key topics will be explored: the Native Faith community’s use of prehistory; the connections between nationalism, Native Faith, and other forms of Slavic Paganism; and the possible future of Ukrainian Paganism and Native Faith.

The Past: Religion among the Ancient Slavs

Linguists today attempt to reconstruct the languages and, by extension, the cognitive worlds of ancient peoples by working backward from today’s



languages according to well-tested models of linguistic change. Archaeologists, meanwhile, reconstruct the material worlds of prehistoric groups from the shards of pottery, ruins of stone, and fragments of bone that have been left behind. If the two sciences could meet, they might tell us who lived where for how long, what they called themselves, what they believed their worlds to consist of, and whatever happened to them. But the terrain on which these two sciences meet, when unsupported by written historical sources, is a murky one filled with rival hypotheses and guesswork.

For that reason, it is incorrect to assume that “the Slavs” ever existed in any real sense of the word—that is, as a unified ethnocultural group or civilization. Ancestral Slavic, or Proto-Slavic, languages developed somewhere, however, and today’s rough consensus is that their speakers lived, from about the second half of the first millennium BCE, somewhere in the territory of Central and Eastern Europe loosely bounded by the Dnieper (Dnipro, in Ukrainian) River basin in the east and the Vistula River basin in the west, the Carpathian Mountains and perhaps the Danube delta in the south, and the forests beyond the Pripet (Prypiat) basin in the north (Barford 2001; Curta 2001; Ivakhiv 1995). Over the course of several centuries, during which Slavic speakers migrated to the north, east, and southwest, Slavic-speaking cultures combined, transformed, and differentiated into the peoples known today, commonly distinguished into Eastern Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarussians), Western Slavs (Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks, among others), and Southern Slavs (Slovenes, Serbs, Croats, Macedonians, and Bulgarians).

The earliest-known beliefs of the Slavs showed strong affinities with those of neighboring linguistic groups, especially Balts, Indo-Iranians, and Thracians. Linguists and structuralist scholars of myth and religion, such as Vyacheslav V. Ivanov and Vladimir N. Toporov, have identified a common Indo-European cultural substrate underlying Slavic beliefs. As presented in a series of works by the French philologist Georges Dumézil and his followers, this substrate may have included a tripartite conception of the social order—a world divided between castes of priests, warriors, and farmers commoners—alongside a dual conception in which a sky god is countered by an underworld adversary and worship of the sun, fire and light, and ancestors. More controversially, archaeologist Marija Gimbutas has argued that Slavic pre-Christian beliefs represent a mixture of Indo-European patriarchy and an earlier, “Old European” stratum of matrifocal, earth-centered belief and ritual practice. The latter was reflected in a widespread reverence toward the earth, sometimes personified as *Maty Syra Zemlia* (Russian, literally meaning “Mother moist earth”). Less contentiously, other scholars, such as Boris Rybakov, have emphasized the slow evolution of Slavic religion from simple animistic beliefs in life-giving spirits (*berehyni*, or protectresses) and

life-threatening ones (*upyri*, or vampires), ancestral cults, and personifications of fertility and communal order (*Lada*, *Kupala*, *Rod*, and others) to the “higher mythological” pantheons of the late pre-Christian era.

From archaeological and ethnographic evidence, it is evident that Eastern Slavic peoples perceived the world to be animated by a variety of spiritual beings. The beings ranged from those dwelling in rivers and waters (such as *mavkas* and *rusalkas*), forests (*lisovyks*), fields (*polyovyks*), and households (*domovyks*) to personifications of illness, climatic forces, abstract principles such as fate or bad luck, and the souls of the dead. Certain places appear to have been regarded with particular reverence; these included springs and wells, rivers, groves of oaks and other trees, the rounded tops of hills, and raised flat areas overlooking rivers. Fairy-tale characters, such as Baba Yaga (the Old Hag) and Koshchei the Deathless, may preserve some memory of ancient deities as well, though these can more easily be explained as simple products of the folk imagination.

Calendrical rituals were commonly connected to the periodic return of the ancestors, the comings and goings of nature spirits, and the agrarian fertility cycle. Seasonal festivals display a rich texture of agricultural and ancestral symbolism: decorations of greenery to welcome the return of the ancestors or nature spirits in springtime, food set aside for the souls of the dead, sheaves of grain and bundles of straw representing ancestors during winter rites, and so on. Ethnographic material gathered in rural Ukraine in the late nineteenth century shows a thorough synthesis of Pagan and Christian elements, typical of the peasant religiosity often referred to as “double faith” (*dvoviria*). The Christmas period is marked by *Koliada* rites: the lighting of fires, processions of masked carolers performing ritual drama and offering greetings and wishes for a bountiful harvest, and offerings of food and drink to the “visitors” (representing the ancestors). Fire and water imagery features most prominently in springtime and midsummer rites, often centered around such figures as Yarylo or Yaryla, Kupalo or Kupala, and Marena. (The names vary among different regions and ethnographic sources. In other parts of the Slavic world, one finds such alternate names as Kostroma, Marzanna, Dudula, and others.) Kupala’s festival, celebrated at midsummer (Saint John’s Day in its Christian incarnation), included the ritual lighting of bonfires, bathing in rivers, divination, songs, dances, and, traditionally, the dressing and sacrificial burning or drowning of an effigy representing the deity. The connection between this world and the spiritual or invisible “Otherworld” was seen as especially close and potent at these turning points of the agricultural calendar; and the passage between the two was represented in such ritual acts as the burning, drowning, or setting onto water of effigies, branches, straw, or garlands of flowers and the rolling of burning wheels of straw down slopes into rivers.



Seasonal festivals display a rich texture of agricultural and ancestral symbolism. Decorations of greenery welcome the return of the ancestors or nature spirits in springtime. (Courtesy of Adrian Ivakhiv)

Analysis of Slavic folklore has allowed researchers to reconstruct the archaic cosmological image of the World Tree, a three-tiered vertical structure whose levels correspond to a heavenly world, represented by birds, sun and moon; an earthly world, represented by bees and humans; and an underworld, represented by chthonic creatures such as snakes and beavers. This structure is arguably preserved in late pre-Christian statuary. For instance, an impressive four-sided temple statue found near Zbruch in western Ukraine includes, in its top level, representations of distinct deities facing the four cardinal directions; a human ritual community (or *khoro vod*) in its middle level; and a three-headed underworld figure, thought to be the god Veles or Volos, holding up the world.

Numerous remains have been found throughout Slav-occupied territories of temples with upraised platforms, frequently located on hills or mountains, with places for wooden or, less frequently, stone statues of deities: some with three or four heads facing the cardinal directions, some holding a drinking horn or decorated with emblems such as sun symbols or incised horse figures. Medieval chronicles name several deities as having been worshipped in Grand Prince Volodymyr's (Vladimir's) late tenth-

century imperial capital, Kyïv (Kiev). The most prominent of these was Perun, god of thunder, law, and war, associated with oak trees and groves and commonly identified with the Germanic god Thor. Veles, or Volos, god of horned livestock, wealth, and the underworld, is thought by some scholars to have been his adversary (the duality being analogous to that of the Indian gods Mitra and Varuna, locked in an eternal combat between sky and underworld). This belief seems attested by the fact that Veles was excluded from Volodymyr's temple atop the Kyïvan hills but worshipped in the lower merchant's town of Podil below. The gods Svaroh and Dazhboh both contain elements of sky and solar deities known from other Indo-European-speaking peoples, whereas Stryboh was a god of winds and the air. Other deities, such as Khors and Symargl, reflect an unmistakable Iranian (Scythian or Sarmatian) influence, and the female Mokosh was likely a fertility goddess. Most of these deities can be traced back to earlier forms as personifications of natural forces (see Gimbutas 1971; Ivakhiv 1994; Jakobson 1972; Kulikowski 1989; Zaroff 1995; Znayenko 1980).

It is likely that Volodymyr consolidated his pantheon from a larger diversity of beliefs and priestly practices in an attempt to cement together a religion appropriate to a growing and powerful state. By 988, Volodymyr himself decisively rejected that religion in favor of Byzantine Christianity. According to legend, the Kyïvan ruler had sent out scouts to foreign lands to seek out the most attractive religion, and the ones who had visited Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire, were duly impressed by the beauty of the art and rituals of Greek Christianity. According to the twelfth-century *Primary Chronicle*, Volodymyr commanded that the Pagan idols be toppled and destroyed, burned, or cast into the Dnipro River. As Pagan believers wept, the statue of Perun was cast down at a spot that was referred to as Perun's Shore for centuries afterward. Temples and sacred sites were destroyed, churches were built in their place, and sermons were directed against the continuation of Pagan practices.

Pre-Christian practices went on, however, especially in isolated and more northerly extensions of Slavic settlement, including the Novgorod, Suzdal, and Belozersk provinces of what is now Russia. The most notable Slavic Pagan resistance occurred at the temple stronghold at Arkona on the island of Rugia (Rügen, now in Germany), which was destroyed by the Christian Danes in 1168. Christianization proceeded more vigorously in the territory of today's central and western Ukraine, as it was closer to the center of Kyïvan Rus', but even there, resistance led by Pagan priests (*volkhvs*) seems to have recurred periodically for centuries in isolated areas. Despite intense efforts, beliefs and practices changed slowly in rural areas. Gods were replaced by saints (Perun by Saint Elijah, Veles by Saint Blasius, Yarylo by Saint George), Pagan festivals by Christian feast days, and sacred sites by

churches, and magical and divinatory practices were accommodated to new understandings. Yet many pre-Christian customs continued as integral parts of rural life even into the twentieth century, among the Eastern Slavs more so than in other parts of the Slavic world. These customs included seasonal festivals; dances; processions; commemorative feasts (such as on All Souls' Day); magical practices connected to the sanctification of water, fire, and cereal grains; and beliefs in harmful as well as beneficent spiritual entities (Kulikowski 1989; Ivanits 1988; Ryan 1999). Outside of the urban centers, then, Christianization was less a process of replacement or "conversion" than one of syncretic mutual accommodation, with Pagan traditions continuing under a new veneer and a new or hybridized form of Christianity emerging as its outcome.

Revival and Reconstruction: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

As with Anglo-American Neopaganism (see Hutton 1999), much of today's Eastern European Paganism can be traced to the late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Romantic revolt against Classicism, Rationalism, Faith in Science, and Enlightenment Universalism. As a broad-scale cultural and intellectual movement, Romanticism flowered alongside the full-scale development of modern nationalism. Fueled by the ideas of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) and others, intellectual elites began to assert histories and heritages for their emerging nations. Herder conceived of nations or peoples as organic totalities: each ethnically defined *volk* (people, or folk) was thought to have its collective personality, unified through a common language and body of customs, folklore, song, myth, and ritual and formed through a distinct history of interaction with its climate, geography, and natural environment. Out of the Romantic ferment grew the fields of folkloristics and comparative philology, which, in the hands of Jakob Grimm, Franz Bopp, and others, came to embody a desire for "noble origins"—the shaping of national identities that would be seen as equal, if not superior, to all others and distinct from the universalistic claims both of Christianity and of the Enlightenment.

In spite of the repressive milieu of czarist Russia, within which most of modern-day Ukraine found itself at the time, Ukrainian writers, folklorists, and intellectuals pursued this national recovery project with vigor and enthusiasm. As other burgeoning nations compiled or invented their folk epics and "books of genesis"—such as the Scottish *Ossian* and the Finnish *Kalevala*—the anonymously composed *History of the Rus' People (Istoriia Rusov)* and the *Books of Genesis of the Ukrainian People (Knyhy Byttia Ukrayins'koho*

Narodu, produced by the secretive but influential Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood), were advanced to serve a similar purpose in Ukraine. Folk customs and worldviews were portrayed by leading writers, most notably in Lesia Ukrayinka's play *Lisova Pisia* (*A Forest Song*), Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi's *Tini Zabutykh Predkiv* (*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*), and the mythologically inspired stories of Nikolai Gogol. Under the czarist regime, however, Ukrainian nationalism was anathema: the czars considered Ukrainians to be a subgroup of the Russian people, and they outlawed the Ukrainian language from usage in higher society. "Ukrainophile" writers and cultural activists were persecuted throughout much of the nineteenth century, and the idea of an independent Ukrainian nation-state was hardly conceivable. In western Ukraine and specifically Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, however, Ukrainian nationalism developed to a significantly greater degree; this fact accounts for a marked discrepancy in nationalist attitudes between the country's east and west until the present day.

The intellectual movement represented by Romantic nationalism included a pronounced quest for "roots," to which comparative philologists provided a set of ideas by which Slavic speakers identified as one of the Indo-European or, as they were known then, "Indo-Aryan" peoples. This idea of ancient "Aryan" ancestors offered a means by which some Europeans felt they could distinguish themselves from the biblically based history of the Semitic peoples, which had provided the dominant lens on the distant past (in Europe) until the eighteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Aryan-Semite dichotomy was used as a convenient template onto which some European intellectuals began projecting their own favored and unfavored traits (see Poliakov 1974; Olender 1992; Figueira 2002). Ariosophy, as it became known, was to influence some of the ideologists of Hitler's Third Reich and has since been discredited in part due to that association; however, in the early decades of the twentieth century, non-Germanocentric forms of Ariosophy were in circulation in other parts of Eastern and Central Europe. These ideas were instrumental in the first stirrings of a Ukrainian Neopagan revival in the 1930s.

The first step toward the rebirth of pre-Christian Ukrainian religion was taken by Volodymyr Shaian (1908–1974), a linguist, philologist, and Orientalist-Sanskritologist from Lviv University, who first articulated the idea following a spiritual revelation he reported having in 1934 atop Mount Grekhit in the Ukrainian Carpathians. Drawing on the Indo-Aryanist ideas then in circulation among mythographers and philologists, Shaian delivered a paper at a 1937 Indologists' seminar in Lviv on the possibility of a "pan-Aryan renaissance," one that was genuinely "all-Aryan" in contrast to Hitler's Germanocentric Aryanism (Lozko 1999). In 1944, he fled Lviv and spent some time in German and Austrian refugee camps,

where he became involved in the founding of the Ukrainian Free Academy of Sciences. Around the same time, he founded the Orden Lytsariv Boha Sontsia (Order of the Knights of the Solar God), a religio-political unit that he hoped would become an arm of the paramilitary Ukrainian Insurgent Army in its fight against the invading Soviet Red Army. Among the order's members was Lev Sylenko (b. 1921), who was initiated "Orlyhora" (Eagle-mountain) by Shaian. By the 1970s, the two had parted ways, with Sylenko pursuing his own attempts to reform the Native Faith, attempts that were rejected by Shaian. The overlap and rivalry between these two founding fathers of the Ridnovir renaissance continues to this day: members of the Volodymyr Shaian Institute in Canada were involved in Sylenko's RUNVira community in Hamilton, Ontario, and the members of the groups that will be examined here still position themselves according to their commitments to the ideas developed by one or the other of the founding fathers. Shaian's writings on Native Faith, pre-Christian traditions, the *Book of Veles*, and other topics continue to be reprinted, read, and discussed by Ukrainian Ridnovirs (Shaian 1987).

For his part, Lev Sylenko emigrated to Canada and subsequently to the United States, where he organized the first community of the Native Ukrainian National Faith (RUNVira) in Chicago in 1966. Following travels in Europe and Asia, Sylenko synthesized a wide array of historical, archaeological, and philosophical sources into his 1,427-page book *Maha Vira (The Great Faith)*; Sylenko 1979), which purports to be an 11,000-year history of "Oraniia-Skytia-Rus'-Ukraina" as well as a prophetic message for a new era. As was not unusual among Ukrainian writers at the time, the Trypillian archaeological culture of 3000 to 5000 BCE was highlighted by Sylenko as a formative moment within this prehistory; less conventionally, Sylenko gave it the name Oriiana or Oraniia and assumed it to have been the original homeland of the Indo-Europeans and the first true civilization, predating that of Sumer. (Sylenko claimed credit for substituting an *O* for the *A* in Aryan to evoke the connection he believed existed with the Ukrainian word for plowing, *oraty*.) According to the *Maha Vira*, the white racial type, and consequently European civilization, was first formed on the banks of the Dnipro River at or preceding the time of the Trypillian civilization; the Oriians-Ukrainians are credited with first developing the philosophy that was to make up the Indian Vedas, written down only after a branch of these same people ostensibly made their way to the Indian subcontinent. Sylenko included a comparative Sanskrit-Ukrainian-English lexicon in his *Maha Vira* in order to demonstrate the links he believed existed between these ancient peoples.

Around the same time as Sylenko was writing his magnum opus, another more mysterious text—one that came to be known as the *Book of Veles*

(*Velesova Knyha* in Ukrainian, *Vles Kniga* in Russian)—began circulating within groups of émigré Ukrainian and Russian Neopagans and amateur prehistorians. As the story goes, a collection of wooden boards or tablets covered with a strange ancient script had been discovered in 1919 by Russian White Army division leader Fedir Izenbek in a village in eastern Ukraine. Having emigrated to Brussels in the 1920s, Izenbek eventually showed them to Russian Ukrainian émigré Iurii Miroljubov, who was to spend several years copying the barely decipherable texts before they disappeared, according to Miroljubov, with Izenbek's death during the Nazi occupation of Belgium. Beginning in the 1950s, segments of the *Book of Veles* (taken from Miroljubov's handwritten manuscripts) began to appear in a series of Russian and Ukrainian émigré publications, and by the 1970s these were causing a minor sensation among some Russian writers and journalists, who touted the text as a kind of master key to Russian and Slavic identity.

The *Book of Veles* would appear to be a chronologically disorganized collection of texts carved into wood under the guidance of Pagan priests (*zhertsy* or *volkhvy*) in the ninth or early tenth century, possibly in the Polisia or Volyn region of northwestern Ukraine, though Russian interpreters tend to locate it much farther east or north. It contains hymns and prayers, myths and legends, sermons, theological tracts, political invectives, and fragments of historical narrative. Historically, the text ostensibly covers the movements of the ancestors of the Rusyches (that is, inhabitants of medieval Rus') or "Oriians" across vast territories between the Indian subcontinent and the Carpathian Mountains over some 1,500 years, with the land of contemporary Ukraine becoming their final homeland.

This territorial expansiveness is among numerous things that has made scholars question the authenticity of *Book of Veles*. In fact, it is widely considered within academic circles as a modern forgery, probably created either by A. I. Sulakadzev, a collector and forger of "ancient texts" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, or by Miroljubov himself, who intended to use its "ancient wisdom" as a tool in the effort to fight the "demonic and antichristian," as he perceived it, Soviet empire (Kaganskaya 1986–1987; Tvorogov 1986, 1990). This scholarly rejection, however, has not detracted from the interest the work elicits within the general public; on the contrary, in fact, it has lent the work a conspiratorially alluring reputation of have been "suppressed knowledge," allegedly stifled in the tradition of Soviet science-by-*diktatcl* (or by some "Jewish-cosmopolitan" or other kind of "cabal"). Ukrainian defenders, such as Pagan author Halyna Lozko, literary historian Borys Iatsenko, archaeologist Iurii Shylov, and writers Valerii Shevchuk, Serhii Plachynda, Ivan Bilyk, and Iurii Kanyhin, have added a nationalist twist to the tale. Critics of the *Book of Veles*, they argue, have primarily been Russians eager to defend, at all costs, the Russocentric-

imperialist version of history, according to which the three “brotherly East Slavic peoples” descended from a common ancestor with a single East Slavic language. The *Book of Veles*, its Ukrainian defenders claim, shows that the southern Rusyches, that is, the ancestors of today’s Ukrainians, have a history at least 1,500 years older than their northern “brethren” and that they have more in common with the western and southern Slavs as well as their Indo-European counterparts to the southeast (that is, the presumed writers of the Vedas) than with today’s Russians. The *Book of Veles* has thus become contested text even among its defenders, with rival Russian and Ukrainian nationalists vying over its proper interpretation and meaning (Asov 2002; Hrabovych 2001; Klochek 2001; Lozko 2002a).

It is easy to see why a written text predating Christianization would be so attractive to those who are seeking to revive an ancient Slavic or Ukrainian identity. Previously, all written source materials had come down to us filtered through the eyes of Christian believers and very often those of missionaries dedicated to the eradication of the pre-Christian faith. Whether it is a ninth-, eighteenth-, or twentieth-century document, the *Book of Veles* has, since the early 1990s, become a religious text in use as a holy book by more than one religious community. Despite its scholarly rejection, it has also achieved a certain degree of popular acceptance within Ukraine. Among Ukrainian Neopagans, the *Book of Veles* offers a seeming vindication of the Paganism that Prince Volodymyr had rejected when he converted the lands of Kyïvan Rus’ to Christianity in 988 CE. If the *Book of Veles* is to be believed, Christianity was not responsible for bringing writing to the Slavs; rather, Neopagans assert, Christianity was responsible for destroying the glorious culture that had existed before it. Among many Neopagans and Ridnovirs, the work is seen as embodying the historical memory of the Ukrainian people, its “covenant,” so to speak, with its gods, its ancestors, and its land, through times of great difficulty and conflict with neighboring tribes and invaders. To the extent that the *Book of Veles* has a predominant message, it revolves around these questions: “Who are we [Ukrainians, Russians, or Slavs]? Where do we come from, and where are we going?” It answers those questions by insisting that Ukrainians are children of the gods Dazhboh and Svaroh and of forefather Or, who have fought and must continue to fight to keep their identity and their land from those who would take both away, whether these foreigners be Greeks, Romans, Goths, Huns, Khazars, or Christians—or, for that matter, today’s Westernizers, globalizers, and other perceived threats. As such, the text speaks to the need to define Ukrainian identity in the post-Soviet era and provides a cosmology and a set of ethics (centered around warriorship, honor, family and community, and the preservation of group identity) and religious practices (mainly prayers and invocations) to aid in that effort.



By the end of the 1980s, in the intellectual ferment unleashed by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika (restructuring) and the rapid growth of Ukrainian nationalism led by prominent members of the cultural intelligentsia, a conducive environment was created in which believers could gather in public and in private. (Courtesy of Adrian Ivakhiv)

Thus, by the 1980s, two of the necessary elements for the rebirth of Native Faith in Ukraine—written materials documenting an ancient tradition and prophetic figures announcing a new dispensation—were in place. All that was missing was a conducive environment in which believers could gather in public and in private, publish and disseminate their organizational materials without the threat of persecution, and find a public eager to read and learn about the deep past of Ukrainian land, culture, and identity (however accurate or inaccurate the image of that deep past may have been). Through most of the Soviet era, such a situation was simply not admissible. By the end of the 1980s, in the intellectual ferment unleashed by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* (restructuring) and the rapid growth of Ukrainian nationalism, led by prominent members of the cultural intelligentsia, all this became possible. By the time Ukrainians voted overwhelmingly for independence in August 1991, a large majority of the country's citizens found the Soviet version of history sorely lacking. Some of them, at least, were interested in looking back to a time when another foreign ideology (as they perceived it)—the Christian faith—had also not yet colonized the hearts and minds of Ukrainians.

*The 1990s: The Quest for National Identity
and the Cultic Milieu of Pagan Religiosity*

With their 1991 declaration of independence from the collapsing Soviet Union, Ukrainians, as Andrew Wilson (2000) put it, appeared as an “unexpected nation” on the world stage. The task of building a national identity appropriate to a modern state has been undertaken in a context that, to Ukrainians, has appeared to harbor multiple threats: on one side, the prospect of being once again swallowed up within a revanchist Russian-dominated, post-Soviet or Eurasian bloc; on the other, the newer danger represented by the global capitalist economy, dominated and skewed in the interests of the United States and Western Europe. It is understandable, in this context, that some Ukrainians would have turned to a kind of national mythmaking more characteristic of the Romantic nationalists of nineteenth-century Europe. Although nationalism has taken many forms, there are, in Ukraine, no obvious historical hinges on which to build an image of previous glory: an independent Ukrainian state appeared all too briefly in the midst of the Russian Revolution; before it, one has to look to the ambiguous quasistate established by Ukrainian Cossacks in early modern times or beyond that to the Kyïvan Rus’ empire, claimed by Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarussians as a heritage shared by them or specific to each.

Some have, therefore, looked beyond the historical record to the deep mists of prehistory. Nationalism has been a constant companion of many national archaeological traditions, and in the post-Soviet world, nationalist agendas have staged a comeback within archaeological and historical circles in recent years (Shnirelman 1995; Dolukhanov 1996). In Ukraine, it has been left to popular writers and to a small coterie of unconventional scholars to develop the more nationalist and pro-Pagan interpretations of the distant past. Perhaps the most influential among the latter has been archaeologist Iurii Shylov. Trained at the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences’s Institute of Archaeology but prevented from achieving the most advanced degrees in his field by what he has variously described as an anti-Ukrainian and “historical materialist” conspiracy, Shylov’s status as a scholarly outsider has given him a degree of visibility and respectability among conspiracy seekers and radical nationalists. In a series of books, each more polemical and popular than the last, Shylov has presented a portrait of prehistory according to which the present-day territory of Ukraine is the unquestioned “cradle of civilization.” It is here in the lower Dnipro basin, according to Shylov, that the world’s first writing system was developed at least two millennia before Sumer (allegedly discovered at Kamiana Mohyla by Shylov himself and deciphered by the linguist Anatolii H. Kifshyn); here that the world’s first great civilization and state flourished

(the Trypillian-Cucuteni, which he names “Ariana”); and here that the Aryans emerged in the fourth or third millennium BCE, before supposedly moving eastward toward India, where these people proceeded to write the Vedas (Shylov 1990, 1995, 2001, 2002). More recently, Shylov has developed a “spiral-shaped” theory of world history, in which God is reconceived as an “Informational Field,” Homo sapiens is seen as mutating into *Homo noeticus*, and the Indo-Europeans of 8,000 years ago are heralded as the originators and carriers of the “Savior” archetype later appropriated by Christianity. Ukraine, for Shylov, is to be the geopolitical center of an impending new age, the source from which the Neopagan renaissance begun by Swami Vivekananda, Nicolai and Elena Rerikh, and others is to spread (Shylov 2002, 251). The main force opposing this spread is the “parasitic internationalism” of “Judaism-Zionism-Bolshevism-fascism” (Shylov 2002, 250). The old duality of Aryan and Semite thus makes a reappearance in the influential writings of a trained archaeologist and leading figure in contemporary Ukrainian Native Faith. (On the Indo-European “homeland” problem, see Renfrew 1987; Mallory 1989; Mallory and Adams 1997).

The quest for an ancient pedigree for the Ukrainian nation has taken on other forms as well. The journal and publishing house *Indo-Ievropa* and the semiglossy magazine *Perekhid-IV (Transition-IV)* have frequently featured articles celebrating Ukraine’s Pagan and “Aryan” past. The latter has argued that Ukrainians are to be “the leading edge of the evolution of the White race and of all humanity” (Spil’na Diia 2003). In a similar vein, writer Iurii Kanyhin’s books, such as *Shliakh Ariyiv (Path of the Aryans)* and *Vikhy Sviashchennoi Rusi (Landmarks of Sacred Rus’)*, have been best sellers. Post-Theosophical and cosmoecological movements, including writer Oles’ Berdnyk’s Ukrainian Spiritual Republic (Ukrains’ka Dukhovna Respublika), the Living Ethics (Zhyva Etyka) and Agni-Yoga movements of Nikolai and Elena Rerikh (Roerich), and the Ariosophical and Vedic movements, have at times propagated the theory that Ukrainians or Slavs in general are descendants of prehistoric Aryans. Organizations of “traditionalist” intellectuals, such as the Mesogaia Group for Research into the Sources of the Primordial Tradition and the Ukrainian Intellectual Club of New Rightists “Golden Gryphon,” frequently express an interest in Pagan and Indo-Europeanist themes in connection with their pursuit of a “perennial philosophy” and the development of a nationally centered “Pagan political culture.”

In addition to Ukrainian Paganism, Russian and Pan-Slavic varieties of Paganism and “Slavic Vedism” can also be found in Ukraine. More distantly related to these is the movement of followers of Porfyrii Korniiovych Ivanov, founder of a *sistema* (system) of natural health and philosophy that

represents a more strictly nature-centered current of quasi-Pagan spirituality. A few thousand members across Ukraine follow Ivanov's precepts, which include weekly fasting, bathing in cold "pure" water, and strict rules guiding speech and behavior. At another end of the spectrum of Pagan-related alternative religions, Satanist groups are known to have arisen in various parts of Ukraine. Although these are more accurately seen as a form of anti-Christianity that is only marginally (if at all) related to pre-Christian traditions, they are often lumped into the same category by outsiders as well as by some Satanists themselves. Pagan, occultist, Satanist, ultranationalist, and racialist "White Power" themes, in sundry combinations and political inflections, can all be found circulating on the margins of the heavy-metal and gothic rock subcultures, as, for instance, in the lyrics and imagery of the bands Sokyra Peruna (Perun's Axe), Whites Load, and Komu Vnyz (Who Will Go Down). These musical and cultural developments, however, have had at best only a marginal influence on the organizations that are the focus of this chapter.

It is within these much broader milieus of "nostalgic" cultural nationalism and alternative spirituality that Ukrainian Paganism and Native Faith have emerged. Many of these groups see themselves as opposed not only to Christianity but also to Judaism (which they often fault for spawning Christianity), "cosmopolitanism," and Western liberalism and globalization. In response to such phenomena, Neopagans assert an ethnic "purity," which is intended to withstand the relativizing and "culturally destructive" influences of all such foreign trends. Ridnovirs look to the past but also to a future in which a strong Ukrainian nation can rise up from the rubble of the Soviet Union and of the uncertainties of latter-day Ukraine.

Contemporary Native Faith Groups and Movements

Native Faith (in Ukrainian, *Ridna Vira*, *Ridnovira*, or *Ridnoviria*) is the most commonly accepted umbrella term for a variety of traditionalist, Pagan, and Pagan-inspired movements in Ukraine today. Some of these identify themselves as *Yazychnyks*, the term customarily used for pre-Christian animist and polytheistic (Pagan or Heathen) practices. Related to these is RUNVira, which is the largest of the organized religious movements loosely identifiable as Pagan-inspired. Monotheistic and oriented around its charismatic founder, Lev Sylenko, RUNVira is rejected by some Neopagans as not authentically "native" or "Pagan," but it is historically closely intertwined with the others and should more accurately be considered a type of "reformed" Paganism. The distinction between RUNVists, Ridnovirs, and Yazychnyks is not always clear-cut in any case.

Ukrainian *ridnovirstvo* (native faithism) tends to find its main base of adherents among nationally oriented ethnic Ukrainians of higher-than-average educational levels. The average age of its membership is also higher than that of most Western Neopagan movements. Few reliable figures exist on the number of Ukrainians involved in *Ridnovirstvo* or Neopaganism of one or another sort. Sociological estimates range from 1,000 Pagans for the entire country (Kolodny, Filipovych, and Biddulph 2001, 71) to 0.2 percent of the population, or some 95,000 in total (Dudar and Fylypovych 2000, 117), but it is likely that active and consistent membership in RUNvira, Yazychnyk (Pagan), and other *Ridnovir* communities hovers somewhere in the area of 5,000 to 10,000 (Ivakhiv 2005). There is a much broader interest in topics related to Paganism and prehistory, however, and in the revival of folk calendar customs connected to pre-Christian practices. In Kyïv, for instance, the decades-old choral group Homin conducts its annual midsummer Kupalo festivities on the Dnipro River, though it celebrates two weeks after the actual solstice, according to the Christian Julian (“old”) calendar, which many Yazychnyks take as being calendrically incorrect. Similar celebrations of Kupalo, Koliada (Yule), and other holidays are conducted across the country, sometimes within an explicitly Christian context and sometimes less so. Interest in folk magic is widespread, even among practicing Christians, and the line between occultism, magic, parapsychology, and religion is much more blurred than it is in many Western countries. This cultural continuity is a feature of Ukrainian society that should be kept in mind when considering the social context of Native Faith.

RUNVira

The earliest formed of contemporary Ukrainian Neopagan organizations is RUNVira, the acronym for Native Ukrainian National Faith, as noted. RUNVira is a monotheistic religion founded in North America by Lev Sylenko (referred to earlier). Beginning in the mid-1960s, small groups of *Runvirtsi* (or *Runvists*) were established in Ukrainian émigré communities in the United States (the first of them in Chicago), Canada, Britain, and Australia, and a center, the Temple of Mother Ukraine, or “Oriiana,” was established near Spring Glen in New York State’s Catskill Mountains area. In the early 1990s, RUNVira began to spread in Ukraine, its first congregation being registered by Kyïv authorities in the fall of 1991. By the end of the decade, there were about fifty officially registered and at least another dozen unregistered RUNVira congregations across the country, ranging in size from as small as a couple of families to over 100 members.

A split in the international RUNVira movement has been mirrored by a similar divergence among Ukrainian Runvists, resulting in the coexistence of three or four associations of *hromadas* (congregations or, literally, “communities”) that draw on Sylenko’s teachings to varying degrees. The largest of these, consisting of some thirty-eight registered congregations, is OSID RUNVira, which has followed the group of onetime Sylenko disciples who now control the Oriiana temple in New York State (Kolodnyi 2002). The smaller OSIDU RUNVira (with about eleven registered congregations) has maintained a direct link with Sylenko himself. The relationship between these rival organizations, along with a third (centered around Lviv-based Volodymyr Chorny) and a more autonomous Vinnytsia-based Sobor Ridnoï Ukraïns’koï Viry, has fluctuated in recent years. Sylenko himself, now in his eighties and in poor health, reportedly lives in the Catskill Mountains area but not at Oriiana. As the Sylenkoite OSIDU RUNVira is most directly related to Sylenko himself, let us examine it first.

OSIDU RUNVira

Headed by Bohdan Savchenko, the Association of Sons and Daughters of Ukraine of the Native Ukrainian National Faith claims some twenty-six congregations within Ukraine and accepts Sylenko as their prophet and his *Maha Vira* as their bible for a new age. Sylenkoite Runvists consider themselves a “reformed” Native Faith, a transformation and completion of the original Ukrainian polytheistic faith in favor of a scientifically grounded monotheism centered around Dazhboh, an impersonal representation of the life-giving energy of the cosmos—in Sylenko’s words, “Light, Endlessness, Gravitation, Eternity, Movement, Action, the Energy of unconscious and conscious Being” (quoted in Kichak 2002, 33). Literally meaning “Giving god” or “giver of being,” the word *Dazhboh* is the name of one of the pre-Christian deities of the Slavs. Though Sylenko uses the term *monotheism*, his conception could also be classified as pantheist or panentheist—as the *Maha Vira* proclaims, “I am Dazhboh, I am in all things and all things are in me” (Sylenko 1979, 22: 111)—with an admixture of other elements, including deism, messianism, and Theosophy. His “reformation” of Paganism is seen as analogous to the Buddha’s reformation of Indian religion or Muhammad’s reformation of Arab religion. As such, Sylenko’s followers generally reject the term *Yazychnyk* (Pagan), preferring to see themselves as both a *new* religion and a distinct tradition within the broader category of Native Faith.

Sylenko’s *Maha Vira* is grounded in the premise of what sociologists would call ethnocultural “primordialism” or “essentialism.” According to

Sylenko, the human species, as part of its evolution, has naturally divided itself into distinct ethnocultural groups, *ethne* or *ethnoi*, each of which has its own life cycle, flourishing or perishing according to its developmental process. Without such a division, Sylenko argued, humanity would be far too fragile an entity; the division allows for a diversity of experiments, some of which will thrive better than others but which will not all perish together. According to Sylenko, every ethnos, or nation, has its own particular religiosity, language, and set of worldviews and customs, which have evolved as part of that culture's interaction with its environment. Other cultures have already undergone the developmental processes according to which their primal worldviews were transformed into more systematic and (according to Sylenko) generally monotheistic religious systems. Ukrainians constitute an ancient ethnos, according to the *Maha Vira*, but one that has not done that yet—hence the need for the new, rationally grounded nationalist religion of RUNVira.

OSIDU RUNVira is organized in local congregations, or hromadas, headed by RUNfathers and RUNmothers (with a large majority of the leadership being male), that meet weekly and on festive occasions, sometimes outdoors when weather allows. Membership overlaps to some extent with folk revival groups; nationalist and ultranationalist political groups, such as the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian National Assembly—Ukrainian People's Self-Defense (UNA-UNSO); and most distinctly with the Traditional Association of Ukrainian Cossacks (Zvychayeva Hromada Ukraïns'kykh Kozakiv), a body created in 2001 with its own leader, or *hetman*, and founding members in nineteen Ukrainian provinces.

Regular practices of Runvists include the weekly Holy Hour of Self-Realization (Sviashchenna Hodyna Samopiznannia, or Sviahos for short, also known as Nabozhenstvo), which includes readings from *Maha Vira*, commentaries and sermons, commemoration of ancestors, prayers, and hymns, and it customarily ends with the singing of the Ukrainian national anthem. National symbols, such as the trident and the flag, are prominent, as is the repetitive refrain of "Glory to Dazhboh! Glory to Ukraine!" Ritual implements include a chalice with water from a local river, a box or chest containing earth from sacred ground (such as that near the village of Trypillia, after which the Trypillian archaeological culture was named), candles, the *Maha Vira*, sheaves of wheat, herbs, and flowers. Feast days are sometimes celebrated with other groups. Kyïv's Soniachna community, for instance, has in the past concelebrated the midsummer Kupalo festival with the Pagan group Triitsia, amid traditional folksinging, bonfire jumping, circle and spiral dancing, burning and/or drowning the deity effigies of Kupalo and Marena, and meeting the sun's first rays the next morning.



Feast days are celebrated with bonfire jumping. (Courtesy of Adrian Ivakhiv)

Kharkiv's Ariiana community is involved in creating *rai-sady* (paradise gardens) and in organizing a regular “Ecology and Spirituality” festival.

OSID RUNVira

The largest denomination within the Native Faith movement, *OSID RUNVira* includes between thirty and forty congregations across Ukraine. It is directly affiliated with the RUNVira temple in Spring Glen, New York, controlled by former Sylenko followers who broke with their teacher in the 1980s, rejecting his ultimate authority and seeking a more multilateral approach to the task of reconstructing the Ukrainian Native Faith. Retaining the RUNVira name, this group used legal means to take over the RUNVira temple in Spring Glen in the late 1990s, after what they perceived to be a hostile takeover attempt by Sylenko's Ukraine-born secretary and confidante. OSID RUNVira is currently administered by the Holy Council (Sviashchenna Rada), headed by Kyiv-based Bohdan Ostrovskyi, a professional

kobzar-bandurist (folk musician). Ostrovskiy is widely credited with forming the first RUNVira-based congregation, the Dazhbozha hromada, in Kyiv in 1991.

The members of OSID RUNVira recognize Sylenko as the one who took the first step toward the rebirth of Ukrainian Native Faith, but they see that the subsequent steps need to be taken independently of him. Similarly to OSIDU RUNVira, OSID members conduct the weekly Holy Hour and mark out special feast days. But these events feature a more eclectic mix of sources, including readings from the *Book of Veles* and from sources not traditionally considered religious, such as the writings of the national poet-bard Taras Shevchenko. The importance of reviving calendrical ritual traditions is more prominent in OSID than among Sylenkoite followers. Services include traditional symbols and objects such as a *didukh* (braided wheat sheaf) and objects representing fire, water, and earth. As with most Native Faith groups, the commemoration of ancestors is central. The ritual calendar of OSID RUNVira includes feast days ranging from de-Christianized Christian holy days (Christmas of Dazhboh's Light, Easter of the Eternal Resurrection, and so on) and Pagan seasonal holidays in honor of the deities Kupala, Perun, Lada, and Dana to commemorations of Ukrainian national heroes, both those widely known (such as the Cossack hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky, writers Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko, philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda) and those whose identities are more nebulous and specific to the Native Faith subculture, such as the "Holy Father Arii (Iarii, Iarylo, Iurii, Or')," "the Great Prince Bohdan Kyi (Attila) and his brothers Shchek and Khoryv," "Tarhitai the First Ancestor of the Ukrainian Rusyches-Skolots," and "Velymyr the Great Prince of Scythia-Rus'-Ukraine," as well as abstract concepts such as the feast days dedicated to "Ukrainian Ancient Literature" and "New Ukrainian Literature."

Yazychnytstvo (Paganism)

In opposition to Runvists, who practice a "modified," modernized, and "monotheized" form of Ukrainian Native Faith, *Yazychnyky* (Pagans or Heathens) are interested in a more exact revival of ancient, generally animist or polytheistic pre-Christian practices. The first recognized community (or congregation) of Ukrainian Yazychnytstvo was the Pagan Community Pravoslavia. Formed in 1993 in Kyiv, the organization considers its modern founder to be Volodymyr Shaian. The name *Pravoslavia* coincides with the Ukrainian term for "orthodoxy" but is also intended to denote the *Book of Veles*-based notion of the world of divine law, or *Prav*. In recent years, the community has increasingly taken the *Book of Veles* to be its holy writ. The

leader of Pravoslavia is Halyna Lozko (Volkhvynia Zoreslava), a philologist, folklorist, university lecturer in religious studies, and author of numerous books and articles, among them scholarly monographs on Ukrainian Paganism and ethnology (Lozko 1994, 1995, 2001). After her 1993 initiation at the hands of Hamilton, Ontario-based elder of the Native Faith and Sylenkoite RUNfather Myroslav Sytnyk, Lozko proceeded to found the Svi-tovyd Center for the Rebirth of Ukrainian Culture; the School of the Native Faith (in 1995); the Museum of the Book of Veles (founded in 1996 but closed by local authorities in 1998); and the journal *Svaroh*, which since 1995 has been the most glossy of Ukrainian Ridnovir publications. Lozko's activism has achieved the highest public profile among Ukrainian Neopagans, her fiery personality both attracting many newcomers and alienating many coreligionists; next to Shylov, Lozko remains the scholarly leader in Ukrainian Paganism. In 1997, the former Sylenkoite Ridnovir community in Hamilton recognized Kyiv as its spiritual center and accepted the protectorate of the Kyiv Pravoslavia Community under Lozko's leadership.

To coordinate Ridnovir activities throughout Ukraine, Lozko and others founded the Native Faith Association of Ukraine (*Obiednannia Ridnoviriv Ukrainy*, or ORU) in 1998. In its founding statement, the ORU blamed the cause of the world's spiritual, political, and economic crisis on the "mixing of ethnic cultures" and the consequent "ruination of the ethnosphere, which is part of the biosphere of planet Earth" (Obiednannia Ridnoviriv Ukraïny 1998, 4). In 2001, the Religious Centre of the ORU was officially registered as a Pagan religious organization. It now includes five registered congregations, as well as a dozen or so unregistered ones, throughout the country. The ORU has also been active in ecumenical Pan-Pagan and inter-ethnic activities, especially in the World Congress of Ethnic Religions (originally called the World Pagan Congress), a European-dominated organization with which the ORU shares much of its worldview, including a strong critique of "cosmopolitan globalism" and the "new world order." If Sylenko's RUNVira is the most comprehensive and systematic attempt to create an intellectually coherent synthetic new religion from Pagan and ethnic religious strands, Lozko's activities on behalf of Ukrainian Yazychnytstvo constitute the most comprehensive articulation of traditionalist Native Faith. Lozko herself is a vehement critic of Sylenko's, calling him a "false prophet" and accusing him of attempting to lead ethnic Ukrainians "into the quagmire of cosmopolitan monotheism." "Monotheistic ideas," she wrote, "are the fruit of Judaic religions which aim for global world domination" (Lozko 2001, 10).

Pravoslavia and the ORU have been very active in establishing and promoting a cohesive system of calendar ritualism, which they call the Kolo Svarozhe (Svaroh's Circle), and in disseminating prayer and ritual

manuals. Pagans have naturally been at the forefront of the revival of Ukrainian folk traditions associated with the agricultural calendar, which results in a colorful, poetic, and evocative tapestry of ritual and communal practices. Although some of these folk practices (such as harvest songs) continued, in modified form, through both the Christian and Soviet eras and some (such as the *vertep*, or Yule pageant) have been widely revived in recent years outside of any explicitly Pagan context, Pagans have aimed to revive a complete annual calendar that is as free as possible of Christian elements. The ORU Ridnovir community even follows a lunar calendar, which results in some years having thirteen months, though the year is divided into quarters by the solstices and equinoxes.

In contrast to many non-Ukrainian forms of Pagan religiosity, however, the central role of the *Book of Veles* adds an element of bookishness to the ORU. Lozko's recent edition of this text (2002a), complete with her theological commentaries, is perhaps the most impressive attempt to make sense of it and present it as a living system of myth and imagery. In Lozko's interpretation, Ukrainian Native Faith, as laid out in the *Book of Veles*, is henotheistic: it sees God as simultaneously unitary and multiple, though she also traces the root *heno-* to *geno-* in the sense that it is concerned with the lineage (*rodovid*) of gods and of humans. Harmony with nature, for Lozko, is only attainable in the relationship between an ethnic group and its land base. Following indications in the *Book of Veles*, Pagans also place a strong emphasis on the "triunity" of the cosmos, which they see as divided between the three realms of Nav (the underworld and ancestral realm), Yav (the visible realm), and Prav (the realm of divine law), seen as represented in the three-leveled Tree of Life described in the first section of this chapter.

In addition to these organizations, numerous independent congregations and at least two independent associations of Ridnovirs exist in Ukraine. The Council of the Native Ukrainian Faith (Sobor Ridnoï Ukraïns'koï Viry) represents a more eclectic mixture of *Ridnovirstvo*, which draws on Sylenko alongside several other writers, including Shaian, Shkavrytko, Kokriats'kyi, Orion, and Lisovyi. The Sobor emerged in 1994 in Vinnytsia in right-bank Ukraine, under the leadership of Oleh Bezverkhyi, an author of several quasi-scholarly pamphlets on Ukrainian Native Faith, mysticism, "raceology," and related topics. It now includes between seven and eleven congregations in Ukraine, the largest being in Vinnytsia. Loosely monotheistic, the group emphasizes the importance of mysticism and the development of an "authentically Ukrainian" theology (Bezverkhyi 1996, 2001). The Sobor considers Podillia, a province of right-bank Ukraine, to be the "heart" of Ukraine, as it was the place where the largest Scythian temple had been located, where the famous Zbruch

Svitovyđ Pagan idol was found, and where Ukrainian Paganism was ostensibly defended as late as 1620 by regional princes.

A more recently emerged organization, the Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith (Rodove Vohnyshche Ridnoyi Pravoslavnoyi Viry), grew out of an organization of Cossack martial arts and magic practitioners in the right-bank Ukraine region of Podillia. At a June 2003 gathering atop Mount Bohyt, believed to be the site at which an ancient four-faced Pagan statue known as Svitovyđ or Sviatovyđ (World-seer or Holiness-seer) once stood, the organization decided to formally announce the creation of a new denomination of Ridnovirs. The organization, which also uses the term *Pravoslavia*, has grown rapidly, encompassing twelve congregations across the nation by the end of 2003, including a few groups from the Council of the Native Ukrainian Faith (Sobor, mentioned earlier), all under the leadership of an advisory council headed by Supreme Magus (Verkhovnyi Volkhv) Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi. In contrast to both RUNVira and the Pagan groups described earlier, the Native Orthodox Faith emphasized the distinct and personal nature of the deities of the Slavic pantheon, who are seen, however, as deriving from a single source, referred to by the name of the deity Rod or Rid (which is also the Ukrainian word for lineage or ancestry).

Independent congregations of Ridnovirs and Yazychnyks include Triitsia (Trinity), Perunova Rat' (Perun's Host), the Khara-Khors Slavic-Vedic movement, the Lytsari Ordena Sontsia (Knights of the Order of the Sun), devotees of the goddess Berehynia, and others. Some streams of Ridnovirstvo are found more in writing than in group practice; such appears to be the case with Ladovira, articulated by Oleksander Shokalo and other authors in the magazine *Ukraïns'kyi Svit*. With Ridnovira being a relatively small niche in Ukrainian religious culture, interaction is frequent among different groups. In Kyïv, for instance, there has been substantial porosity of membership between at least four different groups. This results in an interchange of ideas and the development of a sense of broader community. Books, such as those by Sylenko, Lozko, and Shylov (a member of Triitsia Ridnovir community), are read by members of various congregations, and their interpretation has resulted in some evolution of ideas, as well as the carving out of rival identities based in theological differences or divergences in leadership styles. The Kyïv-based Triitsia community has been especially active in forging links with other local groups. Headed by Ievhen Dobzhans'kyi (Voleliub), a charismatic and widely respected Pagan leader, this community frequently cooperates with other Ridnovirs, celebrating feast days together and attending each other's meetings. It also maintains an active program of lectures, book discussions, and artistic events.

Despite the animosity among some RUNVists and Ridnovirs, the early years of the new century have seen an impressive spirit of ecumenical cooperation develop. In February 2003, forty-one delegates from congregations across Ukraine as well as another thirty-eight registered guests gathered in Kyïv at the First Forum of Ukrainian Ridnovirs, which was initiated by Iurii Shylov, Oleh Bezverkhyi, and Petro Ruban. Participants discussed issues of significance to the Ridnovir community and produced two substantial proclamations, one to the president, Supreme Council, and government of Ukraine, urging the protection of sacred sites and objects, and the other to all Ukrainians, urging resistance to the government's plans to privatize agricultural lands. This forum was followed ten months later by the Second Council (*Viche*) of Ukrainian Ridnovirs, which featured fifty-one delegates and forty-six participants from sixteen Ukrainian provinces, in addition to twenty-six other guests. A coordinating council was created, headed by Petro Ruban and including Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi and Ievhen Dobzhan-s'kyi as two of its vice heads. The Council of Elders also includes prominent figures such as the archaeologist Shylov, writer Serhii Plachynda, *kobzar*-musician Volodymyr Horbatiuk, and parliamentarian and onetime political dissident Levko Lukianenko.

Current Challenges and Possibilities for Future Development

For seven decades, religion played only a marginal role in Soviet life. The Russian Orthodox Church was the only officially allowed religious institution, and the official policy of the state was Marxist-Leninist atheism. The demise of the Soviet Union provided fertile ground for a resurgence of religious beliefs and practices. In Ukraine, the Russian Orthodox Church, now known as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate, has been challenged most prominently by three newly recognized “traditional” churches: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kyïv Patriarchate, the Autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and the Ukrainian Greek—Catholic Church. Although struggles between these churches, especially over the inheritance of religious buildings and properties from the Soviet era, have captured the most headlines, a proliferation of Protestant sects and non-Christian religious organizations have arisen as well, some growing dramatically in the ideological vacuum left behind by the collapse of Soviet communism. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of religious communities (or congregations) in Ukraine grew more than fivefold, from 4,500 to nearly 24,500, and the number of officially registered confessions grew from 9 to over 100 (Kolodny, Filipovych, and Biddulph 2001, 39–40). All this has resulted in a state of interconfessional tensions aptly described

by one sociologist as “the Opium Wars of the new millennium” (Barker 2000, 39–59).

Together, the traditional and newer Christian churches account for about 97 percent of registered religious communities. The remainder covers a wide range, from well-established neo-Hindu and Buddhist organizations to Bah’ai, the Church of Scientology, the Unification Church, the controversial Great White Brotherhood, and numerous others. In principle, the 1991 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organization and Article 35 of the Constitution of Ukraine (adopted in 1996) guarantee the rights to freedom of religion, conscience, religious association, and missionary activity; the separation of church and state (including the state educational system); and the protection of the social status and equality of churches before the law. In practice, however, the achievement of these goals has been variable. Due to a lack of precision in laws and to pressures from the four “traditional” churches, local and regional state bodies have often granted advantages (for instance, in the leasing of state premises) to these Christian groups over the requests of others. “Anticult” campaigns have resulted in denials of registration at local levels to “nontraditional” churches and new religious movements; denials of visas to religious representatives from abroad; and to instances of labeling such groups as Mormons, Sri Chinmoy centers, and others as “totalitarian sects” (Kolodny, Filipovych, and Biddulph 2001, 51–68). Although the State Committee for Religious Affairs has tended to follow its 1995 mandate to carry out an even-handed policy toward religious denominations and groups, some members of parliament have sought to pressure it to counter the “penetration and growth” of unspecified “destructive religions” (112). Reportedly, the Ukrainian Security Service has closely monitored the activities of non-traditional and new religious movements (111). Among post-Soviet and post-Communist states, the U.S.-based Freedom House Center for Religious Freedom in 2000 ranked Ukraine alongside Hungary, Latvia, and Romania as relatively “free,” behind Estonia, Poland, and Lithuania but ahead of Russia, Bulgaria, and all the Caucasus area and Central Asian states (Global Center 2002). It can be hoped that, with the recent Orange Revolution (a peaceful protest movement in Ukraine in late 2004 and early 2005 that resulted in the election of current president Viktor Yushchenko) and the democratization of society that is expected to come in its wake, religious freedom will become more firmly established. However, state tolerance, as Howard Biddulph put it, has exceeded societal tolerance, and at times, this fact has threatened to change the direction of religious pluralization (Kolodny, Filipovych, and Biddulph 2001, 100–121).

In general, Pagan and Native Faith organizations have faced the same difficulties as other “nontraditional” religions. The perception of Native

Faith by others in Ukraine is, at best, a mixed one. Among conservative Orthodox and Catholic Christians, the rise of alternative religions in general is viewed with hostility and often with alarm. Within the largely secularized mainstream, one finds many Ukrainians who are spiritually searching and interested in the distant past—as the popularity of the books of Kanyhin and others testifies—but this rarely translates into direct involvement with Pagan or Native Faith groups. The relatively small size of the Native Faith movement guarantees that it will not have much mass media coverage, and what little it received has not, on the whole, been positive. The more educated and intellectual classes tend to view Native Faith groups as a fringe element of the ultraconservative end of the political spectrum, one tinged with anti-Semitism and xenophobic intolerance. At least some Pagans and Ridnovirs can be said to share responsibility for this perception. Halyna Lozko's prayer manual *Pravoslov*, for instance, includes ten "Pagan commandments," of which the last reads, "Don't get involved with Jews!" (Lozko 2001, 138; see Dymerskaya-Tsigelman and Finberg 1999 and Shnirelman 1998 on the "Jewish question" surrounding Ukrainian and Russian Neopaganism). Lozko's edition of the *Book of Veles* explicitly hails her as "ideologue of the Ukrainian radical right movement" (Lozko 2002b, 366). Some Ridnovir writings portray Ukrainians as crucially involved in the struggle to reassert the white race, and frequently include derogatory references to Judaism, to Christianity as a "Jewish religion," and so on. Indeed, one could argue that the ideology underpinning the Native Faith movement presumes a "natural" relationship between Ukrainians and the Ukrainian land that excludes the possibility of non-Ukrainians having a legitimate place in that land—this despite the fact that Jews, Russians, Poles, and others can legitimately claim an ancestral connection to Ukrainian territories dating back several centuries. If Native Faith is to grow in a pluralistic European context (as most Ukrainians seem to want for their country), it will arguably have to resolve this underlying—and sometimes overt—hostility to "others."

Nevertheless, a segment of Ukrainian society is sympathetic to the goals or at least to the historical claims made by the Native Faith community. Native Faith communities overlap with a set of other cultural contexts, including folk and traditional music revival groups, Cossack associations, traditional martial arts groups, nationalist and ultranationalist political groups, and the "traditionalist" wing of the Ukrainian Writer's Union (which, though no longer the official representative of writers in Ukraine, remains a large and influential organization). An example of this kind of overlap has been the rebirth (as it is called) of the martial arts version of the *hopak* (a Cossack dance form), which in western Ukraine was led by Volodymyr Pylat, a onetime head of OSIDU RUNVira.

In the wake of global political-economic realignments and perhaps all the more so in the new era of the post-Orange Revolution, pro-Western administration of President Viktor Yushchenko, some Ukrainians' fears of U.S.-dominated "globalization" may grow, and the Native Faith movement may be well positioned to take advantage of such fears. On the tenth anniversary of Ukrainian independence, the RUNVira periodical *Slovo Oriyiv* editorialized, "Today we've simply divided up our [former] total dependence on Moscow among Moscow, Washington, Israel, Europe, and god-knows who else" (August 2001, 1). From one oppressor, Ukraine is seen as having been handed over to another, "'Jehovah's chosen' nation and the 'global police force' ruled by them—the USA" (*Slovo Oriyiv*, October 2001, 8). Strong parallels exist between the ideas of Ukrainian Ridnovirs and the ideas espoused by the sundry movements making up the European New Right, as some right-wing pro-Pagan writers have themselves pointed out. At the same time, potential followers are attracted to the Native Faith community for its focus on lifestyle, family, community, and ritual practice and its pronounced ethic of honor, continuity with and responsibility before one's ancestors, and a land-based work ethic, all of which are seen to contrast to the principles that guided the Soviet era and those that are perceived to be flowing in today from the West.

In a sympathetic assessment of the RUNVira movement, Ukrainian religious scholar Anatolii Kolodnyi (2002, 58) concluded that the prospects of RUNVira surviving the death of its founder (which is expected to occur in the near future) are slim. This assertion is itself debatable, but there is no doubt that the prospects for Native Faith more generally are brighter, and it is to be expected that new combinations and hybrids of Paganism, RUNVira, and related religious tendencies will emerge, just as similar movements have developed in other countries (for example, Simpson 2000; Wiench 1997). Today's Ridnovirs appear fixated on defining a Ukrainian identity based in ethnonationalist discourses that are considered retrograde and intellectually discredited by Western scholars. This situation is somewhat analogous to Anglo-American Paganism of the 1970s and early 1980s. At the time, Pagans, Wiccans, Goddess worshippers, and others staked their identities on claims that they were reviving prehistoric religions rooted in ancient Goddess worship, religions that had been viciously persecuted during the Christian Inquisition, leading to the deaths of millions of witches, most of whom were women. In a sense, these claims dovetailed with the rising identity politics of the day, as these developed within race-, gender-, and sexuality-based liberation movements, to which one could now add the movement to liberate "witches" from centuries of oppression. Serious scholarship has since found the more extreme claims to have been baseless or at least drastically overstated (the number of witches

killed during the Inquisition was much closer to 40,000 than to the 9 million some had claimed, and no evidence for a worldwide “Goddess Civilization,” as proclaimed by Marija Gimbutas [1991] among others, is recognized by more than a handful of archaeologists). Since the mid-1980s, Anglo-American Pagans have by and large dealt with this information by incorporating it into their religious narratives and by placing greater emphasis on the creative nature of their religious practices and beliefs. Indeed, the majority of Wiccans now recognize that their religion is less than 100 years old (even if some elements of it are much older), yet Wicca and Paganism have grown steadily in numbers over the past few decades. In principle, there is no reason why Ukrainian Ridnovirs could not develop a similar measure of self-reflexiveness, which would allow for a recognition that their tradition may in part be an invented one and that it is a religious option that requires neither a glorious Aryan origin nor a conspiratorial Judeo-cosmopolitan cabal for its flourishing.

It is possible, then, that Ukrainian Neopaganism may follow a similar trajectory as Anglo-American Neopaganism, in the process becoming both more modern (that is, more scientifically informed) and more postmodern (self-reflexive and aware of its creative nature). To do that, it will need to develop greater contacts with Western scholarship, with Neopagans informed by Western scholarship, or, for that matter, with Ukrainian scholarship, assuming the latter were to rise from its current state of catastrophic underfunding and consequent public invisibility. If Ukrainian Native Faith is to evolve to be a tolerant religious option, one that is comfortable within the existing multicultural society of twenty-first-century Europe (including, one hopes, twenty-first-century Ukraine) and that is perceived to be acceptable by majority (or influential minority) public opinion in Ukraine, it will need to transcend the milieu of reactionary ethnonationalism and find itself anew within a thriving and broader-based civil society. The political events of the 2004 Orange Revolution have shown that such a civil society has matured much more rapidly than had been expected. It is up to Native Faith to respond to the challenges and opportunities this situation will afford.

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Chapter Seven

Romuva:
Lithuanian Paganism
in Lithuania and America

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VILIUS RUDRA DUNDZILA

Modern Lithuanian Paganism is found not only in Lithuania but also in other nations where Lithuanian immigrants settled in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the United States and Canada. It is very much an ethnically oriented Paganism, grounded in a profound awareness of the past history and culture of the Lithuanian people. A point of particular pride is the knowledge that Lithuania was the last country in all of Europe to officially abandon its native Pagan traditions and convert to Christianity, in 1387. This watershed event and its aftermath are worth exploring in some detail, as they are central issues in the historical understanding of modern Lithuanian Paganism. This chapter will therefore begin with a brief overview of relevant episodes in Lithuanian history leading to the rise of modern Lithuanian Paganism.

Lithuania's Transition from Paganism to Christianity

Situated in the center of northeastern Europe, Lithuania has always found itself poised between Eastern and Western Europe. Its neighbors include Sweden to the north, across the Baltic Sea; Russia to the east; Belarus to the south and east; and Poland and Kaliningrad to the south and west, with Germany and Denmark farther west along the Baltic Sea. In the thirteenth

and fourteenth centuries, Germanic Christian crusaders from the west, allied with the Catholic Church, and Slavic Christians from the east, allied with the Orthodox Church, each pressed the Pagan rulers of Lithuania to adopt their particular forms of Christianity and thereby bring Lithuania into the folds of either the Catholic West or the Orthodox East.

By the mid-fourteenth century, Lithuania had become a considerable political and military power, with the Grand Duke Gediminas establishing dominion over a vast territory reaching from the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea to the western shores of the Black Sea, including modern-day Belarus, Ukraine, and adjacent portions of Russia. As noted by the historian S. C. Rowell (1994), Lithuania was a thriving “Pagan empire” in Eastern Europe. As such, the country was coveted by Christian leaders eager to add its wealth and power to their own, as well as to eliminate the last stronghold of Paganism in Europe. Several generations of Lithuanian rulers had skillfully maintained diplomatic relations with the emissaries of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, while vigorously fighting off the armies of Germanic Christian crusaders known as Teutonic Knights, who were intent on introducing Christianity into Lithuania by conquest, as other crusading knights had done in the lands now known as Latvia and Estonia, Lithuania’s northern Baltic neighbors (Christiansen 1997; Rowell 1992, 1994).

The Russian-controlled area to the west of Lithuania—known today as Kaliningrad and formerly known as Prussia—had once been inhabited by a people with Baltic language and Pagan religion, the Baltic Prussians. Their society was overrun by Germanic Christian conquest in the thirteenth century, and their distinctive language, culture, and religion would eventually disappear completely. This kind of colonial conquest, which might be termed cultural genocide, would motivate Lithuanians to fight with great ferocity against the Teutonic Knights and would harden the resolve of Lithuanians to preserve Lithuanian land, culture, and identity up to the present time. As the journalist Anatol Lieven commented, “The elimination of the Old Prussians, one of the Baltic peoples, at the hands of the Germans . . . has often been cited in Baltic literature as an awful warning, an example of the grim, existential danger facing small nations in the region” (1994, 40).

A Lithuanian folk song first noted in a historical record in the sixteenth century and set into written form in the nineteenth, some 500 years after the close of this long-running conflict, further illustrates how deeply affected Lithuania was by its struggle against its Germanic Christian foes of the Middle Ages:

Why did you sleep, Duke, for so long, *sudaicio*,
Sudaicio, sudaiciutele [Lithuanian refrain]

While you were asleep, they slew your soldiers,
Destroyed your castle.
Which of them, Duke, do you grieve for more?
I do not grieve so much for the castle
As I grieve for the soldiers.
I will build myself a new castle, in two or three years,
Yet I can't grow [new] soldiers, even in ten years.
(Kiaupa, Kiaupiene, and Kuncevicious 2000, 105)

It is a matter of great pride to Lithuanians that they, unlike their Baltic neighbors in Latvia, Estonia, or the aforementioned and ill-starred Prussia, not only resisted Germanic Christian invasion but also, in league with Poland, dealt the Teutonic Knights a crushing, conclusive defeat in 1410, as will be explained. For Lithuanian Pagans, their nation's historical resistance to Christianization is a key aspect of their Pagan identity and is retold and contemplated with great solemnity as a kind of "foundation myth" for modern Lithuanian Paganism.

Christianity and Judaism were both in fact present in Lithuania by the fourteenth century, with Christian and Jewish religious communities allowed to construct their own houses of worship. The rulers of Lithuania, however, remained resolutely Pagan, dedicated to the sacred groves, sacrificial fires, and other polytheistic traditions of their ancestors. The fair degree of religious pluralism that held sway in Lithuania, in which Christianity was permitted but not privileged above Paganism, was unacceptable to the rulers of Christian Europe, who wished to see Lithuanian Paganism officially denounced and disestablished in favor of the Christian faith.

In 1387, after some 200 years of on-and-off war and artfully indecisive diplomacy between Lithuania, the Teutonic Knights, and the Catholic Church, the Grand Duke Jogaila bowed to what may well have been a political necessity that could no longer be forestalled (Rowell 1994). Jogaila agreed to accept the Catholic faith, thus releasing Lithuania from the relentless pressure applied by European Christian nations. By embracing Christianity, Jogaila was able to form a firm alliance with the Catholic Kingdom of Poland, which was likewise threatened by the aggressive intentions of the Teutonic Knights.

The close relationship with Poland was to have two momentous outcomes for Lithuania, the first indisputably positive, the other far less so. First, a combined Lithuanian-Polish army was able to decisively defeat the Germanic Teutonic Knights once and for all in 1410, at the Battle of Grunwald, a site alternately known as Tannenburg in German and as Zalgiris in Lithuanian. Second, Lithuania gradually lost its independence to become a progressively junior partner in the Lithuanian-Poland Commonwealth; the

Treaty of Lublin in 1569 marked the beginning of centuries of decline in Lithuanian power and independence, with Polish language and culture predominating among the ruling elite of the nation. Lithuanian culture, language, and folklore were mainly preserved among the peasantry, in rural areas far removed from the halls of power and fashion.

After the 1795 division of the Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth, czarist Russia came into possession of Lithuania, and the ruling language and culture shifted from Polish to Russian. Native Lithuanian language and culture, once again marginalized by the cultural preferences of the nation's rulers, survived, as it had before, beyond the reach of the ruling elite, among the peasantry. Lithuanian rebellion against Russian rule in 1863 resulted in prohibitions on the use of the Lithuanian language in schools and publishing, which further stoked the flames of Lithuanian nationalism and the resentment of Russian oppression.

Folklore and Nationalism: The Crucible of Lithuanian Paganism

The intellectual and political trends of Romanticism and nationalism that swept across Europe in the nineteenth century did not fail to reach Lithuania. A romantic view of the nation's past, such as had been heralded by the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) in his doctrine of each nation's unique "folk soul," stimulated both popular and scholarly interest in folkloric traditions preserved among the Lithuanian peasantry. The collection and analysis of such folklore led to new pride in the distinctiveness of Lithuanian folk arts and crafts, songs, seasonal customs, and mythology and thus an enhanced sense of Lithuania as a nation with its own cultural identity. Artists and writers created new artistic and literary works inspired by Pagan myth and rural folklore.

Of special concern to folklorists were the very archaic folk songs known as *dainas*, which contained considerable information about Pagan mythology, beliefs, and rituals, expressed in a terse and cryptic style. The folklorist Antanas Juska published thousands of the *dainas* in his massive collection, *Lietuviškos Dainos*, issued in several volumes between 1880 and 1882, with another set of wedding song *dainas*, *Lietuviškos Svodbines Dainos*, published in 1880. Other substantial collections were published by Liudvikas Reza in 1825, Simonas Stanevicius in 1829, and Adolfas Sabaliauskas with the Finnish scholar, Augustas Neimis, in 1911.

Out of this general appreciation of Lithuanian folk culture there emerged a movement to re-create the pre-Christian, Pagan religious traditions embedded in the folklore. The quest for a uniquely Lithuanian form of religion was

inspired in part by the rising tide of Lithuanian nationalism, in which Lithuanian language and culture were championed against the past centuries of Polish and Russian linguistic and cultural dominance. Nationalist Lithuanian intellectuals such as Simonas Daukantas and Jonas Basanavicius looked back in history to the time before Lithuania's conquest by Russia, before the alliance with Poland, before the conversion to Christianity, and to the days of Grand Duke Gediminas when Lithuania was a proud and independent Pagan state, seeing it as something of a golden age (Suziedelis 1997, 71–72, 102–103; Krapauskas 2000, 20; Snyder 2003, 31–52). Pagan revivalists believed that the recovery of Lithuania's pre-Christian and folkloric religious traditions would aid in the rebuilding of Lithuanian national identity toward the goal of a future Lithuanian state free of foreign domination.

Much of Lithuanian nationalistic discourse sought to highlight the distinctiveness of Lithuanian culture and identity as something separate from that of other peoples, but there was one area in which Romantic and nationalist scholars and writers strove to link Lithuania to other nations. This was in regard to the Lithuanian language's affinity with other languages of the Indo-European language family. Linguists involved in the study of comparative Indo-European philology had noted that the Lithuanian language displayed striking similarities with one of the oldest Indo-European languages, namely, Sanskrit, the language of the ancient Hindu Vedas and Upanishads.

The linguistic parallels are aptly demonstrated in the following example cited by the esteemed archaeologist and comparative Indo-European scholar J. P. Mallory. A Lithuanian proverb that translates as “God gave teeth, God will give bread” is, in the Lithuanian original, “*Dievas dave dantis; Dievas duous duounos.*” Translated into Sanskrit, it is “*Devas adadat datas; Devas dat dhanas*” (Mallory 1989, 82).

The linguistic linkages between Lithuanian and other Indo-European languages but most particularly Sanskrit were held up as proof of the great antiquity of Lithuanian language, culture, and religion. Additional parallels in Hindu and Lithuanian mythology and worldview excited further interest in the specifically religious features of the Indo-European heritage of the two peoples, a topic that continues to be explored by scholars to the present time. One of the most detailed studies on this topic is *Balts and Aryans in Their Indo-European Setting*, authored by Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1968), an Indian professor of philology who visited Lithuania during the 1960s.

Into the Twentieth Century

As the preceding section has made clear, modern Lithuanian Paganism was inspired by broad social and intellectual currents in nineteenth-century

Lithuania. It was also guided and shaped by a number of leading figures whose lives and works linked the period of nineteenth-century nationalism with the achievement of Lithuanian independence in the aftermath of World War I. Vilius Storosta, also known as Vydunas (1868–1953), was instrumental in increasing public interest and participation in seasonal Pagan festivals, such as the winter and summer solstice celebrations. Storosta also delved deeply into Indian religious philosophy and wrote a number of works exploring parallels in the general worldview and religious concepts of Hinduism and Pagan Lithuanian religion. Domas Sidlauskas, also known as Visuomis (1878–1944), founded a modern Lithuanian Pagan organization called Visuombye (Universalism) and established a sanctuary and a fraternal organization, both called Romuva, in the period of Lithuanian independence between World Wars I and II. The name is significant, as Romuva was originally the name of a major Pagan religious center in Prussia, the westernmost Baltic nation whose native language, culture, and religion were obliterated by foreign invasion, colonization, and Christianization. The name *Romuva* was therefore a poignant reminder of the possibility of total extinction, a tribute to the Baltic Prussians and their religion and the expression of the hope of breathing new life into the spiritual heritage of the Baltic past.

These early twentieth-century Pagan organizations did not survive the tragic events of the invasion and occupation of Lithuania, first by Soviet and then by Nazi forces in the course of World War II and the incorporation of Lithuania into the USSR following the end of the war. Modern Paganism in Lithuania was repressed by the Soviet authorities in the 1940s and 1950s, but it was eventually able to revive in the late 1960s in the disguised form of a folkloric association, named Ramuva, a variant form of Romuva. Ramuva was led by the folklorist Jonas Trinkunas (1939–) in association with other folklorists and intellectuals, and his wife, Inija. With chapters in Vilnius and the other major Lithuanian cities, Ramuva was devoted to the folkloric collection, study, and performance of songs, dances, and other folk arts and traditions from the rural areas, as well as solstice and other seasonal festivals. Despite efforts by Trinkunas and his associates to conceal the religious purpose of their folkloric activities, Ramuva was repressed by Soviet government authorities for political reasons in the early 1970s.

The Reemergence of Romuva in Post-Soviet Lithuania

With the waning of Soviet authority and thus also of Soviet political repression in the 1980s, Ramuva, under the leadership of the aforementioned Jonas Trinkunas and his wife, Inija Trinkuniene, was permitted to resume

its activities in 1988. Its celebrations of native Lithuanian folkloric culture perfectly complemented rising public sentiment for Lithuanian independence (York 1995).

Following the euphoric achievement of independence in 1991, the folkloric organization Ramuva was supplemented by the religious organization Romuva, reviving the historical associations with the ancient religious site in Prussia to proclaim the desire of Trinkunas and his associates to not merely re-create Lithuanian folk culture but also to effectively revive the ancient, pre-Christian religious heritage, which they viewed as the spiritual core of Lithuanian national identity. In its new incarnation, Romuva has continued its activities to the present time, with little interference from the post-Soviet, Lithuanian government but rather a good deal of cooperation and support (Romuva website).

The establishment of Romuva, with its reinterpretation of Ramuva's folkloric activities for the explicit purpose of promoting Lithuanian Paganism as an ethnic, folkloric religion, was highly offensive to some Catholic participants in Ramuva, who felt that they had been deceived by Trinkunas and his associates about the nature and purpose of the organization. Many Catholics had joined Ramuva believing that its folkloric activities were non-religious and thus not in conflict with their Christian affiliation. With the proclamation of Romuva as an explicitly Pagan religious organization, some Catholic members felt they had no choice but to quit Ramuva, as the theologian, journalist, and former Ramuva member Paulius Subacius related with some bitterness in an interview conducted in early 2002 (interview with Michael Strmiska, February 2002).

However, some Lithuanian Catholics have remained engaged in Ramuva and even joined in Romuva activities, either reconciling Paganism with Catholicism according to their own views or simply choosing to participate in both religious communities without concern for theological or doctrinal contradiction. A similar situation pertains among Lithuanian immigrants in North America. This kind of "dual faith," involving the simultaneous practice of and belief in two different religious traditions, was first noted by the scholar George Fedotov (1960, 10) in his classic study of Russian religious history. Examples could also be cited from Afro-Caribbean religions that combine the worship of African deities with reverence for Catholic saints and the Virgin Mary or the participation of many Japanese people in both Shinto and Buddhism.

The dual faith of Lithuanians simultaneously participating in Pagan and Catholic forms of religion is, however, nothing new. From its earliest days, Catholicism in Lithuania has incorporated symbols, sacred sites, and other elements of the same native Pagan religion that it condemned and continues to denounce as a false and wayward faith. This Catholic policy of

appropriating native religious sites and practices can be traced back to the instructions given by Pope Gregory I in the early seventh century for converting Heathens in the British Isles by superimposing Christian names and meanings over Pagan gods and practices (Cusack 1998, 178–179).

Archaeologists in Lithuania have ascertained that the majestic cathedral in Vilnius was built over an earlier Pagan temple. The history of the cathedral site is quite complex and in fact encapsulates the stages of the overall religious history of Lithuania. In the first millennium, the area was a swampy wetland, with the specific site of the later cathedral a small island on which Pagan Lithuanians performed sacrifices. When the Pagan ruler Mindaugas converted to Christianity in 1253, he arranged to have a cathedral, the first of several, built over the site of the earlier Pagan shrine. Mindaugas was slain by Pagan Lithuanians angered at his conversion, and the cathedral was burned and then rebuilt as a Pagan temple, with a stone altar surrounded by zodiac symbols. This temple is believed to have been the house of worship of Gediminas and other Pagan grand dukes prior to the official conversion of Lithuania in 1387; thereafter, the Pagan temple was demolished and rebuilt as a Catholic cathedral once more, only to later be burned and rebuilt again in the tumult of Lithuanian politics over the centuries. Archaeological knowledge of the earlier history of the cathedral site gradually increased in the course of the twentieth century, with the remains of the post-Mindaugas temple and altar uncovered during excavations in the 1970s.

Originally, Pagan winter and summer solstice celebrations have been reinterpreted as Christian holidays—the winter celebration as Christmas and the summer festivities as Saint John’s Day. Christian crosses in Lithuania are often decorated with sun, moon, and snake motifs, all drawn from the symbolic repertoire of Lithuanian Paganism.

As these examples illustrate, the Catholic Church has generally been quite happy to allow various aspects of Lithuanian Paganism to continue under Catholic auspices, as long as such elements were purged of their original Pagan associations and fully converted to Christian purposes. By the same token, Catholic leaders have been quick to condemn modern attempts by Romuva and other modern Pagans to reclaim the originally Pagan identity of symbols and practices formerly appropriated by the church. From the historical viewpoint of the church, Lithuania has been a majority Catholic nation for 600 years, and as such, it is the church that is the true keeper of Lithuanian culture and identity, not a small group of Pagan revivalist upstarts. There can be little doubt that the Catholic Church in Lithuania would prefer for the pre-Christian, Pagan heritage embedded in Lithuanian folk Catholicism to remain buried under the doctrines of the church, just as the recently excavated Pagan temple was long buried under



Christian crosses in Lithuania are often decorated with sun, moon, and snake motifs, all drawn from the symbolic repertoire of Lithuanian Paganism. (Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)

the Vilnius Grand Cathedral, but the winds of change blowing through Lithuania do not favor the church being able to maintain or impose a monolithic, church-centered view of the nation's history and culture.

With Lithuania gradually rejoining Europe as a modern, democratic country, an atmosphere of increasing religious diversity and pluralism is taking root. This atmosphere supports the right of Romuva to assert the originally Pagan nature of certain elements of Lithuanian history and ethnic culture, along with the right of Lithuanian Catholics to interpret the same history and folk traditions in a de-Paganized and Christianized manner. For example, the period of conflict between the Pagan grand dukes of Lithuania and the Christian Teutonic Knights in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is generally viewed by members of Romuva as a heroic struggle against foreign, Christian oppression, whereas the same events may be viewed by Lithuanian Catholics as a tragic and painful but ultimately fruitful process of ignorant ancestors slowly moving toward the truth of Christ and full membership in his church. With the two religions staking these kinds of competing claims to Lithuanian ethnic heritage and cultural identity, it is to be expected that the animosity between the two religious communities will continue, along with the dual-faith participation

of Lithuanians more comfortable combining these religious traditions than choosing between them.

Such controversies do not appear to have damaged Romuva, but they may have actually have increased public awareness of and interest in modern Lithuanian Paganism. Romuva has maintained a robust program of folkloric and ritual activities and continued to attract both dedicated followers and casual participants throughout the 1990s and into the first years of the twenty-first century.

Romuva received official governmental recognition as a “nontraditional religious community” in 1992. Romuva supporters in the Lithuanian national parliament, the Seimas, proposed legislation in the late 1990s to grant Romuva the higher official status of a “traditional religious community,” which would have placed it on a level of legal status equal to the Catholic, Orthodox, and Lutheran churches; Judaism; Sunni Islam; and a number of other religious associations (Glodenis 2000 and online at <http://www.religija.lt>; interview with Donatas Glodenis, February 2002). The legislation failed to win approval, partly because of the opposition of Catholic politicians. Another factor was the stipulation of the 1995 Lithuanian Law on Religious Communities and Associations that a religious association could only be recognized as “traditional” after twenty-five years had passed since its first registration with the government.

With Romuva having only registered with the government in 1992, the law could be interpreted to mean that 2017 would be the earliest date at which Romuva could obtain the full legal status of a traditional religious community. Supporters of Romuva made the case that their religion could hardly be more traditional, as it was the modern continuation of native religious traditions that far predated the arrival of Christianity and the other religions recognized as traditional. The pro-Romuva camp also advanced the argument that modern Romuva had been active in Lithuania long before 1992, but neither this nor the other argument succeeded in convincing the majority of the Seimas. As of 2005, a petition drive is under way to garner public support in Lithuania for granting Romuva the status of traditional religious community (interview with Inija Trinkuniene, December 2004).

The mere fact that the status of Romuva came to be discussed at the highest levels of government demonstrates that the organization has achieved a certain level of recognition in Lithuanian society. However, the ultimate decision by the Seimas to deny Romuva a higher legal standing illustrates the extent to which the religious movement remains controversial. The legal status of Romuva in the United States will be taken up in a separate section.

Romuva as a Religion

If we ask if Romuva is a religion, we must first establish a baseline idea of what a religion is. Though views on this subject naturally vary, most definitions of *religion* generally include the following four elements: (1) a system of sacred beliefs articulating a particular view of the world; (2) a set of sacred narratives relating the mythology of deities and supernatural beings and the history of the religion itself; (3) a body of rituals facilitating the worship of sacred beings and providing an experiential understanding of myths and beliefs; and (4) an organization of individuals with a shared commitment to these beliefs, myths, and rituals in a coherent and self-sustaining community. To understand Romuva as a religion, let us then examine something of its beliefs, myths, rituals, and community structures.

Romuva Beliefs: The Ethnic and the Mystical

Regarding the beliefs of Romuva, a good starting point is provided in a set of statutes submitted by a Lithuanian Romuva elder, translated into English and then published on Romuva's e-mail discussion group on the Yahoo! Internet service in 2003. The document begins with a declaration of basic principles: "The [Romuva] Community continues the traditions of the native ancient Baltic faith. It aims at the unison and the harmony with the God and the Gods, with the ancestors, the nature and the people, exalts the sanctity of nature as the most obvious manifestation of divinity, and nurtures the Baltic traditional moral way of life, their own way towards the divinity, which was created through many centuries" (published on the Yahoo! Romuva discussion group, March 6, 2003; translated into English by Dangis Verseckas).

This little document very concisely summarizes a number of sacred concerns of Romuva: the worship of divinity and nature, respect for the dead as well as the living, and a quest for harmony between these different aspects of the world. Note, however, that the very first item that is mentioned is "continues the traditions of the native ancient Baltic faith." There is, first and foremost, a consciousness of respecting and preserving the ways of the Lithuanians of the past—an *ethnic* consciousness. Reverence for the ancestors further expresses this ethnic concern, as does the final point about "nurturing the Baltic traditional moral way of life." A similar passage in *Of Gods and Holidays*, an anthology of essays concerning Lithuanian and Latvian Paganism compiled by Jonas Trinkunas and colleagues, speaks of Romuva as "the mansion of faith created by our ancestors" (Trinkunas 1999, 152).

In terms of Romuva's conception of the divine, there are two intriguing types of ambiguity. There is first the statement about "God" *or* "Gods," an ambiguity leaving space for various interpretations and conceptions, both the monistic and the pluralistic. We can perhaps detect the influence of Indian religion and philosophy, which have been widely discussed in Lithuanian Pagan circles since the time of Vyduenas, particularly the strand of Hindu speculative thought in texts such as the Upanishads, wherein provision is made for how a multitude of gods existing on one level of experience may be known as a single godhead at a different level of consciousness. The mention of the Baltic "way" toward the divine evolving over many centuries likewise suggests that the tradition contains multiple forms of worship and thought continuously evolving and developing, opening the door to further extensions and adaptations. This contrasts strongly with the tendency in Abrahamic or monotheistic forms of religion to emphasize the perfection and enforcement of set laws and doctrines received through a divine revelation transmitted in the distant past.

The second ambiguity concerns the relationship between nature and the divine. The document speaks of the "sanctity of nature as the most obvious manifestation of divinity." This is an interesting formulation, which identifies nature with the divine but not in an absolute or exclusive manner. Nature is described as the "most obvious," most accessible form of the divine but *not* as the only form. The implication is there may indeed be *other* forms or levels of divinity beyond the world of nature. We might compare this with Christian debates about the relationship of the physical body of Jesus to the transcendental nature of the Christian god. Compare also the Hindu creation myth from the Rig-Veda, which tells us that when the world was created from the body of the primordial man Purusha, only one-fourth of his body was used to make up our world of physical existence, that is, nature; the other three-quarters of Purusha exist in a transcendental realm beyond our normal experience (Rig-Veda, bk. 10, hymn 90).

Although there may be some ambiguity on certain points, one aspect of the worldview expressed in this document is very clear. There is no *dualism* in the Romuva view of the world. There is no sense of opposition between the divine and the human, the spiritual and the physical, the living and the dead. In this nondualistic framework, the highest value is placed on "harmony" or "unison" with the different levels and inhabitants of the cosmos. A passage in Trinkunas's book *Of Gods and Holidays* makes the point: "Evil—*blogas*—does not exist of itself; rather, it is the downfall of harmony, the absence of harmony and the inability to restore it. This is manifested most glaringly in man's devastation of nature, his destruction of Her order" (Dundzila and Trinkunas in Trinkunas 1999, 158–159).

The Lithuanian word for harmony is *darna*. Via Indo-European comparative linguistics, this word is etymologically related to the Indian word *dharma*, a key religious term laden with multiple meanings in both Hinduism and Buddhism, ranging from “order” to “law” to “teaching” to “duty.” The diversity of meanings in the Indian cognate again opens the door to a certain ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning for *darna*, grounded in the core sense of an underlying sustaining principle in the universe, somewhat akin to the Chinese Tao.

The Romuva belief system therefore discloses both an *ethnic* aspect, emphasizing reverence for Lithuanian ancestors and ethnic heritage, and a *mystical* strain in which the world of nature is seen as linking mankind with a numinous world of divinity, partly coterminous with nature, partly transcendent, accessible either to polytheistic worship of multiple deities or a monistic understanding of multiplicity linked in oneness. The concept of *darna* ties the mystical connection with nature, ancestors, and divinity together with a concern for ethical, harmonious living.

Romuva Narratives: Lithuanian Mythology

Lithuanian myths were originally part of oral tradition at the folk level and have never been systematized and harmonized into literary works in the way of Greek or Norse mythology. There was no Lithuanian Homer in ancient times, nor any Lithuanian Snorri Sturluson in medieval times, to give the world a Lithuanian *Iliad* or *Edda*. The myths of the ancient Baltic peoples of Lithuania have been pieced together by such scholars as Marija Gimbutas, Norbertas Velius, and Prane Dundeliene from folk songs, folk tales, and other folklore, as well as from archaeology and other scattered sources. Much of the work that has been done on Lithuanian myth, religion, folklore, and archaeology by native Lithuanian scholars remains to be translated into English or other languages.

A Lithuanian creation myth is discernible in a number of folkloric sources and is summarized by the Lithuanian scholars Vytautas Straisys and Libertas Klimka as follows:

In the beginning there were darkness and chaos: land was mixed with water. In vast expanses of chaos wandered the God [*Dievas*], who commenced dividing the universe into the separate elements: water, earth, air and fire. Almost all Lithuanian legends feature two divinities, the highest god and, assisting him, the younger god, in some legends called his brother, in others, *velnias* (a devil). Water seems to be the first element which was isolated from chaos and

formed lagoons. By orders of the highest god, the younger god dived many times to the bottom of the lagoon and brought to the surface the seeds from which the earth grew. (Straisys and Klimka 1997, 2004)

The name *Dievas* is of Indo-European derivation and is cognate with the names of sky gods in other Indo-European pantheons, such as the Sanskrit *Dyaus* and the Greek *Zeus*, with the French word for god, *Dieu*, and the English *Divinity/Divine* showing further reflexes of the same ancient root. The motif of the “Earth Diver” enacted by the god Velnias in this myth is common in many creation accounts found in mythological traditions of Europe, Asia, and the Americas.

In their further adventures, Dievas and Velnias create the various features of the world as we know it, including the other deities of the Lithuanian pantheon and human beings. Dievas gradually becomes the sky god of the upper world, with Velnias taking on the role prefigured in his diving action, the master of the watery depths and the underworld (Norbertas Velius in Trinkunas 1999, 57). In later times, under the influence of Christianity, Velnias became identified with the Christian devil, but his original character showed affinities with the Indian god Varuna, who is likewise a deity of waters, wisdom, mystery, and death.

According to Lithuanian myth, the cosmos is supported by the World Tree. The upper reaches of this great tree touch the heavenly realm of the deities. Birds dwell in the branches; humans and all of the earth’s other creatures dwell at the base; and in the underworld touched by the roots dwell snakes, reptiles, and other creatures, as well as the dead. There, too, flow rivers, streams, and springs whose waters give life and wisdom to the worlds above (Straisys and Klimka 1997). The concept of the World Tree, which unites different levels of the cosmos in a vertical order, is shared among many ancient cultures, like the Earth Diver motif mentioned earlier. The World Tree found in Scandinavian myth presents a particularly close parallel (Davidson 1988, 170–173).

Inija Trinkuniene, in a lecture delivered in India in 2003 on Lithuanian spirituality and mythology, explained the World Tree as follows: “A tree [as] a significant sign and image of ancient religion explains the world’s structure. In Lithuanian harvest-time songs, it is sung [citing a *daina*, a traditional Lithuanian folk song]:

A poplar stood by the roadside,
Oh glorious plant of rye.
From below the roots, the ringing *kankles*,
In the middle the buzzing bees,
At the summit the falcon’s children,

A group of brothers rides by,
Please stop, young brothers,
Behold the falcon's children,
Listen to the buzzing bees,
Listen to the ringing kankles,
The kankles rings for our dear father
The bees they buzz for our dear mother
The falcon's children for our brother.

[*The *kankles* is a harp- or zitherlike instrument common in the Baltic lands and Northern Europe, known by different names in different countries.]

Trinkuniene commented on the tree symbolism in the song:

This is the main hymn of Romuva . . . It is sung about the mythological world-tree and its three most important parts, which symbolize the three levels of the world. Roots underground, death, the past, water beginning and spring of life. The ringing of kankles at the roots [signifies] the world of the old, the wise, and the dead. The buzzing bees in the middle [indicate] the world of working, toiling people. The falcon's children at the summit [symbolize] the heavens, the world of warriors and heroes. Death and life, an uninterrupted linking of evolution. A tree, even though it drops its leaves in the autumn, goes into sleep in winter, but its life goes on and its soul remains alive. Such is man's path through birth, death and rebirth. The central meaning of this hymn is the equal importance and harmony of these three levels. (Trinkuniene, "Lithuanian Folklore as a Source of Baltic Religion: The Fire Ritual," accessed online May 25, 2004)

The World Tree was given material expression in the form of decorated wooden poles, capped with rooflike, protective structures, that were familiar, folkloric features of the Lithuanian landscape for many centuries. In the words of Marija Gimbutas:

Right up to the present century, roofed poles as well as crosses with a sun symbol around the cross-arms could be encountered in Lithuania in front of homesteads, in fields, besides sacred springs, or in the forests. They were erected on the occasions of someone's marriage or illness, during epidemics, or for the purpose of ensuring good crops . . . Their presence in pre-Christian religion is attested by historic documents describing them as relics of the old religion. Christian bishops instructed the clergy to destroy the poles and crosses in front of which the peasants made offerings and observed other pagan rites. The Lithuanian roofed poles and crosses managed

to escape destruction because the people affixed some of the Christian symbols to them and gradually they came under the protection of the Catholic Church. (Gimbutas, quoted in Trinkunas 1999, 35–36)

There are a wide variety of male and female deities with diverse functions. Prominent among the goddesses are Zemyna, the earth goddess, also worshipped in localized form as Zemepati, patroness of the farmstead; Jurate, the sea goddess; Saule, the sun goddess; Ausrine, the dawn goddess; Rasa, the goddess of the morning dew; Austeja, the bee goddess; Medeine, the goddess of forests; Gabija, the goddess of fire and general protectress of the home in her special association with the hearth fire; Dimste or Dimstipati, another household guardian goddess; Laima, the fate goddess; Gvyate, the snake goddess; Kupuole or Kaupuole, the goddess of fertility; Krumine, the goddess of the corn; Ragana, the goddess of witchcraft; Giltine, the fearsome, death-bringing goddess; and Velionas, the goddess of the dead, who is the female counterpart of Velnias. Several other goddesses have male counterparts as well.

The fertility god Kupolinis is the male counterpart to Kupuole. The god Dimstipatis, like the goddess Dimstipati, watches over the household. Zemepatis is the male counterpart to Zemepati. Bubelis is a bee god, complementary to Austeja. Menulis or Menuo, the moon god, is the husband of Saule, in a reversal of the usual male/sun and female/moon gendering of deities that is common in many mythologies. Saule the female sun is, however, unfaithful to Menulis the male moon, who therefore flees and hides from her, in an etiological myth explaining the phases and occasional invisibility of the moon. An alternate version of the myth reverses the role of betrayer and betrayed, but the result is the same. The celestial children of this rocky cosmic marriage are the planets and stars.

Perkunas, the Lithuanian god of sky, storm, and justice, is a parallel figure to the Norse god Thor or the Greek god Zeus. Like Thor, he is the great protector of mankind, commanding the earth-shaking power of the thunderstorm. Perkunas's lightning bolts are not only destructive but also life enhancing, splitting open the earth so that falling or planted seeds may take root and grow and giving fire and light for the use of humankind. He is also associated with oak trees, which are sometimes split or set aflame by his fiery bolts. Like Zeus, Perkunas represents not only raw physical force but also justice, wisdom, and social order. He was the major deity of the Lithuanian rulers prior to their conversion to Christianity.

Besides Perkunas, Saule, the sun goddess, is the other preeminent celestial deity. She drives a chariot across the sky by day and returns by boat across the far northern sea at night. Both solstice holidays focus on her, with the summer solstice celebrating her full strength and brilliance and the win-

ter solstice her rebirth out of darkness. When the mythical marriage of Saule and the moon god Menulis goes awry, Perkunas, as arbiter of justice, divorces Saule from Menulis. After this separation of sun and moon, Saule watches their daughter, the earth, by day, and Menulis watches her by night.

The earth goddess, Zemyna, is the mother of all life in our world. Although she does not have an anthropomorphic form, symbolically she is both womb and tomb, not only for humans but for animals and plants as well. Many rituals and traditions pay her reverence even today. At the ritual funerary meal called *sermenys*, three bites of bread, three morsels of meat, and three spoons of beer are offered to the earth on behalf of the deceased. In traditional Lithuanian belief, one should not strike the earth or spit on it. Pious farmers would kiss the earth good morning and good night everyday. In Lithuanian, the word for human, *zmogus*, is etymologically derived from the word for earth, *zeme*. Humans are literally “earthlings” in Lithuanian. This furthermore makes humans the grandchildren of the sun and the moon.

The third most important goddess in addition to Zemyna and Saule is Laima, the goddess of fate. July is her sacred month, and the linden is her sacred tree. She determines each human destiny at birth, and her decision cannot be changed, not even by Dievas. She does not determine cosmic fate. As the birthing mother, she is called the bear. She protects births and is invoked at name-giving rituals. She is also invoked at weddings to bless couples. The verb for blessing, *laiminti*, comes from the name of Laima. The word for luck also comes from the name of the goddess. A popular blessing is the folkloric phrase *Laima laimink laime*, meaning, “Laima, bless (our) luck.” Under Christianity, Laima and the Christian mother of God, Mary, were conflated. In later folklore, Laima and Laume, a female counterpart to Velnias, were confused.

Though Lithuania is a small country in modern terms, only about 25,000 square miles or 65,000 square kilometers in area, it has considerable regional diversity in terms of different customs, folkways, and dialects in the different quarters of the country. This observation applies to the ancient gods and goddesses as well, who have therefore been known by different names in documents from different points in history and from the different regions of Lithuania. This matter goes beyond the scope of this introductory essay, but the late, eminent Lithuanian ethnologist Norbertas Velius devoted a fine book to explaining the regional variations of mythology and folklore. The interested reader is referred to this work, *The World-Outlook of the Ancient Balts* (Velius 1989).

In addition to the beings recognized as gods and goddesses, there are also a variety of demigods or nature-spirits, such as the *kaukai* (sing. *kaukas*), miniature beings who dwell underground. The *kaukai* somewhat

resemble elves, fairies, and other such magical “little people” commonly found in European myth and folklore. Another category of semidivine beings were the *aitvarai* (sing. *aitvaras*), flying creatures associated with meteorites sometimes thought to live in the sky *and* believed able to bring wealth to those who capture and keep them (Velius 2002).

Romuva Narratives: The History of Lithuanian Paganism

Apart from myths that detail the functions and adventures of the deities, the other form of narrative that is important and even sacred for Romuva members and other Lithuanian Pagans involves their understanding of the history of Paganism in Lithuania.

This history was outlined in the first section of this chapter. Lithuanian Pagans take pride and inspiration from knowing that their country was the last in Europe to officially accept Christianity and also that their Pagan religion lived on in customs and folklore even after Christianization, until its recent revival from the nineteenth century onward.

Romuva Rituals and Festivals

Romuva has many different types of rituals and sacred days throughout the year in which the gods, goddesses, and ancestors and the powers of nature and the cycles of the seasons are all paid reverence. The following is a brief survey of the annual ritual calendar, with a more detailed description of certain rituals to follow.

To begin with the winter festivals, the time of the winter solstice is celebrated with two holidays, Kucios and Kaledos. Kucios, observed on December 24, is partly a feast for the dead and partly a reaffirmation of life during the coldest and darkest days of winter. It is a solemn occasion centered around a feast shared between the living and the dead, which will be described in more detail. Kaledos is a more cheerful holiday that marks the rebirth of Saule, the sun goddess, following her symbolic death on the shortest, darkest day of the year. It is celebrated on December 25.

In January, the middle of winter is marked at the time of the new moon in the holiday of Pusiauziemis. At the end of the month is the day of Kirmiu Diena, when hibernating *zaltys* (snakes) are worshipped, a continuation of a long tradition of snake veneration in Lithuania, which is also noted in medieval records of Christian visitors to the grand duchy.

At the end of February comes the festival of Uzgavenies, a jolly time marking the ending of winter. Uzgavenies festivities include sharing can-

dies and treats; the wearing of costumes that have multiple levels of meaning, as in Kaledos festivities, in parades and performances; riding and racing using sleighs, wagons, or other conveyances; and other forms of merrymaking. A straw image of the More, a female figure who personifies the winter, is burned, and winter is so bidden adieu. Lithuanian Christians commonly combine aspects of Uzgavenies with the Christian festival of Lent.

Of spring holidays, there is first Pasavario Lyge, celebrated at the time of the spring equinox, March 21 or 22, to greet the arrival of spring. In early to mid-April comes Velykos, a festival that both welcomes the spring and commemorates the ancestors, whose main holidays are in the autumn and winter. There is some variability in the date of Velykos because the ethnic Lithuanian spring holidays have, under influence of Christianity, become confused with Christian festivals and then further confused due to the different calendars employed by the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. Originally, Velykos was probably celebrated at the time of the spring equinox, but it became conflated with Easter and its movable date. Under czarist Russian occupation, Lithuania shifted back from the Gregorian to the Julian calendars used by the Orthodox Church. Pan-Slavic influences forced the celebration of both Catholic and Orthodox holidays according to the Julian dates, which only served to confuse the Lithuanian folkloric ritual cycle. Romuva now celebrates the spring holidays according to the Catholic Gregorian dates.

At the end of April comes Jore, in which spring is further celebrated, focusing on the new growth in nature now emerging. At the end of May, the festival of Samboriai is celebrated, in honor of the growing season now fully under way.

Lithuanians celebrate the summer solstice on June 21 or 22 with the Pagan festival of Rasa or Rasos, meaning “dew,” which is also known as Kupoline, named for the special decorated pole called the *kupole*, and in Christianized form as Jonines, a feast day for John the Baptist. This holiday is celebrated in natural settings such as hills and fields that are near bodies of water—rivers, springs, ponds, or lakes. Jonas Stundzia, leader of the Romuva chapter in the Boston area, emphasized the importance of water for Rasa/Kupoline. He noted that he had visited villages in Lithuania where the central site of the summer solstice celebration was the village well, small and humble as it might be, because it was the only body of natural water in the village and there could be no Rasa without a natural body of water of some sort (interview with Jonas Stundzia, February 5, 2005). The emphasis on water also helps explain the association with John the Baptist, who performed ritual baptism on the River Jordan. The celebration of Rasa typically includes bonfires, singing and dancing, and other activities that will

be described. The sun herself is understood to dance with her daughters in the sky on the midsummer's night of Rasa.

The other summer festival is that of Rugiu Svente, which takes place at the end of July, just before the annual harvest of rye. This is essentially a festival of thanksgiving for the rye crop. Men and women wear traditional white linen clothes for the ritual and then wear the same clothes for the work of the harvest. Other festivities include the making and displaying of doll-like figurines out of the rye plant, representing the spirit of the harvest, and the adornment of cows and other animals with wreathes and garlands woven from rye (interview with Jonas Stundzia, February 5, 2005).

Autumn festivals begin with Dagotuves, which celebrates the fall planting of the winter rye. It is observed at the time of the fall equinox, which usually falls on September 21 or 22.

By far the most significant festival of the autumn season is Velines, typically celebrated November 1 and 2 as a solemn commemoration of the dead, known as *veles* in Lithuanian. Because the timing of this ritual overlaps with the Catholic holidays of All Souls' and All Saints' Days, many Catholic Lithuanians think of Velines as a Christian event, not realizing that it has pre-Christian roots. For Romuva members, Velines is one of the most important events in the yearly ritual calendar as the time to commune with ancestors and show caring and concern for them. In a general way, the Lithuanian autumn, with its gray and gloomy skies, misty fogs, and first hints of snow and winter, is devoted to the dead, with the next ritual event, the previously mentioned feast of Kucios, bringing the period dedicated to the ancestors to a close. The merriment of Kaledos then turns attention away from death toward new life.

Because of its predominantly urban membership, Romuva is more and more focusing on the nonagrarian Lithuanian calendar celebrations. Having quickly scanned the Lithuanian Pagan ritual calendar, let us now look at several festivals in more detail.

The Winter Solstice: Kucios and Kaledos

The winter solstice holidays of Kucios and Kaledos have almost opposite meanings that join together to form a bridge from one state of being to another. Dark and somber Kucios, celebrated on December 24, is heavy with memories of the dead and an awareness of the hardship of survival in the winter cold of Northern Europe. But one day later, Kucios gives way to the inspiring vision of the sun reborn from darkness and the hope of new life and vitality in the new year.

One of the most interesting features of Kucios are the intricate straw figures displayed in homes at this time. These are hung like mobiles from doorways or ceilings, representing natural phenomena such as birds, trees, the sun, and more. The most elaborate are tri-level constructions that symbolize the three levels of existence in the traditional Lithuanian and Indo-European worldview. Humans inhabit the middle realm of human and earthly life, whereas the higher realm of the ethereal sky is reserved for the gods, and the subterranean realm below human consciousness belongs to the dead. In the dark time of winter's depths, these figures reassert the totality and vitality of the universe against the threat of chaos and despair.

The hanging straw figurines of sun, tree, and birds mark out a symbolic "grove," a sacred space echoing the ritual groves of the past Pagans of Lithuania and of other European Pagan peoples as well, such as Celts and Scandinavians, who all maintained places of worship in forest areas. In this place of security and solemnity, a large number of candles are lit to welcome the visiting spirits of the ancestors.

Before joining together for the Kucios meal, participants wash themselves in baths or saunas. They must also settle all disputes and reconcile disagreements because these will taint the New Year with bad luck if they are carried over. The table for the Kucios meal is set for both the living and the dead, with a place of honor for the ancestors, who are seen as equal participants in the household community for the duration of Kucios.

Before eating begins, invocations are made to such deities as Dievas, the sky and creator god; Zemyna, the earth goddess; and Zemepatis, the brother of Zemyna and protector of the household. The deities are thanked for their bounty and asked for their continued blessing and protection. Participants greet each other with special ritual blessings for health, fortune, and prosperity. Children are instructed in the importance of obedience to their parents, teachers, and elders, with wishes for strong growth and good grades. Doors and windows are opened, and the spirits of the ancestors are invited into the home to join the living. Bread is raised in offering and then eaten, and beer is likewise offered and drunk, with each person allowing some to drip onto the floor as an offering to Zemyna and/or for the dead. When the table is cleared, the plate for the dead is left overnight for the pleasure of the ancestors.

Special meatless and milkless dishes are prepared for Kucios, the most important of which is *kucia*, a tasty grain, nut, water, and honey mixture that can be served as a cold, moist dish or baked into a loaf. There is also a dairy-free, soy milk-like beverage, made from pulverized poppy seeds, which is drunk with *kleckai*, hard, cookielike balls also made from poppy

seeds. Jonas Stundzia commented that although the drink is quite tasty and could conceivably be a popular drink throughout the year, it is drunk only at the time of Kucios, indicating its sacral nature.

Stundzia and Jonas Trinkunas were questioned by coauthor Strmiska in December 2004 as to whether the serving of vegetarian fare on Kucios was truly a Pagan custom from the distant past or may have resulted from the influence of Catholic dietary customs. Neither Trinkunas nor Stundzia was completely certain one way or the other, but coauthor Dundzila believes that the milkless and meatless prescriptions of the holiday may reflect old Catholic fasting requirements for Christmas Eve. He postulates that the dietary requirements probably became part of Kucios as Kucios became associated with Christmas Eve. Academic research indicates Kucios was not originally a vegetarian holiday. Contraindications to the vegetarian meal come from the Latvian equivalent of Kucios, *Bluka Vakars*, which features a roasted pig's head, with the decidedly carnivorous injunction that all the meat must be eaten that same evening. A few Lithuanian locales also share this tradition for Kucios.

Other Kucios foods include *kisielius* (a relish or jelly made from cranberries), beet soup, mushroom dumplings, cabbage, and fish. After the main meal, desserts such as *slizikai*, or cookies made from poppy seeds, apples, and nuts, are served, along with a sweet, white, milklike beverage also made from poppy seeds.

In past times, the foods were shared not only with the dead but also with household animals, which were served from the table. This practice is a graphic illustration of the intimacy of Lithuanian peasants with their farm animals. Food was also offered to bees and to fruit trees, both highly valued in Lithuanian folk culture. The veneration of trees in Kucios is another illustration of the pervasive sacredness of trees in Lithuanian folk tradition. As Kucios is largely centered on the worship of ancestors, the feeding of trees could also be related to the Lithuanian belief that the souls of the dead may transmigrate into trees. The trees honored in Kucios, however, are the family's domesticated fruit trees growing in the yard or garden near the house, and the trees into which the dead pass are more commonly understood to be forest trees.

After the meal is concluded, a mood of levity is injected into the proceedings with a divination activity that caters to the younger members of the family. Still seated at the table, children and young people pull straws or pieces of hay out from under the tablecloth, with the length of straw understood to predict the length of the life of the person drawing the straw. Other Lithuanian holidays likewise feature divination games, which seem to be performed as much for fun as for any more solemn purpose.

For the last activities of the night of Kucios, the family moves from the table to the area around the hearth or stove—understood to be symbolically linked with Gabija, the guardian goddess of fire and the hearth—and hence a sacred, protective fire burning for the welfare of all the family. The ancestors are believed to be present in spirit and to appreciate the warmth of the fire. The family members now wish each other well by throwing grains into the fire, with each grain believed to represent a specific wish for another family member that is hoped to come to fruition in the same way as grain bursts and gives forth new life. Last, a log, stump, or wreath from a birch tree is thrown into the fire, representing the ending of the year and the destruction of the pains and sorrows of that year, looking ahead to the promise of the new year soon to come.

Kaledos, celebrated the day after Kucios, greets the rebirth of Saule, the sun goddess, with a variety of joyful festivities that contrast strongly with the more somber activities of Kucios. Images of the sun are carried through the streets and even into the forests, fields, and farms. Another traditional decoration is a reindeer with nine horns, which also represents the sun. Similar to the custom of Christmas caroling, people stroll their neighborhoods and sing special Kaledos songs, some wearing animal masks and costumes representing such creatures as bears, horses, and goats. Although these animal masks and costumes are enjoyed in good fun and obviously have a humorous function at the surface level, there is also a deeper level of meaning, in which the animals represent the forces of nature that the rites are intended to reawaken and stimulate from the depths of the frozen Baltic winter. For example, in Lithuanian mythology, the goat is the animal that pulls the cart of the mighty, life-giving thunder god Perkunas across the sky. The Norse thunder god, Thor, likewise depends on goats to draw his chariot, suggesting a broader Indo-European significance to the symbolism of the goat.

One particular character represented by mask and costume is an old man with a white beard, known as the Elder of Kaleda, somewhat analogous to the figures of Father Christmas or Santa Claus in English-speaking nations. Another enjoyable yet also meaningful activity of Kaledos is the joint effort of a group of people, which could be a family or some other grouping, to drag a specially selected log around their town or village (or whatever community area is convenient for those involved) for several hours in the daytime and then to burn it in a festive bonfire in the evening. The log is called *blukis*, with its bearers called *blukininkai*. The burning of the *blukis* symbolizes the passing of the old year, like the birch items burned in the home fire at the end of Kucios. The two ritual actions are indeed very similar in purpose and function, except that the Kucios burning

is in the home, performed by and for the family, and the Kaledos burning is out in the town or village for the broader community outside the home.

Kucios and Kaledos are national Lithuanian festivals celebrated by nearly every Lithuanian family. Although the festivals are clearly Pagan in origin, they have been Christianized with the addition of Christian symbolic meanings. Kucios is closely associated with Catholicism but not with Protestantism. Ironically, the Catholic Church had banned it and persecuted it in centuries past, somewhat like the Soviet government did in the second half of the twentieth century, when school officials inspected children's teeth for telltale poppy seeds on Christmas Day. Overall, the Kucios and Kaledos holidays show a blending of Pagan, Christian, and Lithuanian elements into a singular, unified tradition. Romuva's Pagan celebration strives to remove the Christian elements and restore the Pagan ones.

Rasa/Kupolines/Jonines, the Summer Solstice

This lively and joyous holiday, which is celebrated on June 21 or 22, is known by three different names. *Rasa* means “dew,” which in the Lithuanian Pagan worldview is understood as possessing magical properties, particularly on the night of the summer solstice when dew would be collected on cloths to use for medicinal purposes. The name *Kupolines* derives from *kupole*, a term that designates both herbs and a specific decoration used in this festival—a stylized pole topped with three branches pointing upward, somewhat like a trident. *Jonines* is a Christianized name for the festival, derived from *Jonas*, the Lithuanian version of the name of John the Baptist. The linkage of water with baptism and the solstice ritual with dew help to account for how this particular biblical figure came to be associated with the summer solstice in Lithuania.

Rasa is celebrated out-of-doors, in large open spaces such as fields and meadows, at a warm and pleasant time of year when all of nature seems to be in blossom. At a Rasa celebration attended by this chapter's authors in 1998, the setting was the historic town of Kernave in southern Lithuania, among hills where Lithuanian chieftains of a thousand years ago were buried, with the River Neris flowing peacefully nearby. Several hundred people were in attendance, both Romuva members and others who came simply to enjoy the traditional festivities.

This Rasa celebration commenced in the early evening and continued throughout the night and into the early morning. The sun set for only a few hours, from about 11 PM until about 3 AM, then rose to full strength again. Therefore, there was light for most of the activities. Arriving at the festival site, people would pass through a specially constructed wooden



Kernave Cultural Reserve, a UNESCO world heritage historic site since July 1994 and the site of the Rasa celebration, Kernave, Lithuania, June 1998. (Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)

archway, with crosspieces creating a runelike design and oak leaves woven with the wood. Participants gathered on a broad area on top of a hill to hear the Trinkunas-led musical ensemble Kulgrinda sing several dainas appropriate to the occasion and then to dance all in a circle, with each two people linking arms to twirl or spin in smaller circles. This dance symbolized the dancing of the sun goddess Saule and her daughters, who are believed to likewise celebrate on the evening of Rasa.

During the hours leading to twilight, participants harvest various herbs and flowers. These will be bundled together and eventually dried, to be used for medicinal purposes. Since nature is believed to be at the height of its powers on this night, herbs collected at this time are believed to similarly possess exceptional potency. Some of the herbs and flowers will be used for wreath making and divination in the festival.

In the 1998 celebration, a large bonfire was lit on a broad hilltop, with other fires blazing in other locations around the sacred hills of Kernave. People dispersed into different directions to partake of various activities, strolling on pathways and climbing wooden staircases connecting the hilltops and other spaces. Women sought out herbs and plants to weave into wreaths (*vainikai*), and men did the same with leaves from oak trees.

Rasa wreaths are worn as festive headgear and also figure in certain divinatory activities. Young unmarried women may, for example, toss their wreaths at the kupole in a divinatory competition, throwing the wreaths backward over their heads and hoping to land on the kupole. One Rasa tradition holds that the number of attempts used to attach the wreath to the kupole foretell the number of years that will pass until the woman is married. Women may also toss their wreaths onto birch trees in the hopes of catching them on the branches, which represent young unmarried men just as the wreaths represent young unmarried women. The sexual symbolism of the wreath catching on a birch branch or on the kupole is quite obvious.

Another wreath activity involves young men and women tossing their wreaths into a river or another body of water. Candles are sometimes attached to the wreaths, a custom also found in Russian Pagan tradition, as illustrated in a famous scene in the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev*. Where the wreaths of particular men and women link up in the current and float together as a pair, it is believed that the two are marked for marriage. With the warm air bearing the scent of fragrant blossoms and the lengthened days providing a mellow light in the midsummer evenings, Rasa is indeed a propitious time for romance.

In the 1998 festivities observed at Kernave, families and other groups of participants spread blankets and had picnics, freely sharing their food and drink—including traditional Lithuanian mead, a strong drink brewed from honey and fortified with additional alcohol; others passed by, even itinerant American scholars who could not speak Lithuanian. Singers educated in the traditional lore of Rasa sang dainas at various locations, with others pausing to listen or add their voices. Young people gathered near the bonfire to sing and dance.

Here are the words of one Rasa song, a special daina for the kupole:

O Kupole, dear Kupole,
Where did you winter,
Where are you to be found in summer?
Are you among the fragrant greenery
Or underneath a flower?

[The kupole replies:]

In winter, I am covered in down (snow)
In summer, I play among the grasses.

(Romuva website, accessed May 31, 2002)

The mentions of winter and summer illustrate how the Pagan Lithuanian traditions viewed the year as a unity marked by complementary phases.

Other Rasa songs are intended to be sung at particular hours, such as dainas for the setting sun; dainas for the moon in the brief dark time when the moon is visible; dainas for stars at the time when they appear; and finally, dainas for the rising sun, when Saule is believed to dance in the sky with her daughters. Here are the words of one such daina, taken from the Romuva website:

O beloved Saule, Daughter of God [Dievas],
Where were you, all the day long?
[Saule replies:]
Among the hills and seas
I warmed my children,
Many are my gifts,
O Kupole, dear Kupole.

Another striking decoration at Kernave were wagon wheels coated with pitch that were positioned on tall poles and then set on fire. Like the dancing, spinning couples of earlier in the evening, these burning wheels refer to the sun goddess Saule, for which reason they are known as sun wheels. In the early hours of the morning, when darkness began to give way to dawn, the wheels were taken down from the poles and rolled down hills, still blazing with fire. Jumping over the fiery sun wheels as they hurtled by was another fun activity for participants, believed auspicious for those leaping over the burning wheels.

The dead of night is an important time for the festival. Participants search for the fern blossom, with the notion that whoever finds it will be blessed with luck, not unlike the Irish custom of the four-leaf clover. However, the search is considered dangerous, as various supernatural beings are also expected to be out searching for the precious bloom as well. Rituals include casting a circle of protection and other magical acts to find the elusive blossom.

Rasa, or Kupolines, is a festive time for Lithuanians of all ages, from small children picnicking with their parents and grandparents to young men and women dancing and laughing, eager for midsummer romance. It is a night of easy camaraderie, with the carefree sharing of song, dance, food, and drink. Though the description here draws on particular activities observed in Kernave, the festivities take place simultaneously at sites across Lithuania. For members of Romuva and other Lithuanian Pagans, Rasa/Kupolines is a deeply spiritual and joyous time; for others, it may just be a time of frolicking and merriment. Many Lithuanian Christians attend Rasa celebrations without worrying about whether their participation conflicts with their membership in the Catholic Church or other Christian



Rasa summer solstice celebration, Kernave, Lithuania, June 1998. (Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)

communities. For most Lithuanians, Rasa/Kupolines/Jonines is first and foremost a *Lithuanian* holiday; the question of its Pagan or Christian nature is a strictly secondary matter, if it is considered at all. The celebration of Rasa is a perfect illustration of how Pagan Lithuanian traditions are both rooted in and blended with general Lithuanian society and culture, including Christian traditions, to the point where they can no longer be clearly separated.

Velines

The autumn holiday of Velines, which is also called Ilges, is the major Lithuanian festival of the dead. It is officially celebrated on November 1 and, to a lesser extent, on November 2 but may also be observed over a longer period, from the time of the autumn equinox, around September 21 or 22 through all of October and into the beginning of November. Velines is another example of a Lithuanian tradition that has a Pagan basis overlaid with Christian elements. In the contemporary situation, Velines can be understood as purely Pagan, as blended with Christianity, or even as a nonreligious event that is simply part of Lithuanian culture, depending on the viewpoint of a given individual.

Velines is generally observed in two locations: in the local graveyard where ancestors are buried and in the family home. In the days leading up to Velines, family members visit the graves of deceased relatives, where they meticulously clean the graves by removing trash, pulling weeds, raking the plots free of leaves, and so forth. The graves are then ornamented with flowers and special, long-burning candles set in glass jars or lanterns. The hundreds of candles glowing in Lithuanian graveyards makes Velines a festival of lights, as if the Milky Way had come down to earth to nestle among the dead for one night. The modern Lithuanian cemetery may seem a thoroughly Christian place, adorned as it is with numerous crucifixes and images of saints and madonnas, but many cemeteries in Lithuania may well have been Pagan holy sites in pre-Christian times. The worship of the dead in Velines would seem to be an originally Pagan tradition carried on in a Christian setting. The Lithuanian Pagan tradition still places graveyards in forested and sometimes hilly sites just outside the city or village boundary. In addition to cleaning and decorating the graves, family members also go to their dead ones' graves simply to sit and commune with or reflect on their parted loved ones. University students in a class taught by coauthor Strmiska in Siauliai, Lithuania, in the autumn of 2004 spoke of their family visits to the graveyard for remembrance of the dead as a solemn and largely

silent time of both family solidarity and shared grief. Some bring food and drink to symbolically share their fare with the departed.

The visit to the graveyard is followed by an evening meal in the home, with either a place at the table or a special table by itself set to welcome the dead to the feast. Romuva members or others devoted to Lithuanian tradition may also include a special toast to the dead made with a mixture of grains, flour, and salt, offered to the dead in a distinctive carved wooden cup known as a *kausas* (believed to have been made from a human skull in past times). The *kausas* is raised in a gesture of respectful offering and then emptied into the hearth fire, with the words, “For all our dear friends.” This toast is typically followed by the passing of a drink to be shared among all present, further toasts by those wishing to express their reverence for the dead, and the singing of *dainas* (Trinkunas 1999, 128–129).

Though a good many Lithuanians may not particularly care whether Velines is Pagan or Christian in nature, members of Romuva pay tribute to the Pagan roots of the holiday by observing Velines with visits to ancient grave mounds called *piliakalniai* or *pilkape*. Celebrating Velines in 2004, Jonas Trinkunas, his wife, Inija, and other members or supporters of the Vilnius chapter of Romuva, a total of twenty people, made a pilgrimage to a number of such grave mounds in a rural area outside Vilnius, near Birtiskes village, where a number of Romuva members own property and occasionally meet for various activities. One of the mounds that they visited is believed to be the site of a thousand-year-old Pagan cemetery. At each *pilkapas*, Romuva sang *dainas* for the dead and lit candles.

Returning to the Trinkunas’s cottage in Birtiskes, they washed and purified themselves in a traditional Lithuanian sauna, while also inviting the *velės*, the spirits of the dead for which Velines is named, to join them. They then left the sauna and assembled around a long wooden table in the cottage, where a meal was served and eaten by candle and firelight, with no use of electricity. Food and drink were also offered to the dead. They ended the night by singing songs and sharing reminiscences of the dead, with a candle passing around the table to signify whose turn it was to speak; the occasion ended at about 2 or 3 AM (Interview with Jonas Trinkunas and Inija Trinkuniene, November 2, 2004).

As with the solstice observances, Velines is both part of contemporary Lithuanian culture and a living vestige of Lithuanian Paganism. As an indisputably Lithuanian tradition, it can be viewed as either Pagan or Christian by those participating. Understood as a Pagan tradition of ancestor worship, Velines is a powerful link not only with one’s own deceased relatives but also with the Pagan ancestors of the past. It should be noted that all of the Pagan holidays and festivals, except Rasa, include ritual actions to commemorate ancestors. The sense of caring for and communing with the

Lithuanian ancestors of the past is very real and definite, which underlines the importance of the “ethnic” aspect of Lithuanian Paganism.

Romuva as an Organization

Romuva today has chapters or local associations across Lithuania. The chapter in Lithuania’s beautiful capital city of Vilnius was headed formerly by Jonas Trinkunas and is now led by his wife, the noted folksinger and researcher Inija Trinkuniene. There are also Romuva associations in Kaunas, Lithuania’s second-largest city, which served as the capital when Vilnius was claimed as part of Poland during the period of Lithuanian independence between World Wars I and II; the smaller cities of Klaipeda and Panevyzas; and the towns of Palanga, Moletai, Plateliai, Seduva, Telsiai, Valkininkai, and Vilkaviskio; in addition, there are chapters either existing or under development in the United States and Canada, which will be discussed.

Each chapter is headed by a *seniunas* (elder), a local man or woman with substantial knowledge of Lithuanian folk culture and Pagan traditions who organizes activities in his or her area; performs rituals such as weddings, funerals, and name-giving (Pagan baptism) ceremonies; and teaches religious lore to Romuva members and other interested persons. Romuva has no missionaries, but each *seniunas* works to promote public awareness of the religion and to invite others to the faith by organizing events such as lectures, musical performances, and rituals open to the public, as well as through maintaining a presence on the Internet.

Romuva’s membership in Lithuania has been estimated at between 1,000 and 3,000 in a 2003 population of some 3.5 million, with the official government census giving a figure of 1,270 (Donatas Glodenis e-mail, July 2004). This figure is less than 1 percent of the population, but it does not include the many Lithuanians, including those who are nominally Catholic or affiliated with other faiths, who occasionally participate in Romuva activities such as solstice celebrations without officially joining the association.

An important annual event for Romuva in Lithuania are summer folklore camps, which take place for one week in August each year in the small village of Svariskiai, located 70 kilometers from Vilnius. The folklore camps are organized jointly by Romuva and its strictly folkloric, nonreligious sister organizations Lithuanian Youth Ramuva and Lithuanian Ramuva Union. Though mainly intended for young people, the camps are open to those of other ages as well. Activities in the camp focus on teaching traditional Lithuanian arts, crafts, and music but also include instruction in Lithuanian mythology and the religious significance of traditional events such as

the solstice activities, introducing participants to Romuva as a religious organization.

The way in which ethnic folk culture provides the entry point into religious activity during the summer camps perfectly illustrates the self-understanding of Romuva as an ethnically and folklorically based religion. These camps may be said to function as recruiting centers for Romuva, but participants with Catholic or other religious affiliations are not pressured to renounce their religious commitments but are welcome to focus on learning folklore as an exploration of Lithuanian culture apart from religious issues.

The different Romuva chapters in Lithuania function more or less autonomously, with occasional meetings between the seniunases to share information, develop policies to address common concerns, and coordinate public events. At the national level, the leadership structure of Lithuanian Romuva underwent a transformation in 2002 when Vilnius Seniunas Jonas Trinkunas was elected to the post of *krivis*, an overall leadership position roughly equivalent to the pope in Catholicism or the patriarch in Orthodox Christianity. The office of the *krivis* is a reconstructed institution, hailing back to fragmentary records about a religious leader referred to by this name in ancient Pagan Prussia. Therefore, when Jonas Trinkunas was consecrated as *krivis* in a formal ceremony on October 19, 2002, the occasion was understood within the Romuva community as one more step in the gradual restoration of Lithuanian Pagan religion to its past power and glory.

Scholars of Lithuanian religious history, notably the eminent British historian S. C. Rowell, have questioned whether the *krivis* ever actually existed or was merely a figment of the medieval imagination, a “Pagan pope” created as a “boogeyman” for the purpose of rallying Germanic Christian crusaders to make war on Pagans in the Baltics (Rowell 1994, 125–128). Owing to the sketchy nature of medieval documents relating to Lithuanian Pagan religion, this question may never be resolved in a completely satisfactory manner. Nevertheless, the decision by modern Lithuanian Pagans to declare Trinkunas their *krivis* at the current time strongly expresses their increasing organizational sophistication, as well as their ambition. This approach is not the strategy of a group wishing to keep a low profile and is in fact part of a larger project of increasing the stature and influence of Romuva, particularly in Lithuanian society but outside Lithuania as well.

Jonas Trinkunas and Inija Trinkuniene

Any account of the development of Romuva in Lithuania cannot really be separated from the story of Jonas Trinkunas (1939–). Though something

like Romuva might well have developed in modern Lithuania without him, the organization as it exists today owes much to the work of Trinkunas and also his wife, Inija Trinkuniene (1951–), over some four decades, from the 1960s to the present time. For both authors of this chapter and many others involved in Romuva, including the Lithuanian Americans who would establish Romuva in the United States, it was meetings with Jonas and Inija that led them from a keen interest in Lithuanian folklore into a deeper participation with Lithuanian Paganism. This section draws on Michael Strmiska's numerous interviews and communications with Jonas Trinkunas and his wife from 1996 through 2005.

Jonas Trinkunas graduated from high school in Kaunas, the second city of Lithuania, before studying at Vilnius University and graduating with a bachelor's degree in Lithuanian language and literature in 1965. He continued with these studies in the late 1960s, undertaking a dissertation on ancient Lithuanian religion; publishing articles on Lithuanian folklore, mythology, and culture; and participating in ethnographic expeditions to Lithuanian village communities. It was during one such folkloristic excursion that Trinkunas met his future wife, Inija. Their common passion for Lithuanian folk culture, especially folk music, brought them together in marriage, family, and a continuing partnership in activities and organizations related to ethnic culture and Lithuanian Paganism. Trinkunas and his wife now have five daughters, having lost a son who drowned while only a boy.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Trinkunas organized the aforementioned Ramuva Folklore Association, a number of folk music ensembles in Vilnius and other places, a hundredth anniversary celebration of the birth of the previously noted Lithuanian religious leader Vydunas (Vilius Storosta), and annual Rasa/Kupolines celebrations in the ancient Lithuanian capital of Kernave. Trinkunas's activities ran afoul of Soviet state authorities, and in 1973 he was expelled from the university and banned from any employment in teaching or research, a prohibition that would not be lifted until 1988 during the liberalizing period of perestroika in the USSR. For some fifteen years, Trinkunas worked at various odd jobs to support himself and his family. During this period of professional exile, he remained involved in folkloric and folk music activities but kept a low profile.

Once the political winds in Lithuania began to shift in the late 1980s and he was off the government blacklist, Trinkunas quickly reclaimed a leading position in folkloric organizations and activities, even taking a prominent post in the same government that had once persecuted him in an ironic, near-total reversal of fortune. In 1988, he formally reestablished the folkloric association Ramuva, and in 1992 he registered Romuva as an official, government-recognized religious organization in Lithuania. From 1990 to

1993, he served in the government as head of the Ethnic Culture Division of the Ministry of Culture and in 1997 was awarded the J. Basanavicius Award for his service and achievements in the field of ethnic culture. Since 1994, Trinkunas has been a senior research associate at the Institute for Social Research in Vilnius, where his wife is also employed.

Trinkunas is codirector, along with Inija, of the Lithuanian folk music ensemble Kulgrinda, which performs in Lithuania as well as other countries, including, in recent years, India, South Korea, Greece, Poland, Canada, and the United States. The musical element of Lithuanian Paganism is indeed among its most compelling features. A Lithuanian summer music festival called Menuo Juodaragis (Moon of the Black Horn), which has become an annual event of growing popularity, is an interesting example of how the musical aspect of Lithuanian Paganism interacts with modern youth culture. At this out-in-nature, bring-your-own-tent event that is both very modern and very rustic, Kulgrinda and other similarly oriented musical groups perform traditional Lithuanian folk music while heavy-metal, industrial, and experimental rock bands offer modern electronic sounds. There is an explicit Pagan theme in the organization and public promotion of the festival, with workshops and lectures providing information on Lithuanian folklore, history, and Pagan spirituality (further discussed in Strmiska 2005; information about Kulgrinda, Menuo Juodaragis, and Lithuanian music CDs is available at <http://www.dangus.net>).

World Romuva, the World Congress of Ethnic Religions, and Indo-Romuva

In 1998, Jonas Trinkunas began advocating for a further evolution of Romuva as a religious organization—the formation of a global Romuva organization, a “World Romuva,” to facilitate interaction between Romuva chapters around the world and to assist in the establishment of new ones. In January 1999, he issued a declaration entitled “Let’s Organize a World Romuva,” which remains posted on the Romuva website to the present time. It reads, in part:

The Lithuanian world community and persons who cherish the historical Baltic traditions are rallied to join in establishing a World Romuva community. Romuva keeps alive the memory of the traditions of our forefathers and ancestors, and the ancient faith of the Baltic peoples . . . The traditions of our ancestors can help us to live in harmony with the world and all mankind. A World Romuva would serve people of Baltic heritage to find solidarity . . .



Scene from the Menuo Juodaragis festival of music, folklore, and Pagan, in Kernave, Lithuania, August 2004. The tepee like structure is designed for lectures and workshops. The figure on the pole is modeled on ancient Lithuanian runes. (Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)

Romuva is already active in Lithuania, Chicago and Boston in the US, Canada and Australia. These communities are a solid foundation for the establishment of a World Romuva. The flame of a World Romuva would be lit in Vilnius, a city which is sacred to Baltic peoples and Lithuanians. Let Vilnius continue to be the center of the World Romuva. The further growth and development of the community would be determined by the membership itself. The first step for developing a World Romuva will be the formation of an active membership, and accumulation of knowledge regarding the faith of the ancient Baltic peoples. (Romuva website, accessed December 28, 2004)

The declaration defines Romuva as a Baltic and, more specifically, a Lithuanian religious tradition, primarily for people of Lithuanian ancestry or ethnic heritage, but it does not limit participation or membership in Romuva to people of Lithuanian ancestry. “Persons who cherish the historical Baltic traditions” are also welcomed, a clause that leaves the door of Romuva open to people of any race, ethnicity, or national origin with a sincere interest in Lithuanian cultural and spiritual heritage, even if they do

not have Lithuanian ancestry. This makes the idea of a *World Romuva*, a Baltic-Lithuanian religious tradition for people of any region or nation, much more feasible than if it were strictly defined as a Lithuanian religion for ethnic Lithuanians only.

To this point, however, very little has been done with the World Romuva concept. The different Romuva chapters in Lithuania and North America continue to function more or less autonomously, with occasional meetings and discussion to coordinate their ideas and events but each mainly focusing on local issues and activities. Language remains a limiting factor in reaching out to the larger world of English-speaking nations, as most Romuva members in Lithuania (including most of the movement's leaders apart from the Trinkunases) do not speak English; many do, however, speak Russian, German, and other European languages. The most concrete and practical manifestation of the desire for creating a World Romuva has been the development of the bilingual (Lithuanian and English) website <http://www.romuva.lt>, which makes information about Lithuanian Paganism accessible to English-speaking people across the world.

Jonas Trinkunas has been active in another international project, which has given Romuva an additional forum for communication with the larger world community. This is the organization known as World Congress of Ethnic Religions (WCER, with an Internet presence at <http://www.wcer.org>). Trinkunas invited leaders of other Pagan, Indigenous, and/or Ethnic religion groups in Europe and North America to a conference in Vilnius in June 1998 for the purpose of promoting greater understanding of their respective religious traditions and cultural and political situations, as well as developing an organizational network for protecting and promoting Pagan religion against opposition from various quarters. He also invited interested academics, including Michael Strmiska, coauthor of this chapter, to speak at the first WCER conference in Vilnius and again at the seventh WCER meeting in Athens in 2004. Strmiska remains a sympathetic supporter of the WCER.

The 1998 World Pagan Congress has become an annual event with a functioning organization, retitled the World Congress of Ethnic Religions. The name change from "Pagan" to "Ethnic" was the result of a daylong, passionate discussion at the first congress in Vilnius, in which the majority of participants expressed the feeling that the term *Pagan* had too many negative connotations and that the word *Ethnic* better expressed the roots of many Pagan-type religions in the ethnic and folkloric traditions of particular nations. The global scope of the "World" Congress remains more of a dream than a reality, as the vast majority of the religious groups represented in the organization are from Europe, representing such nations as Germany, Greece, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, Ice-



Michael Strmiska, coauthor and founding member of the WCER. (Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)

land, Latvia, and of course Lithuania, with a smaller contingent of participants from North America or elsewhere. That is to say, the World Congress of Ethnic Religions has, to this point, been a mainly Euro-American affair, despite the desire of WCER members to reach out to indigenous peoples and religious traditions in other areas. The main extension of the WCER beyond a strictly Euro-American axis has been the inclusion of Indian religious leaders and scholars from the Sikh and Hindu traditions.

The Indian dimension of the WCER has been of particular interest to members of Romuva, stimulating their desire to further explore Indian-Baltic parallels at the levels of language, culture, religious beliefs, practices, and mythology, just as contact with the WCER has inspired Indian scholars and religious leaders to learn more about Romuva and Baltic religion and culture more generally. In February 2003, Romuva members were invited to India to attend an indigenous religions symposium entitled the “First International Conference and Gathering of the Elders,” held in Mumbai (Bombay). This led to a series of Indo-Romuva conferences, jointly organized by the WCER and the World Council of Elders of the Ancient Traditions and Cultures, the same group that sponsored the Mumbai meeting. The first Indo-Romuva conference was held in the United States in October 2003, with presentations and discussion of various aspects of Hindu

and Baltic religious traditions, as well as musical and dance performances and the sharing of prayers and rituals.

The following posting from the website of the Indian-oriented magazine *Hinduism Today*, advertising the Indo-Romuva event, illustrates the positive interest in Romuva expressed by Indian and Indian American Hindus.

ATLANTIC CITY, NEW JERSEY, June 12, 2003: The World Council of Elders of the Ancient Traditions and Cultures in collaboration with the World Congress of Ethnic Religions, Vilnius, Lithuania, proudly announces the First Conference (in a series of understanding ancient traditions and cultures of the world) on Indo Romuva Cultures. The conference will be October 10–12, 2003, at the Howard Johnson Hotel, Atlantic City, New Jersey, U.S.A. The Romuva people are from the Baltic countries, with a major concentration in Lithuania. They worship Fire as well as many Deities with prayers similar to Sanskrit prayers. (*Hinduism Today*, online)

There seems to be sufficient momentum for the Hindu-Lithuanian/Indo-Romuva exchange to continue to grow and develop, but like the WCER, this activity has more to do with promoting friendly relations between Romuva and kindred Pagan, Ethnic, or Indigenous religious movements than an indication of Romuva expanding from its Lithuanian base to become a truly globe-spanning, multinational world religion. At the present time, Romuva is primarily a Lithuanian movement, with extensions in the United States, Canada, and Australia, mainly among people of Lithuanian ancestry. In this way, Romuva is similar to Hinduism, which has mainly, though again not exclusively, expanded outside India among Indian immigrants and their descendants. It remains to be seen if Romuva will become a religion that can be freely embraced by a large number of people with no ethnic or ancestral link to Lithuania or if it will remain first and foremost an ethnic Lithuanian religious movement. To put it another way, the question is whether Romuva will, over the course of coming decades, evolve into a universal, open-to-all religion rooted in but not limited by a particular ethnic identity, as has been happening to some extent with the Scandinavian-based Pagan religion Ásatrú, or define itself in strictly ethnic terms, as a Lithuanian religion for Lithuanians only.

Romuva in North America

Romuva has established chapters in both the United States and Canada. In the United States, the two main centers of Romuva activity are Chicago and Boston. As these cities possess large Lithuanian American communities

that continue to receive a steady flow of immigrants from Lithuania, it is not surprising to find that they are places where Romuva has also found a home. In Cleveland, another city with a sizable Lithuanian immigrant population, the idea of forming a Romuva group was under discussion for a number of years, but these discussions failed to cohere into a solid organization. Some of those involved have now joined forces with a local Pagan group, Stone Creek Grove (<http://www.stonecreek.org/aboutscg.html>). Stone Creek is a local chapter of an international Pagan, Celtic, and Indo-European-oriented Pagan fellowship, *Ár nDraíocht Féin*, which is itself a fascinating topic (<http://www.adf.org/core/index.html>).

The same dynamic of Romuva building on a foundation of past or present Lithuanian immigration pertains in Canada, where the immigrant stronghold of Toronto is the location of the primary chapter of Romuva Canada. A Romuva organization is also under development in Vancouver.

This section will focus on the development of Romuva organizations in Chicago and Boston. One of the prime movers in Romuva Chicago is a seniunas and a professor of humanities at Truman College in Chicago—Vilius Rudra Dundzila (1960–), formerly known as Audrius Dundzila; he is also one of the coauthors of this chapter, and the discussion here draws heavily on his records and recollections.

Interest in Lithuanian Paganism, which would in time give rise to local Romuva movements, began to develop in North America in the late 1980s. At that time, Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalizing policies of glasnost and perestroika were loosening the reins of Soviet social control in the USSR, inadvertently setting in motion the events that would enable the Baltic states to achieve full independence from the Soviet Union. By the end of the 1980s, a number of Lithuanian Americans with varying degrees of acquaintance with Lithuanian culture, including Dundzila and Emilijus Hollanderis from Chicago, Lana Vyte from Toronto, J. D. LaBash from Cleveland, and Laima Sruoginaite from New York, had all entered into communication with Jonas Trinkunas—some by mail, others by visiting him in Lithuania—to begin discussing the possibility of promoting Lithuanian Paganism in North America.

When Vyte and Dundzila returned to Canada and the United States from visiting Lithuania in the early 1990s, Romuva Lithuania appointed Vyte to be seniunas for Romuva in Canada and Dundzila for Romuva USA. These leadership positions changed hands in 2003, with Bernadeta Abromaitis becoming seniune for Romuva Canada and Kaze Kazlauskiene taking on the role of seniune for Romuva USA.

Jonas Stundzia, a Lithuanian American who had been active in Lithuanian ethnic culture in the Boston area and visited Lithuania a number of times in the 1980s and 1990s, established a Boston chapter of Romuva in

the mid-1990s. (The history of the Boston chapter will be discussed later.) Martynas Girchys-Shetty, a 1993 immigrant from Lithuania, joined the Lithuanian folklore group Jore in the Washington, D.C., area in 1998. He has since helped Jore, first established in 1996, to develop a deeper spiritual understanding of the Lithuanian *dainas* and ritual traditions.

The evolution of Vilius Dundzila's involvement with Romuva is typical of the way in which many of these individuals came to be with Romuva. Dundzila's interest in Lithuanian Paganism grew out of his childhood experience in a Lithuanian American family environment, in which Lithuanian language and ethnic traditions were a regular part of daily life. He spent autumn 1981 in Lithuania together with his father, a professor who taught in Lithuania in that year through the U.S. government-funded Fulbright Fellowship Program, as Michael Strmiska, coauthor of this chapter, did in 2004 and 2005. This experience deepened the younger Dundzila's fascination with Lithuanian ethnic culture and eventually inspired him to investigate the spirituality of Lithuania's ancient traditions.

Dundzila undertook a second trip to Lithuania in 1988 for the express purpose of meeting modern Lithuanian Pagans. Although his former acquaintances admitted having heard of the Pagans, they were unable or unwilling to put him in contact with them. Dundzila found only Lithuanian nationalists promoting Lithuanian culture and identity, as forms of opposition to Soviet rule, through the officially tolerated Lithuanian folklore movement. That was as far as he was able to get at the time, but this was not the end of the road for Dundzila's interest in Paganism.

Looking back on these early days, Dundzila now realizes that his approach to meeting Pagans on that visit to Lithuania was faulty. He was expecting to find Lithuanian Paganism organized and functioning in the relatively open manner of Western European and North American paradigms of Paganism. But Romuva, at the time disguised as folkloric Ramuva, was operating under oppressive social and political conditions that required extreme secrecy and cautioned against unsolicited contacts and unwanted publicity. Another limitation he faced was that many of his clandestine contacts came from the Roman Catholic anti-Soviet resistance movement, and as committed Catholics, they moved in different social circles than Pagans.

It was not until several months after Dundzila had returned to the United States that his efforts to contact Lithuanian Pagans finally bore fruit. Dundzila began a correspondence with Jonas Trinkunas, having received his name and address, without actually meeting him, during his visit to Lithuania. Their exchange of letters rapidly progressed into a strong alliance of shared religious faith and mutual respect, eventually leading to Dundzila's appointment by Trinkunas as the first American *seniunas* in 1992. From that point onward, Dundzila would take a leading role in intro-

ducing Romuva in the upper Midwest region of the United States, particularly the Chicago metropolitan area.

While enrolled in graduate study at the University of Wisconsin, Dundzila tried to foster support for Romuva through the Madison, Wisconsin, Lithuanian community. Madison might have seemed an ideal choice, as it had a sizable Lithuanian American population and was the official sister city to Vilnius. Dundzila was in fact a member of the Vilnius-Madison Sister Cities International Association and had assisted in hosting delegations from Lithuania. Nonetheless, he had little luck in interesting the Madison Lithuanian American community in Lithuanian Paganism. The Baltic Student Organization at the University of Wisconsin was more receptive, in large part because it included students who were members or supporters of the Latvian Pagan movement Dievturi, who immediately supported Romuva as a kindred Baltic organization. This also reflected the situation at the time in Latvia and Lithuania, where Dievturi and Romuva were cooperating to organize winter and summer solstice events, despite the danger of police detection and political suppression. Dundzila began participating in Dievturi events, and he gave a presentation on Romuva in 1990 at a Dievturi Conference at its Dievseta Temple in Warrens, Wisconsin. He also gave presentations on Romuva to other U.S. Pagan groups, such as the Pagan Spirit Gathering.

In the 1991–1992 academic year, Dundzila lived in Lithuania, teaching humanities courses as a visiting assistant professor at the Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas and contemplating permanently relocating to Lithuania. Actively participating in Romuva activities in Kaunas, he was elected seniunas of Romuva Kaunas. Dundzila assisted with the preparation of documents for the legal recognition of Romuva in both the United States and Lithuania, a process that began in 1991 and concluded in 1992. There was scarcely any Romuva movement in the United States to speak of at this time, and the main reason for undertaking this action was the belief that recognition of Romuva by U.S. authorities would bolster the efforts of Romuva in Lithuania to register the organization as an officially recognized religious community with the Lithuanian government. Romuva USA, officially the Lithuanian Ethnic Church Romuva of the USA, Inc., is mainly an umbrella organization that provides legal sanction to the smaller regional chapters that now exist or are proposed in Chicago, Boston, and elsewhere.

The only sustained activity that the early North American Romuva undertook was the publication of newsletters. The first issue of *Romuva/USA*, edited by Dundzila, coincided with the fall equinox in 1990. It was published on an approximately quarterly basis until the last issue in the spring of 1993. At its peak, it had twenty-four subscribers. When it folded, the newsletter was unsuccessfully attempting to serve an English-speaking

North American Baltic audience composed of Lithuanian Americans, Lithuanian Canadians, Latvian Americans, and Latvian Canadians. A Lithuanian-language counterpart, *Romuva/JAV*, ran for four issues from winter 1992 to winter of the following year. Lana Vyte edited and published five issues of *Sacred Serpent: Journal of Baltic Tradition* from spring 1994 to spring of the following year. J. D. LaBash translated Marija Gimbutas's article "The Old Lithuanian Religion" and had it published in the Celtic and Indo-European Pagan newsletter *The Druid's Progress* (no. 10, 1992, available online at http://www.adf.org/regalia/publications/druids-progress/S_DP_10_index.jpg, accessed January 29, 2005).

The national leadership of the Canadian and U.S. divisions of Romvua in North America changed hands in 2003. Bernadeta Abromaitis became seniune for Romuva/Canada, and Kaze Kazlauskienė became seniune for Romuva/USA.

Romuva Chicago

Romuva Chicago was first organized in the spring of 1993 at the initiative of Vilius Dundzila and Don Grazulis, another Lithuanian American and Chicago native who was the proprietor of a bookstore. The first members were assembled from advertisements placed in local Lithuanian stores. Similarly simple advertising has been used on an ongoing basis ever since, with the addition of Internet postings in recent years; Romuva Chicago now has its own moderated electronic mailing list accessible through the Yahoo! website. Romuva meetings took place irregularly for many years and only started to occur on a monthly basis in the fall of 2003, with a summer hiatus except for gathering to celebrate the summer solstice. Romuva Chicago was first organized to celebrate Lithuanian holidays and festivals, and it continues to celebrate the following on a regular basis: the winter solstice holiday Kucios, the end-of-winter celebration Uzgavenies in February, the summer solstice Rasa/Kupoline, and Velines, the Lithuanian day of the dead. Other meetings are dedicated to education, discussion, and studying and singing dainas, the Lithuanian pagan hymns.

In the early days of Romuva Chicago, meetings used to be held at the Grazulis family bookstore. It closed in 1998, and for the next year the group had no set location, with members meeting in each other's homes on a rotating basis. The lack of a definite location accompanied a decline in membership. In 1999, the meetings finally settled into a regular location at a local metaphysical bookstore owned by Kaze and Gintas Kazlauskas, a Lithuanian American couple.

Romuva Chicago has strived to celebrate Lithuanian holidays in venues that either have direct Lithuanian associations or are felt in some way to recreate the settings in which the festivities would be observed in Lithuania. For example, Velines, the time of shades, has always been celebrated at a local Lithuanian American cemetery, except for one trip to an allegedly Lithuanian freethinkers cemetery in rural central Illinois. The cemetery turned out to be Lithuanian but mostly Catholic, to the chagrin and bemusement of the members of Romuva Chicago.

The two major holidays Romuva Chicago celebrates are Rasa/Kupoline and Kucios. Every year, Romuva seeks out a pleasant, outdoor location for the occasion that will allow a joyful experience of the natural world at the peak of midsummer. Rasa/Kupoline has been celebrated at private campgrounds, state park campgrounds, and members' homes with large yards. A natural body of water as well as a campfire are the two physical prerequisites, echoing the rivers and bonfires of celebrations in Lithuania. Kucios takes place at a member's home around a common dining table. It is celebrated as a ritual meal commemorating the ancestors and linking the living with the dead.

The small membership of Romuva Chicago has made it difficult to host complex holiday celebrations on an ongoing basis; at the time of this chapter's writing, there are only five active members, with several dozen more subscribed to the electronic mailing list and occasionally participating in events and about the same number of people floating in and out of involvement with the organization. For example, Romuva hosted a public Uzgavenies holiday in 1998, but the level of preparation required so greatly strained the capacity of the membership that a second attempt has not yet been undertaken. Romuva Chicago has also tried to participate in other local holiday celebrations, such as the local Lithuanian American community's celebration of the summer solstice holiday in 2001 and again in 2004. The small Romuva contingent was lost in the crowd, which was focused on enjoying a secular celebration rather than participating in a religious festival.

Romuva Chicago has unsuccessfully tried to find new members from among recent Lithuanian immigrants to Chicago. The differences in language and social culture have prevented effective cooperation. The members of the group come from various immigrant generations, with correspondingly different degrees of familiarity with Lithuanian language and culture and different attitudes toward assimilation to American culture. All of Romuva Chicago's members speak English, but only some speak Lithuanian. Some are relearning the traditions their ancestors lost in the United States, and others are carrying on traditions that have continued in their families.

By contrast, recent Lithuanian immigrants are looking for religious solace in a Lithuanian-language setting as they adapt their lives to American society. The Chicago immigrant community has established folkloric daina singing groups that may acknowledge the spiritual nature of the dainas but do not pursue the implicitly Pagan element that might be seen to conflict with Lithuanian Catholicism. This is obviously attractive to devout Catholic immigrants but also comfortable for less pious immigrants who rely on the various support services and social network provided by Lithuanian Catholic churches in the Chicago area and so do not wish to run afoul of the church. Moreover, there are acknowledged tensions between the “old” (post–World War II) immigrants and their descendants, on the one hand, and the more recent immigrants of the postindependence era, on the other. In general, the recent immigrants tend not to join the already established Lithuanian organizations but seek to form their own venues.

Romuva Chicago therefore remains a small, struggling religious organization with a committed core group and dedicated leadership but continuing difficulty in attracting members. It may be that the future growth of the association will depend on its ability to draw participants from outside the Lithuanian American community.

Romuva Boston

Jonas Stundzia (1954–), a native of Lawrence, Massachusetts, is an entrepreneur, a trader in Baltic cultural heritage items, a member of the Lawrence Historical Commission, and also the founder and seniunas of the Boston chapter of Romuva. He was deeply immersed in Baltic spirituality and Lithuanian folklore long before he had ever heard of Romuva. This section is based on interviews done by Michael Strmiska with Stundzia in Boston in January 2004, together with supplementary e-mail and telephone communications from November 2004 through May 2005.

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in a Lithuanian American family and community in Lawrence less than an hour’s drive north from the much larger Lithuanian immigrant community in Boston, Stundzia was surrounded by Lithuanian language and culture. Unlike his siblings who strove to break away from their immigrant past and assimilate to American society in every way possible, Stundzia was always fascinated by his Lithuanian heritage, and he showed an affinity for Lithuanian folk arts and crafts from an early age.

Stundzia’s parents were Catholics, and though well versed in the folkloric traditions that Jonas would come to understand as expressions of Lithuanian Pagan spirituality, they did nothing to encourage their son in



Interview with Jonas Stundzia (right) and Michael Strmiska, Boston, Massachusetts, January 2004. (Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)

developing a non-Christian spiritual identity. Stundzia's view of his father's Catholicism is that it was based less on heartfelt piety than on burning social ambition, arising from a wish to imitate the religious behavior of Irish Catholics in order to affiliate with an ethnic group that was better connected and more accepted in Massachusetts than Eastern Europeans such as Lithuanians. When Stundzia began to question his father about the meaning of Lithuanian folkloric traditions at about the age of ten, his father barked, "Don't be a freethinker!" This set the tone for religious discussions inside the family. His father also referred with scorn to *gamtininkai* (sing. *gamtininkas*), a Lithuanian term with a literal translation of "nature-people," used in reference to people in Lithuania who refused to have a Christian funeral or follow other Christian customs but preferred ancient Lithuanian traditions.

It was therefore not his parents or anyone else in his immediate family that initiated Stundzia into deeper meanings of Lithuanian folk culture but an elderly Lithuanian immigrant couple in the nearby town of North Andover, who had come to the United States before World War I. The Strzdaszes, who spoke only Lithuanian, took the young Jonas under their wing and became like a second set of parents to him. From the time Stundzia was eight until he was twelve, they provided him with a substantial

education in Lithuanian folklore and, in effect, Lithuania Pagan religion, without ever calling what they were teaching by any such name. Old man Strazdas, for example, frequently took Jonas out on nature walks around the fields and forests near his North Andover farm to share with him the sacredness of nature, which Stundzia perceives as a fundamental Lithuanian value; his wife would instruct Stundzia on Lithuanian domestic traditions inside the home. Jonas also enjoyed spending time with other Lithuanian seniors, absorbing from each what they had to share about the folklore, history, and ethnic culture of Lithuania. As he says of his childhood, “For me, the world revolved around Lithuania.”

Stundzia recalls a particular moment with old man Strazdas that he considers a “pivot-point” in his development of a Lithuanian Pagan sense of spirituality. They were out walking in a field and came on a bee buzzing in the grass. Stundzia, who was about ten years old at the time, made ready to step on it and crush it with his shoe, but Strazdas held him back, saying, in Lithuanian, “It’s alive . . . nature is alive, and you are part of nature.” The bee flew off unharmed, and Stundzia felt a sudden shock of awareness about the value of the natural world. At the age of twelve, Jonas built a crude shrine to the earth goddess *Zemyna*, a stone altar between two trees near his house, and buried bread in the ground as an offering to *Zemyna*, as is indeed a traditional form of worship to the goddess. He also wove wreaths of oak leaves and observed the summer solstice on the banks of a river near his home. From that point onward, he was constantly learning about and dabbling in new aspects of Lithuanian folk culture. Stundzia learned to carve Lithuanian themes and designs in wood; weave traditional patterns in cloth; carve amber *gamta* (nature) figures; and color and decorate eggs for spring with pre-Christian, native Lithuanian designs such as suns, moons, stars, birds, snakes, and waterwheel figures. In this period of his life, he did not yet have a clear conception of what he was doing as a distinctive form of religion, let alone Lithuanian Paganism. To him, it was simply a matter of carrying on folk traditions that he found personally meaningful.

Stundzia participated in Lithuanian American community events and holidays throughout his teens and into his twenties, becoming recognized as a young person with extraordinary skill and knowledge regarding the old traditions that many younger Lithuanian Americans seemed more interested in forgetting than preserving. Stundzia began to offer free lectures and classes in Lithuanian folk culture in the late 1970s and later organized public celebrations of Lithuanian holidays at Lithuanian American community centers, churches, and other locations. He has remained devoted to educating both Lithuanian Americans and the general public about Lithuanian folk culture, with increasing attention to its ancient Pagan roots.

By the early 1980s, he had developed a circle of five male Lithuanian American friends who all shared with Stundzia the name of Jonas as well as a common interest in Lithuanian folk traditions. They gathered together to celebrate Rasa/Kupoline in an informal manner, preferring the Christian name Jonines for the holiday, as it seemed the proper name for this meeting of the five Jonases. However, Stundzia felt dissatisfied with their efforts. One of his friends wanted to add American volleyball games to the Lithuanian solstice festivities, which Stundzia strongly resisted. He knew he needed further instruction in how to celebrate the holiday with greater authority and authenticity.

Stundzia visited family relations in Lithuania a number of times in the 1980s, when the country was still under Soviet domination, and explained his interest in learning more about Lithuanian folk holidays. In 1983, his cousins took him to a secret Rasa/Kupoline/Jonines celebration in an undisclosed location on a hill in a rural area. Because of the risk of Soviet interference and persecution, Stundzia was driven to the site disguised in local clothes and told not to speak if they were stopped by the police. He was also not told where they were going, in case he might be questioned by authorities at a later point. Stundzia was amazed to see a thousand or more people gathered on a hilltop and the surrounding area, camping out in tents, clustered around huge bonfires with flames leaping 20 meters high, singing folk songs, dancing traditional dances, playfully weaving oak wreaths, and practicing other folk traditions. Stundzia's sense of joyful surprise was all the greater because he had feared that under Soviet oppression, the ancient Lithuanian ways had been forgotten, to be preserved only among immigrant communities in the United States and elsewhere. Here was proof that the old traditions were vibrantly, triumphantly alive in Lithuania.

Stundzia returned to the United States with increasing understanding of the Rasa holiday, in terms of both practical details and spiritual aspects, and he was now able to organize summer solstice events in a more cohesive and compelling manner. He publicized the events throughout the network of Lithuanian American businesses, churches, and community centers in the greater Boston area. He has since taught classes and delivered lectures on Lithuanian folk culture and organized celebrations of holidays such as Velines and Kucios/Kaledos in locations including the Saint Francis Church and the Masonic Temple in Lawrence, the New England Folk Arts Center in Lowell, the Arlington Street Church in downtown Boston, and the Boston International Institute. As a recognized authority on Lithuanian ethnic traditions, Stundzia has also been interviewed by the Massachusetts state folklorist. However, even as his range of Lithuanian folk cultural activities expanded in the early to mid-1980s, he still did not consciously

conceive of what he was doing with Lithuanian ethnic traditions as religion or as Paganism.

In getting to know Vilius Dundzila, seniunas of the Chicago Romuva chapter, through various Lithuanian American events in the early 1990s, Stundzia found a new conceptual framework for his many years of teaching, practicing, and contemplating Lithuanian folk cultural traditions. He now realized it was possible to look on these traditions not merely as Lithuanian folk culture but as religion—as Lithuanian Paganism. He proposed to his fellow Lithuanian folklore enthusiasts in 1993 that they formally organize a Romuva chapter for the Boston area. They embraced this proposal and selected Stundzia to be their seniunas, out of respect for his deep knowledge of Lithuanian folk culture, his long-standing service to the Lithuanian American community, and his teaching activities.

At the current time, Romuva Boston has a dedicated membership of twenty-five drawn not only from the Boston area but also from across southern New England, with about double that number of transient or occasional participants in solstice celebrations and other activities. Stundzia notes that many Lithuanian American Catholics participate in Romuva Boston holiday events and ritual celebrations without ever formally joining the organization. This phenomenon illustrates the important point that the Lithuanian folklore that provides the cultural basis of Romuva is highly meaningful to Lithuanian American Catholics as well as Lithuanian American Pagans and to some extent transcends their differing religious and spiritual conceptions.

Stundzia, like his Chicago counterpart Dundzila, frequently travels to Lithuania. During a visit in January 1999, he met with his fellow seniunas Jonas Trinkunas to discuss Trinkunas's proposal to develop a world Romuva organization. Stundzia endorsed the idea and signed his name to a compact of support, as did several other seniunases. Like Trinkunas and Dundzila, Stundzia is fascinated by the parallels between Lithuanian language and religion and ancient linguistic and ritual traditions of India. In 2002, Stundzia and Romuva Boston organized and hosted a conference on Indic-Baltic connections at Suffolk University. This event was followed by an invitation to conduct a seminar on Baltic beliefs and traditions at a Hindu retreat at Saraswati Mandiram, a Hindu temple in Epping, New Hampshire. This religious institution unfortunately burned down in January 2004.

Another notable event in the early 2000s was Stundzia's appearance on a Boston public television program on religious affairs, *Spirit Talk*, on March 22, 2004. He spoke with some eloquence about Lithuanian folk traditions as expressions of an earth-based spirituality in which the divinity of nature was paramount. Jeff Ferrannini, the host of the program, responded by ask-



Monument to King Mindaugas who was coronated in 1253, Lithuania. (Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)

ing what Romuva had to do with Jesus and the Bible, which left Stundzia rather at a loss for words. The incident illustrates a problem that not only Romuva but also all Pagan religions face in the United States: the problem of how to explain a non-Christian, nonbiblical religion to a predominantly Christian public that tends to have little knowledge of or interest in religions that are not based on the Bible.

The year 2003 was the 750th anniversary of the coronation of the Lithuanian king Mindaugas in 1253. This occasion was observed by Romuva Boston in a quite interesting manner, which requires some explanation. Mindaugas is seen as a great hero in Lithuania for his success in welding the various Lithuanian tribes into a unified state capable of vigorous self-defense in a time when the entire Baltic region was under attack from Christian crusaders (Suziedelis 1997, 195–197). For Lithuanian Pagans, he is a more ambiguous figure because of his complex involvement with both Paganism and Christianity. Mindaugas accepted baptism in 1251, thus gaining the right to be crowned a legitimate, church-acknowledged king in the European Christian sense two years later. This seeming conversion to Christianity on the part of the Lithuanian leader secured for his nation some breathing space from crusader attack for a number of years, but it also cost Mindaugas his life when disgruntled Pagan followers assassinated him in

1263 as a punishment for what they saw as his betrayal and apostasy (Rowell 1994, 65). A brick cathedral constructed by Mindaugas in Vilnius was burned following his murder and replaced by a Pagan temple, which would itself later be destroyed and replaced by a series of Christian edifices, leading to the present magnificent cathedral at that site (Rowell 1994, 134–136).

Modern scholars tend to think that Mindaugas underwent baptism for political rather than religious reasons, as sources suggest that he continued to practice Pagan rituals for many years after his baptism and coronation. He would not be the last Lithuanian leader to approach Christian conversion as a political tool. Grand Duke Gediminas, who ruled from 1316 to 1341, corresponded with Vatican officials in a discussion of possible Lithuanian conversion that lasted for years, artfully stretching out the exchange of letters in a calculation, correct as it turned out, that the papacy would restrain the forces of the crusaders as long as Lithuania was willing to discuss conversion (Rowell 1994, 189–226). When Grand Duke Jogaila formally accepted Christianity for Lithuania in 1387, it was part of the agreement establishing the military alliance with Poland that would crush the Teutonic Knights in 1410.

There is thus an interesting history of religious conversion in Lithuania that may have neither been religious nor even a conversion but only the semblance of a conversion to Christianity that was performed for other purposes. The Lithuanian royals were not the only ones to engage in this; we find the same kind of mock conversion occurring among the common folk as well. A famous historical tradition, contained in the Polish historian Maciej Strykowski's 1582 chronicle of Lithuanian history, *Kronika Polska, Litewska, Zmudzka i wszyskiej Rusi*, tells of Christian monks who arrived in Lithuania hoping to win conversions to Christianity by offering a tangible incentive to potential converts. The monks provided free white wool shirts of good quality to each Lithuanian who underwent baptism, not unlike modern-day fast-food restaurants that dispense plastic toys as an inducement to families with young children to eat in their restaurants. At first, the tactic seemed to be working quite well, bringing in a fine crop of apparently enthusiastic converts, but it was then discovered to be working a bit too well. Some of the Lithuanian Pagans were coming in for repeat baptisms in order to receive multiple wool shirts, with greater enthusiasm for the free clothing than for the solemn Christian sacrament. And so ended this particular effort at the mass baptism of the medieval Lithuanians.

It is this historical tradition that Romuva Boston reenacted during their 2003 Rasa/Kupoline festival as a ritual commemoration of Mindaugas's 1253 coronation as a "Christian" monarch. Romuva members gathered bearing white shirts that they first tied with linen cords. They then deco-



*Statue of Grand Duke Gediminas in Cathedral Square, Vilnius, Lithuania, 1998.
(Courtesy of Michael Strmiska)*

rated the white garments with Pagan symbols of suns, moons, stars, snakes, and other aspects of nature typically represented in Lithuanian folk art. The shirts were then buried under a large pile of stones that was part of a rock wall from the 1600s, which Seniunas Stundzia consecrated as a permanent Pagan altar.

The ritual was performed with the primary motivation of worshipping ancestors and the earth goddess Zemyna. It was also an artful inversion of the sequence of events in the historical tradition mentioned earlier. Instead of medieval Lithuanians receiving white clothes that signified Christian conversion, twenty-first-century Lithuanian American Pagans effected a reverse “conversion” to Paganism by decorating similar white garments with symbols of nature and then dedicating them to the sacred earth that is, in Lithuanian Pagan tradition, the goddess Zemyna.

Romuva Boston has, to this point in time, been able to attract larger numbers of both dedicated members and occasional participants than Romuva Chicago. Part of the reason for this greater relative success is that Stundzia had been actively involved in promoting Lithuanian ethnic culture in the Boston metropolitan area for more than ten years before the establishment of Boston Romuva. A substantial groundwork had therefore

been set in place for the religious organization, as well as an already committed following, when the Boston chapter of Romuva finally was established in 1993. In this way, Romuva Boston developed in a similar manner to Romuva in Lithuania, which began in the 1960s as the folkloric organization Ramuva and later metamorphosed into the religious organization Romuva after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Another factor worth noting is that Romuva Boston appears to have been more successful than its Chicago sister organization in attracting recent Lithuanian immigrant members. Jonas Stundzia stresses that this has been very important for the particular spiritual quality of Boston Romuva gatherings, explaining that “newly arrived Lithuanians . . . due to their upbringing, find nature worship more of a natural experience” than do second- or third-generation Lithuanian Americans (e-mail communication, May 26, 2005). Seniunas Stundzia views Boston Romuva as a “safe haven of Lithuanianism” in which the mixture of recent Lithuanian immigrants with more assimilated Lithuanian Americans creates multiple levels of spiritual expression and experience rooted in Lithuanian cultural and spiritual heritage.

Reflections on Romuva Lithuania and Romuva USA

Reflecting on the process of development of their respective Romuva groups in the United States, Stundzia and Dundzila both note a dilemma they face in the United States that is much less of an issue for Romuva in Lithuania. Romuva is a religious movement that draws on and is defined by the spirituality embedded in the folk traditions of Lithuanian ethnic culture. But as a Lithuanian ethnic religion, should Romuva only be a religion for Lithuanian people, that is, for ethnic Lithuanians? This is the prickly dilemma that Romuva faces.

Romuva in Lithuania clearly caters to ethnic Lithuanians intrigued by the spiritual dimension of their cultural heritage. People of other ethnic or national origins are not excluded from participation or membership, but the overwhelmingly “Lithuanian-ness” of Romuva Lithuania’s events, especially the language in which they are conducted, effectively ensures that very few non-Lithuanians will ever become deeply committed members. It is therefore essentially true that Romuva in Lithuania is a Lithuanian ethnic religion for Lithuanian people, period.

In the United States, Romuva has developed primarily as a Lithuanian ethnic religion for Lithuanian Americans, which has greatly restricted the pool of people from which it can draw members and participants. However, some non-Lithuanian Americans have also participated in Romuva events.

This situation raises the question of whether Romuva in the United States should take further steps to embrace non-Lithuanian Americans into its fold. This approach might seem advisable to allow for growth of the very small Romuva groups established to this point, but what might the consequences be? One likely impact would be at the level of language, with an increasing use of English and a decreasing use of Lithuanian, perhaps even requiring the translation of the much-loved *daina* folk songs into English to accommodate a greater number of participants and members who lack knowledge of the Lithuanian language.

Both Dundzila and Stundzia fear that this linguistic shift within Romuva, from emphasizing Lithuanian language to accepting the use of English, might mean a progressive lessening of the sense of connectedness with Lithuanian ethnic culture and an increasing homogenization and universalization of the particular type of spirituality expressed and preserved through that culture and its language. On the other hand, allowing a greater use of English in Romuva might enhance the possibility of the general public in the United States and beyond being introduced to Lithuanian folk traditions and Pagan spirituality, even if in a more universalized and homogenized form, and in this way realizing Jonas Trinkunas's dream of a World Romuva movement.

All ethnically based, reconstructionist forms of Paganism face a similar struggle between the drive to preserve the cultural and linguistic traditions that form their basis and the need to adapt to social and cultural situations outside their original ethnic context, such as by using English or other languages to supplement, translate, or replace the original language or languages of the tradition.

To return to the question posed earlier in this chapter, it can be shown that Romuva is a "religion" in the sense that it does demonstrate the four elements commonly understood to constitute a religion. It has a system of sacred beliefs and a particular worldview, emphasizing the divinity of nature; it has its own mythology and sacred history; it has its own rituals and festivals; and it is developing, with varying degrees of success, organizations in both Lithuania and North America dedicated to the preservation and continuation of Lithuanian Pagan religion. Romuva is certainly stronger in Lithuania than in the United States or Canada, where it is clearly struggling to establish sustainable communities. This underlines the basic fact that Lithuania is, indeed, the "Holy Land" of this particular form of modern Paganism. However Romuva may fare in the United States, Canada, or elsewhere, there seems little doubt that the spiritual center of Romuva will remain in Lithuania, just as Lithuanian ethnic folk culture will remain the essential foundation of the religion.

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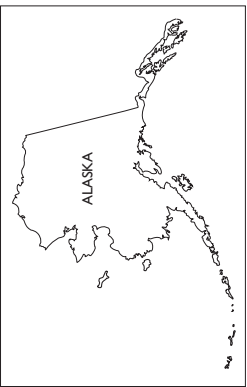
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Chapter Eight

Onward Pagan Soldiers: Paganism in the U.S. Military

STEPHANIE URQUHART

Modern Paganism appears to be one of the fastest-growing religions in the United States, and in recent years it has achieved a high level of social and commercial visibility. However, it still comes as a surprise to many observers that the increase in numbers of contemporary Pagan practitioners has been mirrored within the ranks of the U.S. military. Although no official numbers are currently available for the total number of Pagans serving in the armed forces, the U.S. Air Force did begin tracking the number of active-duty Pagans, and it was estimated that at the current rate of official self-identification, Pagans would have outnumbered Muslims within the air force by the end of 2004 (Creager 2004, 1). The American public has only recently become aware of the religious diversity within the U.S. military, as various minority faiths make their presence known through requests for accommodation and the consequent media reports. Much of this exposure is due to the collective efforts of countless individuals and Pagan groups that have worked tirelessly within the military to increase tolerance, to revise the narrow definitions of religion, and to create a positive image of modern Paganism as a viable system of beliefs and practices for loyal and patriotic citizens.

My own experience as both a military Pagan and an advocacy worker for Pagan issues has given me a unique perspective in these matters. I served in the U.S. Navy from 1990 to 1995, and Paganism became my spiritual and religious path during that time. Shortly afterward, I became a volunteer member of the Military Pagan Network (MPN) and the director of the Military/International Chapter of Witches against Religious Discrimination (WARD). I have worked for the MPN for over a decade, helping military Pagans and their dependents resolve accommodation, harassment, and

discrimination issues through research and education. In that time, I have witnessed important and far-reaching changes in the attitude of the military authorities regarding religious and cultural diversity. I have also observed some important distinctions between military Pagan culture and the civilian Pagan community, including the different attitudes displayed by these groups in regard to each other and the unique ways in which they relate to mainstream society, including other religious groups. Military Pagans occupy precarious territory, existing within a set of government organizations with their own distinctive laws and customs. To be a part of the military, as either a member or a dependent, is to be a part of a subculture with a well-defined hierarchy, special rules, and its own unique language. For that reason, many of the military Pagans interviewed for this article requested the right to remain anonymous; they are therefore referred to only as “Subject L,” “Subject M,” and so forth to protect their privacy and forestall any possible repercussions either within or outside the military.

Persons who join the U.S. military enter into a contractual agreement with the government that subjects them to the rules of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), a legal code that governs every aspect of military life, including important distinctions regarding civil rights. Some civilian rights are suspended or curtailed for the duration of service. Most notably, military service is a twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week job that one cannot quit or neglect without incurring severe legal sanctions.

Recruiters refer to service in the U.S. military as a “way of life” in which all members of the military share unique experiences. Many of these experiences can be considered to be of an initiatory nature. Primary among these is boot camp, a rigorous introduction to military life that trains recruits to follow orders quickly and instinctively and to perform their duties as a group. Military organization depends on a high level of unit cohesion in order to achieve its goals and maintain mission readiness. This goal requires the establishment of a unique culture, one based on common goals that take precedence over racial, cultural, and religious identities.

However, efforts are made to ensure that the norms of military culture do not run contrary to the basic values that underlie the U.S. national character. According to Department of Defense (DoD) Directive 1300.17, “A basic principle of our nation is free exercise of religion. The Department of Defense places a high value on the rights of members of the Armed Forces to observe the tenets of their respective religions” (DoD 1988, 1). But that same directive states that “requests for accommodation of religious practices should be approved by commanders when accommodation will not have an adverse impact on military readiness, unit cohesion, standards, or discipline.” Members of the U.S. military are guaranteed the right to practice their religion, but their observances must conform to military stan-

dards, and individual religious expression may be limited in order to preserve good order and discipline within the ranks. This chapter explores the efforts made by military Pagans to maintain their distinct identity while conforming to military culture, to gain their rights by accommodation requests, to perform interfaith work, and to build community.

First Contact: The 1970s and 1980s

When contemporary Pagans began to emerge from the “broom closet,” with reference to the fact that most military pagans are Wiccans (that is, modern-day witches), they faced many obstacles. Modern Paganism was not considered by many to be an authentic religion but rather was seen as a set of obscure practices that existed on the fringes of society, and public information was often negative and misleading, especially in the media. This situation became especially serious in the 1980s, during a national moral panic over an alleged worldwide Satanic conspiracy. To counter the misinformation about Paganism that was then being spread by other religious groups, law-enforcement agencies, and the media, 109 Pagan groups joined together in 1988 and created “The Earth Religion Anti-Abuse Resolution” (Zell 1991, 11). Pagans had begun to surface within the U.S. military around 1978, when two important supplements were added to an army reference manual concerning minority religious groups (Fox e-mail communication 2003). The U.S. Army publication *Religious Requirements and Practices of Certain Selected Groups: A Handbook for Military Chaplains* contained chapters that clarified the beliefs, practices, and unique problems faced by Wiccans of the Gardnerian and Eclectic schools or sects. The *Handbook for Military Chaplains* drew on recognized sources within the American Pagan community as well as academia, and their appearance in print represented the first time that credible material concerning contemporary Paganism was published through an agency of the U.S. government. The publication and distribution of this material was a breakthrough. Although its intended use was to facilitate religious accommodation within the ranks through the education of the Chaplain Corps (DoD 1993), it lent credibility to both the military and the civilian Pagan communities by promoting the concept that Pagans were acceptable candidates for military service.

Not only did this publication provide a basic account of Pagan theology, it also addressed the difficulties that Pagans faced in the military, many of which were compounded by the close quarters of military living conditions. “Social forces do not yet allow witches to publicly declare their religious faith without fear of reprisals such as loss of job, ridicule, etc. Rituals, many teachings, and even acknowledgment of affiliation with the Craft

are generally not discussed with non-initiates. Ritual instruments are generally hidden and protected” (DoD 1993).

Military Pagans deal with many of the same concerns as their civilian counterparts, but as members of the armed forces, they are legally required to remain in the military until their terms of service are fulfilled. The reality of being “stuck” in a potentially hostile workplace and living environment creates a need for secrecy. Although the tendency to remain hidden preserves careers and reputations, it intensifies the isolation that every member of the armed forces experiences due to social and geographic isolation from the civilian world. The practice of remaining within the broom closet was and still is considered a prudent act of self-preservation for many military Pagans.

Stories of Pagans in the military began to appear more frequently in the press during the 1980s, which coincided with a change in DoD policy in regard to the ability of religious institutions to sponsor military chaplains. An article in the *Army Times* of October 26, 1987, discussed a policy change that had occurred in 1984, allowing all faith groups to apply for recognition as ecclesiastical endorsing agencies. In addition to the earlier publication of the Wiccan supplements to the chaplains’ manual, this was an indication that the notion of religion as the traditional, exclusive domain of the Abrahamic faiths was slowly being broadened and updated. Three years later, Staff Sergeant Nathan Crisp performed the first organized Wiccan services with chapel support, at a troop center in Kaiserslautern, Germany (Machate e-mail communication 2003). Crisp performed these services as a lay leader, meaning he had been appointed by his command to assist the chapel in facilitating Wiccans, who constituted a distinctive faith group. His contribution set the precedent for aspiring Pagan lay leaders and distinctive faith group leaders through all the services. However, his accomplishment at that time was the exception rather than the rule.

Interviews with military Pagans who served in those early years were marked by expressions of caution and frustration. For them, the difficulty of finding other Pagans who were willing to engage in public worship was compounded by a very real threat of professional persecution, often forcing individuals to choose between spiritual isolation and compromised careers. The cofounder of the *Pagan Military Newsletter*, retired Master Sergeant Fred Rayworth, supplied a provocative view of his military Pagan experience:

We originally started PMN from Incirlik, Turkey in 1985. We did it for a few years (until 1988) [but] neither of us can remember who took it up from there . . . This whole thing got started for a variety of reasons, one of them being I was a key witness in a court martial and it came out from the defense



Dea English turns her hand to the sky and ex-Lieutenant Colonel Marie Smith holds a ceremonial baton, Fort Hood, Texas, 1999. (Rebecca McEntee/Corbis Sygma)

lawyer that I was a “devil-worshipping Witch!” Anyway from there it progressed to Jesus hate mail on [our] doorstep and bloody crosses left in our yard. That little thing turned into an article about us in the *Air Force Times* in Europe. Instant fame (or infamy). We started to get a flood of mail through the newspaper from other Pagans who put up with similar s*** from all over Europe. That even spread to a few places in the States. The next thing you know, we decided to create PMN to keep in touch with the military Pagan community throughout the world. At the peak of our membership, we had about 70 subscribers and we didn’t even charge a dime. (Rayworth e-mail communication February 10, 2004).

Sergeant Rayworth also appeared in 1987 in a *Stars and Stripes* article with another military Pagan, Staff Sergeant Lori Johnson. Johnson became the center of attention when she placed an advertisement in a 1987 *Stars and Stripes* issue, searching for military Pagans to join the Farwander Military Pagan Fellowship.

Johnson’s goal was to form a more cohesive military Pagan community and to help Pagans network with more success. In a November 11, 1987, *Army Times* story entitled “Pagans Emphasize They Don’t Worship the Devil,” Johnson stated that her purpose was “to let military Pagans know

they're not alone . . . and to show the military that we are not just a bunch of scattered weirdos." Johnson suffered for her actions, noting on her personal website that her military career was sabotaged because of her visibility as a military Pagan. She felt she would always be looking over her shoulder and that there was no hope for career advancement. Had she not submitted that advertisement, perhaps she "might be drawing retirement pay today" (Sunfell 2001). Crisp, Rayworth, and Johnson materialized in the press within months of each other, each doing their best to present a palatable vision of Paganism to a skeptical public. Until their articles appeared in print, it is unlikely that they knew of each other's existence. Other military Pagans kept their identities confidential during press interviews in order to protect their dependents from any unpleasant repercussions.

In the October 26, 1987, *Air Force Times*, in an article by Grant Willis entitled "Witches and Pagans Cast Aside Shroud of Secrecy," the Rayworth family members described how they often felt "harassed by the well-intentioned efforts of some Christians to 'save' them from sin." The Rayworths' daughter had received nine cross pendants from a friendly Christian neighbor intent on converting her to Christianity. Other acts, such as the planting on their lawn of a large wooden cross, painted a blood-dark shade of red, were considerably less amicable and more ominous. This intrusive behavior on the part of the Rayworths' Christian neighbors and coworkers created conflict in the confining atmosphere of a U.S. military installation on foreign soil.

Unfortunately for Pagans such as the Rayworths, proselytizing or evangelizing is considered not merely acceptable but also mandatory for those Christians who feel directed to spread the "good news" about Christ in order to "save souls." By contrast, most Pagans believe that individuals find their authentic religious identities through personal hierophanies and thus consider proselytizing an act of spiritual arrogance. This reaction often confuses and offends evangelizing Christians in the military, many of whom seem to expect that once a "true" introduction of the non-Christian to Jesus occurs, conversion will inevitably follow. In this arena of contested theologies, both parties frequently come away believing that the other's rejection is the act of a morally deficient person or of someone incapable of genuine spirituality, and they are left to wrestle with the implied insult that lies at the heart of this mutual rejection.

Because of the assumption by some Evangelical Christians and members of other religious groups that proselytizing is an integral part of the religious experience, being visibly Pagan can create a potentially volatile situation. Most of the Pagans interviewed indicated that they answer truthfully if asked directly but that being Pagan is not something they advertise to their coworkers. This technique of passive avoidance allows Pagans to take per-

sonal satisfaction in their religious affiliation without appearing to push that identity or faith on others.

Many members of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam find Paganism difficult to credit as a serious religion, since it lacks what are often believed to be the traditional pillars of established religion, such as sacred texts on the order of the Bible or Qur'an, apostolic succession and oversight, doctrinal authority, and even strict gender roles. Furthermore, Paganism's secretive and cellular organizational forms tend to give it the appearance of a "fly-by-night" cult. This lack of credibility reflects poorly on the Pagan community, and its effect on military Pagans is especially harsh. In the military, when individuals are perceived as untrustworthy or unstable, they may be considered a security risk, a perception that can completely derail an otherwise successful career.

In addition to the lack of a recognizable structure, Pagans use certain terms and concepts that non-Pagan Americans often associate with evil intentions and antireligious sentiments, in particular the words *witchcraft* and *magic(k)*. A November 26, 1987, *Stars and Stripes* article, "You Say You're a Witch and People Back Up," addressed this issue directly. During the 1970s and 1980s, most American Pagans were Wiccans and used the words *Pagan*, *Witch*, and *Wiccan* interchangeably. At the same time, most Americans did not distinguish between the terms *Satanist*, *occultist*, *Witch*, and *devil worshipper*. In both cases, problematic misperceptions resulted from embedded elements of language, religion, folklore, and popular culture.

During the period of the emergence of modern Paganism, a media frenzy developed about a supposed epidemic of sinister, animal-sacrificing, sexually depraved Satanists. Satanic occultists were believed to have infiltrated every walk of American life, stealing and molesting children, mutilating beloved pets, and participating in every imaginable act of perversity (Cuneo 2001, 51). This "Satanic Panic" reached its peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During that period, Paganism, especially Witchcraft, was lumped into the same category of aberrant and dangerous pseudoreligions as Satanism (Hicks 1991, 38–40). The fear of Satanism that permeated American culture at the time naturally spilled over into the subculture of the military, an anxiety that was noted in the *Handbook for Military Chaplains*: "Prejudice against Wiccans is the result of public confusion between Witchcraft and Satanism" (DoD 1993, 233). This anxiety was the driving force behind institutionalized discrimination against Pagans in the military.

The Satanic Panic dogged military Pagans during their early attempts to build a workable relationship with the military chain of command, fueling the belief that any person involved in a religion that embraced occult doctrine did not deserve either religious accommodation or the right to participate in the American dream. The result was a slow and painful process that

produced an endless number of media interviews, personal talks, and lectures in which military Pagans were repeatedly obliged to assert that they did not worship the devil, participate in ritualistic midnight orgies, or practice human sacrifice or infanticide. Military Pagans were attempting to confront both the military and the civilian public over these issues, but Paganism had to find its voice first.

Creating Community and Making Connections: The 1990s

Master Sergeant Rayworth was on the cutting edge of Paganism in the armed services when he and his spouse created the *Pagan Military Newsletter* in Turkey in 1986. Staff Sergeant Lori Johnson was in step with the Rayworths when she started the Farwander Fellowship at the same time in Germany. Six years later, John Machate founded the Military Pagan Network, which would be followed by the Sacred Well Congregation and the Isis Invicta Military Mission. Each of these groups catered to the unique needs of military Pagans, especially in regard to their contractual obligations to the military, acting as a buffer between the liberal atmosphere of contemporary Paganism and the conservative environment of the military.

Behaviors that are acceptable in the Pagan community are not necessarily acceptable or even legal in the military. The issues of contention are numerous, such as the reinterpretation of marriage, the sacramental use of hallucinogens, the acceptance of alternative sexual orientations, the redefinition of gender roles, so-called green or environmentalist politics, scarification and other forms of body modification, and antiwar/antimilitary sentiments. These issues caused conflict for military Pagans not only with the military chain of command but also with their civilian counterparts, many of whom felt that no Pagan should serve in the military due to a fundamental ideological conflict between the Wiccan ethical teaching known as the Wiccan Rede, which states, "An' it harm none, do what ye will," and the military's use of deadly force in combat situations.

In 1990, an American Pagan leader, Archdruid Isaac Bonewits, reinforced the perception of Pagan unsuitability for military service by arguing that one could not embrace authentic Pagan spirituality and at the same time be a member of the military. According to Bonewits, Pagans placed themselves in an ethically precarious position when they swore allegiance to a military machine controlled by morally bankrupt political and corporate entities. Bonewits further contended that Paganism was not compatible with the modern form of military service but was perhaps more suitable for the way of life of an independent warrior (Bonewits 1990). Of course,

these beliefs were in direct conflict with the core structure of the military chain of command.

By broadcasting his position of disagreement with the notion of Pagans serving in the military, Bonewits inadvertently generated hostility toward Pagans in the armed forces. Beyond that, he isolated military Pagans from their civilian counterparts, Bonewits himself included, even though there were indeed some Pagan soldiers in the military who held antimilitary views similar to those of Bonewits. Subject J, whose career in the U.S. Air Force began in 1971, was opposed to the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. He stated, "I would remove my uniform to protest the Vietnam war, and then put it on to serve my country." He also conceded that "yes, we as military, are forced to perform actions that the civilian Pagans would oppose" (Subject J, e-mail communication, July 1, 2003).

Other military Pagans felt torn between the ideal of peace, which they related to their Pagan spirituality and worldview, and the reality of global violence. Subject L, a woman in the U.S. Naval Reserve, expressed similar internal conflicts. "I used to subscribe to the unconditional non-violence belief," she stated, "but then I just think that is unrealistic and naïve at this point. In order to protect the innocent, sometimes you have to kill. It is as simple as that. I meet a lot of civilian Pagans that just do not believe that. I wanted to believe in non-violence, but unfortunately that is not true of humanity" (Subject L, e-mail communication, June 29, 2003).

Bonewits has argued that just the opposite is true—that violence is a tool to silence political dissent and is not used to protect the innocent. His position in the matter is based on personal experience. As he has explained, "Like many members of the Neo-Pagan community, I grew up as part of the 60s counterculture. Our primary interaction with law enforcement and soldiers were generally of a negative sort. We saw them as upholders of the corrupt status quo, mouthing platitudes about freedom and democracy, while they beat our heads and napalmed little children" (Bonewits 1990, 1).

This hostility to the military on the part of civilian Pagans is not surprising, since American Pagans have customarily considered governments and the military, as well as organized religions, to be extensions of generic "forces of oppression." Subject A1, a member of the Air National Guard, expressed his frustration with antimilitary Pagans: "I have sustained a substantial amount of verbal abuse in Pagan chat-rooms for my military affiliation, especially since the Iraq war. I have been told quite a few times that no 'real' Pagan would ever serve as a soldier" (Subject A1, e-mail communication, June 27, 2003).

The executive director of the Military Pagan Network, John Machate, confronted Isaac Bonewits over his challenge to the ethics of Pagan military

service in the Pagan journal *Tides*: “We as members of the armed forces have to work, not only to convince the military Pagans that we are not ‘baby killers,’ but the civilian Pagans too” (Machate 1994, 11). Eventually, parties on both sides of this issue agreed to disagree, and hostilities began to wane. Ironically, this would not be the last time military Pagans would face an attack over the ethics of their service. Christian opponents of Paganism would later use the aforementioned Wiccan Rede, “An’ it harm none, do what ye will,” as one of several reasons to deny religious accommodations to Pagan service members (Maginnis 1999, 3).

During the 1990s, increased media visibility, a noticeable increase in the number of Pagans in the military, and the proliferation of organizations that supported them went a long way toward creating a more positive and stable relationship between the civilian Pagan community and military Pagans. During the same period, however, other issues, mostly involving personal lifestyle choices, created different areas of contention.

For military members, every aspect of their lives is governed by military regulations, the most important being the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The UCMJ is clear about what is considered acceptable behavior for service members. It prohibits homosexuality and various forms of sodomy (Article 125), adulterous liaisons (Article 134), and the use of controlled or banned substances (Article 112a). Members of the military are expected to avoid involvement with individuals and groups that commit illegal acts or participate in behavior that the military deems a security risk. Those who consort with questionable people, particularly ones who participate in illegal acts, are violating military laws. One legal risk specific to military members is the potential of being tried in both military and civil courts for the same crime (Garner 1996, 207): this is one of the few instances in which the laws against double jeopardy do not apply. Legal prosecution in the military can carry severe and lengthy punishments, sometimes in addition to civil penalties. But merely being suspected of criminal behavior can lead to the loss of a security clearance and/or separation from the service, making it important for members to avoid even the appearance of impropriety while in the military.

This message has been difficult to communicate to many members of the civilian Pagan community, who live in a society that often turns a blind eye to the sacramental use of hallucinogens and marijuana. Such drugs are often used at Pagan gatherings without the informed consent of the hosts and with a casual disregard for the legal difficulties facing any military Pagans who might be present. The Pagan community also includes individuals of diverse alternative sexual lifestyles, including gay and lesbian Pagans, transsexual Pagans, transgendered Pagans, polyamorous (poly) Pagans, and participants in a growing bondage and submission (BDSM) commu-

nity. Some of these lifestyles have quietly infiltrated the military through Pagan service members, much to the dismay of their socially conservative counterparts. Subject M, a veteran of the U.S. Air Force, felt that things had changed for the worse for Pagans in the armed forces because of the open expression of these lifestyles by some military Pagans and that the outreach done by MPN and similar organizations had inadvertently worsened the situation for the very Pagans such organizations intended to help:

The military Pagans I met were pretty smart about how they dealt with their faith and the military. They did not advertise, they did not seek out persecution, they did nothing that would interfere with their job or missions, and they worked hard at their job. Now in 2003 I do not feel that way. In the last 10 years MPN and others have made it safe for the fringe element to join the military as well as feel safe. As a result we have homosexual Pagans, polyamorous Pagans, and Goth Pagans as three examples. All of these lifestyles are fine in the civilian world, but in the military they must be toned down or hidden. (Subject M, e-mail communication, June 23, 2003)

Of course, there are plenty of non-Pagan service members who are homosexual, who engage in partner swapping or “swinging,” or who participate in some other form of alternative behavior. But it becomes highly problematic for military Pagans when civilian Pagan adherents of these lifestyles state that their activities are the direct product of their Pagan faith, implying that alternate sexual practices or illegal forms of intoxication are accepted elements of authentic Pagan practice. According to Subject A1, “Much of Neo-Pagan culture is enmeshed with popular counter-culture—Goths, body art, drugs, fetish wear, etc., all things that are generally incompatible with a military mindset or lifestyle. For example, the Boston Metro Pagan crowd has a monthly ‘Pagan Night-Out’ every month, . . . which is always held at a Goth/Fetish club” (Subject A1, e-mail communication, June 27, 2003). Situations such as these can place military Pagans in the difficult position of having to decide whether participation in civilian Pagan events may pose a legal or professional hazard to their military careers.

Tattoos, Symbols, and Piercings

Other lifestyle choices that affect military Pagans include the popularity of body modification, including piercing, scarification, skin implants, ornamental dental work, tongue splitting, and the display of or association with certain controversial religious symbols. Tattoos are a long-established and

accepted form of body modification for U.S. military members, a tradition supported by reports of tattoo artists aboard naval vessels as early as the 1840s. As members of two subcultures that are simultaneously demonized and romanticized by the public, members of the armed forces and American Pagans have embraced tattooing as a rite of passage, acknowledging their membership in an organization that lies outside mainstream, consensual reality. Members of both groups tattoo themselves with symbols that imply special status, the possession of hidden knowledge, and the beginning of the quest for spiritual evolution. Military members acknowledge the dangers of war and issues of national security; Pagans express their interest in the hidden magical world of spirits, gods, and ancestors. As such, tattooing may mark a defining moment in a person's life, expressing an integral aspect of his or her psyche and notion of the sacred and setting the individual apart from an ordinary or mundane life.

For Pagans in particular, tattooing is considered part of their cultural heritage: "Body mutilation has long been a part of non-Christian cultures as a positive mark of identity" (Hewitt 1997, 65). Tattooing was practiced in pre-Christian Europe (68). Seekers (novice Wiccans) might be tattooed after they receive their first-degree initiation. This sign of spiritual accomplishment is also popular among feminist Witches and goddess worshippers, for whom tattooing provides a way of expressing political and spiritual beliefs, such as self-ownership, the right to total self-determination, and the possession of an inherently sacred feminine spirit (Tolley 1994, 8).

Tattoo artists interviewed in the May 14, 2004, issue of the *Air Force Times* in an article by Phillip Thompson entitled "What's All the Buzz about Tattoos?" indicated that they have seen a growing number of female service members and dependent spouses receiving tattoos. "Eric Renst, the owner of Odyssey Tattoo in Jacksonville, N.C., also has seen a sharp increase in the number of women getting inked. Ten years ago, he said, women made up about 2 percent of his clientele; today, he estimates it's about 30 percent." For Pagans, tattooing may also be a means of visibly marking oneself as a nonparticipant in the Christian majority and middle-class values, since biblical laws prohibit tattoos and body modification other than circumcision (Leviticus 19:28).

Although the practice of tattooing has long been associated with military culture, it is not necessarily an approved practice. Official notice has been taken that tattooing is sometimes used as a means of acknowledging membership in the military while simultaneously asserting a level of individuality that implies a personal nonconformity with military standards: "A study in 1968 concluded that sailors with tattoos were more likely to be maladjusted, and military men with 'Death Before Dishonor' tattoos were more likely to be discharged from the service" (Hewitt 1997, 72). Some of these

tattoos had become so elaborate and large that the military began to severely restrict the type, visibility, size, and symbolism of tattoos (USAF 2002). In an acknowledgment of this concern, the Fort Hood Open Circle, a Pagan group that meets on the Fort Hood Army Base, agreed to “not be tattooed” as part of their negotiations with the chapel for religious accommodations (Robinson 1999, 3), in spite of the fact that there is no restriction on religious tattoos, as long as the design of the tattoo adheres to the size, placement, and content requirements of military regulations.

Tattoos have always been considered identifying marks, and they are meticulously cataloged in one’s service record. Individuals are also inspected for “inappropriate” tattoos that might indicate affiliation with gangs or hate groups, and this has proved problematic for Pagan service members. A U.S. Navy equal opportunity training module, *Unauthorized and/or Inappropriate Tattoos and Symbols*, provided to the author by her husband, who also serves in the military, covers a wide range of symbolism that is considered obscene, extremist, or discriminatory. Unfortunately, the module does not contain any in-depth exploration of these symbols from a religious or historical perspective, allowing the reader to believe that anyone who possesses or displays these graphics must be part of a gang or a hate group or espouse extremist ideologies.

Another problem for the image of Pagans in the military lies in their use of controversial religious symbols for personal decoration or other purposes. What makes this such a problem is the effort by some racist and white separatist hate groups to appropriate some of the same ancient religious symbols also valued by the Pagan community. The most obvious example is the swastika. For the general public, the swastika is typically defined as a symbol of Nazism, modern day Neo-Nazism, and white separatism, even though it has a long pre-Nazi history as a nonracist religious symbol in Europe, India, and elsewhere. Pagans who appreciate the positive, ancient, pre-Nazi connotations of the swastika do not dare to link themselves with the symbol for fear of being labeled as Neo-Nazis or racists, as the association of Paganism with Nazism is a favorite rhetorical maneuver of those who seek to defame and destroy Paganism in the United States through this kind of scaremongering (see Chapter 1).

Another popular Pagan symbol is the Celtic cross, which especially appeals to those who associate their Pagan spirituality with Celtic religious traditions. Unfortunately, according to U.S. military regulations, the Celtic cross has been identified as a Ku Klux Klan symbol, especially when it appears in a tattoo. The manual does not mention that stone Celtic or high crosses in Ireland date back to the ninth century, a historical lineage that precedes the founding of the Ku Klux Klan in 1865 by a rather significant period of time (Trager 1992, 499).



The swastika as a good luck symbol predates the Third Reich by thousands of years. The swastika has a long pre-Nazi history as a nonracist religious symbol in Europe, India, and elsewhere. However, the folk etymology of this card—claiming that it is made up of the “four Ls” of Light, Luck, Love, and Life—is unfounded, c. 1908. (Rykoff Collection/Corbis)

Runic symbols were carved in Northern Europe some two millennia before the rise of Nazism and are now sacred to Pagans involved with Germanic and Scandinavian forms of Pagan spirituality (Pennick 1999, 42). They are now in danger of being permanently mislabeled as hate symbols by the U.S. military because of their appropriation by Neo-Nazis and other racist groups. The National Alliance, a racist, right-wing, Neo-Nazi organization that advocates the creation of an all-white Aryan living space, racial cleansing by means of a long-term eugenics program, an economic policy prohibiting the import of nonwhite labor, and the enforcement of strict gender roles, uses a wreathed *Algiz* rune for its logo (National Alliance, <http://www.natvan.com/what-is-na/na2.html>). Modern Pagans also use the *Algiz* rune but as a protective charm, a healing symbol, and a symbolic bridge to the Otherworld. In addition, this symbol is an ideographic character in six different Futharks (runic alphabets) and, as such, holds an important place in runic divinatory systems.

The writers of the military chaplains' training module are, to their credit, at least partly aware of this problem regarding the multiple possible meanings of such ancient symbols, stressing that “caution must be ex-

exercised when determining appropriate or inappropriate tattoos. The service member may not know the tattoo's full meaning" (DoD 1993). Unfortunately, at the current rate of symbol appropriation by criminal gangs, Neo-Nazi organizations, and racially motivated hate groups, there may soon be few "appropriate" symbols of pre-Christian Europe left for use by contemporary Pagans. In the case of the controversy around the Celtic cross, Irish Catholics are also in danger of losing one of their most sacred Christian symbols. These few examples illustrate how ancient religious symbols represent something of a semiotic minefield for the modern military Pagan.

In addition to tattoos, the military has begun to restrict other forms of body modification. Members of the latest generation of military recruits have found body piercing to be a convenient means of challenging military standards of conformity. Although women are allowed one piercing per earlobe for earrings per DoD uniform appearance regulations, this has not stopped men from getting their ears pierced, and many women have multiple ear piercings. Individuals also pierce their tongues, nipples, and genitals because these piercings are easily concealed. Some military members also employ scarification as an alternative to tattooing.

To their recipients, body piercings and scarification may have the same emotional value as tattoos, but where tattoos are understood as traditional in the armed services, other forms of body modification are viewed as strange, exotic, and unsuitable for the military: "Members are prohibited from attaching, affixing, or displaying objects, articles, jewelry or ornamentation to or through the ear, nose, tongue, or any exposed body part (includes visible through uniform)" (USAF 2002, 140). This instruction goes on to make it clear that the regulation applies not only to members in uniform or on post but also to those off post or in civilian attire. Therefore, even though most military Pagans only display their piercings or other body alterations while off duty and away from their posts, this is still a uniform violation, despite the clear attempt at discretion.

In one notable case of extreme body modification by a military Pagan, Joe Jarrell, an enlisted man in the U.S. Air Force, had his tongue split while on leave. There was no specific ban on tongue splitting in air force regulations, most likely because no one had ever foreseen it becoming an issue. Jarrell claimed that this modification was required for him to become a priest in a particular sect of contemporary Paganism.

Both the extreme act and the reasoning behind it drew the attention of the press, and the case made national headlines. Predictably, the responses included those from non-Pagan members of the military who thought Jarrell should be separated from the service, but the story also received negative comments from other military Pagans.

As one such Pagan serving in the air force put it, “I am working towards becoming a Wiccan priest, but my group, which is recognized by the Air Force and federal and state governments, doesn’t require me to split my tongue . . . I feel with the uphill battle we have in the military to maintain our religion, the airman has cast a negative image over paganism that will take years to overcome” (*Air Force Times*, August 5, 2002). A *Navy Times* correspondent covered this story and announced that Jarrell had “triggered an Air Force-wide review of its dress and appearance policy.” Air Force Instruction 36-2903 was rewritten so that body modification, including tongue splitting, is now covered by clear and concise military regulatory standards:

Members who intentionally alter or modify any part of their bodies in order to achieve a visible, physical effect that disfigures, deforms, or otherwise detracts from a professional military image may be subject to disciplinary action or involuntary separation, as determined appropriate by the member’s commander. Examples of prohibited conduct include (but are not limited to) tongue splitting or forking, tooth filing, and acquiring visible, disfiguring skin implants. (USAF 2002, 140–141)

The instruction incorporated the “included but not limited to” clause in order to address acts committed by innovative airmen and airwomen in the future. Commanders may institute more strict requirements overseas or in training facilities or in cases in which hidden piercings affect one’s ability to don safety gear or perform duties (*ibid.*).

A news story on the Jarrell case by Seena Simon, entitled “Split Decision: The Military Has Regulations Governing What You Can Do to Every Square Inch of Your Body. And Then Along Came Joe Jarrell,” was carried in the January 20, 2003, issue of the *Navy Times*. Simon depicted this tongue-splitting incident as one of “monkey see, monkey do”: “During leave from Seymour Johnson [Air Force Base], Jarrell attended a Pagan conference in New York. On the way back, he was with a Pagan friend who already had his tongue forked, and Jarrell decided to [also] have his tongue split at a friend’s piercing parlor in Ohio.”

A photo of Airman Jarrell sticking his forked tongue out began circulating on the Internet, and the story caused heated debates in the military Pagan community. Some Pagans were angry that a person would jeopardize the whole movement for something as trivial as body modification, but others applauded Jarrell’s actions as pushing the envelope for acceptance of body modification as an element of Pagan religiosity.

Age and experience often determine on which side of the body modification issue individual Pagans find themselves, highlighting an underlying

tension between older veterans and junior personnel that is reflected servicewide. This generation gap between older and younger Pagan service members has become pronounced at times.

The Gothic, Vampire, and Neo-Tribal lifestyles that are prevalent among younger Pagans visually highlight the marked difference between themselves and the previous generations of adherents. Many of this newer generation have embraced styles of dress and deportment that their older counterparts worked hard to avoid being associated with. The Gothic look in particular plays to the fears surrounding popular misconception of Pagans as occultists dressing in black, wearing heavy makeup, and possibly meeting in the dark to do unspeakable things. Older Pagans fear that the social acceptance they have won through years of outreach within the military will be eroded if the chain of command is continuously obliged to rewrite uniform regulations in order to keep the standards up to par. Many are also concerned that Paganism may become a convenient scapegoat should the DoD be forced to rethink its religious accommodation directives.

Military Pagans, the Press, and Political Reaction

The news media have played an interesting part in the history of contemporary Paganism. Their contributions have been positive in that they offer exposure of this religious movement, encouraging dialogue that focuses on religious diversity. However, they have also been used to rally opposition. For military Pagans, press coverage has resulted in increased awareness, extended accommodation, and even the revision of military directives. But it has also generated intense social and political scrutiny and even attempts at hostile legislative action. Media discussion of Paganism therefore presents a difficult conundrum for Pagans in the military. For the most part, press coverage serves as a normalizing agent, informing the public of Pagan beliefs and depicting Pagans as decent people, citizens, and soldiers, but it can also bring unwanted attention from adherents of opposing religious groups. Media coverage of military Pagans often results in civilian religious organizations encouraging the military to deny Pagans religious accommodation, and the responses to these attempts have varied from localized conflicts to national debate.

In 1989, Airman Pat Hutchins received approval for a special request regarding religious accommodations: “Pat Hutchins is a military Wiccan stationed at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. When she asked military officials in January for religious leave to observe the eight sabbats, she was granted permission within a week” (Suggs 1989, 4). Her story appeared in a local Texas paper and was later picked up by the Associated Press. As a

result of the media coverage, military officials and civilian religious leaders contacted the command at Lackland.

Some people unfamiliar with the Wiccan religion called the base and told officials that “they couldn’t believe that they [the military] would allow something like this to happen in this country . . .” The Base Commanding Officer explained to other officials and civilians that he could not do otherwise according to Air Force regulation 35:53 which states: “members of the Air Force are free to express their religious beliefs in a manner that is consistent and fair to all.” The decision was not withdrawn. (Suggs 1989, 4)

Pagans at other military installations and in other service branches have faced similar problems. The Pagans stationed in Kaiserslautern, Germany, were already dealing with harassment from fellow soldiers, but the media spotlight turned on them by the *Stars and Stripes* in October 1987 brought them to the attention of the entire military and civilian readership of the paper. According to Staff Sergeant Lori Johnson, a Pagan who was also stationed at Kaiserslautern, “We were also permitted to use the chapel facilities to hold study groups. Some Christians were horrified—Pagan worship in a church??? Heated debate lit up the editorial section of the *Stars and Stripes*: Churches were for CHRISTIANS only!” (Sunfell 2001). Technically, the Wiccans were entitled to the use of chapel facilities, a point that seemed lost on the individuals making the complaints. In supporting the Wiccans, the military authorities upheld the rules related to religious observances in the armed services by promoting fair and equitable use of religious facilities regardless of religious affiliation. However, the Wiccans were an unpopular religious group, which opened the military up to criticism by conservative citizens and politicians who argued that the Wiccans might defile these areas with their “profane” rituals.

In 1999, Fort Hood Army Base became the focal point of another heated controversy sparked by press coverage. An article entitled “Practicing Their Old-Time Religion” by Kim Sue Lia Perkes appeared in the May 11, 1999, *Austin-American Statesman*. The article covered the vernal equinox ceremonies of the Fort Hood Open Circle, the military Pagan group sponsored by the Sacred Well Congregation. This story invoked the wrath of conservative Christians in neighboring Killeen, Texas, who were appalled to discover that there were Pagans in the U.S. armed forces organized in study and worship groups, receiving support from the Chaplain Corps according to directives and precedents that had been in place for over a decade.

Suddenly, military Pagans found themselves facing a united attack by politicians from both the House and the Senate. Congressman Bob Barr, who represented the Seventh District of Georgia, along with the late Strom



S. Robinson, Jessica Ek, Tama Oringderff, and her husband David (back) salute the four cardinal points, Fort Hood, Texas, 1999. (Rebecca McEntee/Corbis Sygma)

Thurmond, a Republican senator from South Carolina who was then the Senate's oldest serving member, spearheaded a campaign to deny military Pagans the right to religious accommodations and the right to practice their religion openly within the military. On the June 24, 1999, episode of *Good Morning America*, then Texas governor and presidential candidate George W. Bush stated, "I don't think Witchcraft is a real religion, and I wish the military would take another look at it and decide against it."

Congressman Barr attacked the military for allowing Wiccans religious accommodations on military installations. A news story published in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* on May 30, 1999, stated that Barr "favored the free exercise of Wicca in civilian life or by military personnel off their bases. He claimed that officially sanctioning Wicca would open the door to other religious practices such as peyote use by Native Americans." Senator Thurmond took a similar position. In a letter to the Senate Judiciary Committee, Senator Thurmond accused the military of going too far in its attempt to accommodate religious diversity within its ranks:

Limits can and should be placed on the exercise of those views, especially in the military. I do not believe that the Armed Forces should accommodate the practice of witchcraft at military facilities. The same applies to the practices

of other groups such as Satanists and cultists. For the sake of the honor and prestige of our military, there should be no obligation to permit such activity. This is an example of going too far to accommodate the practice of one's views in the name of religion. (Quoted in Leaming 1999, 2)

Both men portrayed the accommodation of Paganism and Wicca as a foot in the door for more extreme behaviors, a classic "slippery slope" argument. Not surprisingly, their proposals for limiting religious expression within the ranks of the U.S. military focused on denying religious accommodation to non-Christian minorities. In the June 9, 1999, *West Virginia Gazette*, Congressman Barr asked, "What's next? Will armored divisions be forced to travel with sacrificial animals for satanic rituals? Will Rastafarians demand the inclusion of ritualistic marijuana cigarettes in their rations?" Such remarks were clearly intended to instill outrage in the Christian majority population.

Other public figures took their cue from Congressman Barr's position. Paul Weyrich, chairman and chief executive officer of the Free Congress Foundation, is well known in conservative political circles as an articulate advocate for right-wing Christian views and a regular participant in conservative think tanks. In an opinion piece entitled "Has the U.S. Populace Abandoned Its Christian Heritage?" published in the June 20, 1999, *Salt Lake City Tribune*, Weyrich sounded the alarm against the presence of Pagans in the military as follows: "News accounts tell of a high priestess at Fort Hood plunging her knife into Mother Earth to celebrate the seasons. How long will it be until a high priestess is plunging a knife into a young lady who must be sacrificed in a satanic ritual?" This statement was part of a campaign by Weyrich and others to lead a boycott against army recruiters until the Wiccans were removed or at least silenced. This ultimately unsuccessful effort was described by Kim Sue Lia Perkes in the article "Until Army Rejects Wicca, 13 Groups Call for Boycott," published in the *Austin-American Statesman* on June 10, 1999 (see also Robinson 1999).

The failure of this boycott did not stop Congressman Barr from attempting to attach a legislative rider to the Defense Appropriations Bill of 2001 that would have expressly eliminated military religious accommodations for Wiccan servicemen and servicewomen. According to the June 10, 1999, edition of the *Austin-American Statesman*, the rider was not considered germane to the bill and was never attached. Congressman Barr made another failed attempt later in the same year. As it turned out, neither the senator nor the congressman nor the right-wing political forces represented by Weyrich possessed the public or political support they had expected for either the legislation or the boycott.

Pagans, however, discovered some quite unexpected allies. Many media outlets reported support for the religious accommodation of Pagan service members, including some statements of support from several conservative Christian leaders. Pat Robertson, writing for the 700 Club, a conservative religious program and news service, expressed concern that suppressing the rights of Wiccans could lead to the suppression of all religious expression within the ranks, including the suppression of particular forms of Christianity (Russell 1999). An article in the magazine *Christianity Today* quoted Craig Conrad, the executive director of the Christian Military Fellowship, agreeing with Pat Robertson: "If we oppose these [Pagan] practices, we stand a very good chance of shooting ourselves in the foot and [being] given the boot ourselves. A military chapel is not a church, but a place where we facilitate the exercise of religious liberty" (Quoted in Kellner 1999, 1).

A good many Christian leaders were chastened in their opposition to Paganism in the military in light of a ruling on religious observances in the military issued by the Second Circuit Court of Appeals in the 1985 case of *Katcoff v. March*. This ruling held that the Chaplain Corps was not in violation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment, which prohibits the government from engaging in the establishment of any religion, only so long as individual military members were free to worship as their conscience dictated without fear of harassment or social stigma (Silk 1999). Clearly, if Pagans, Wiccans, or any specific religious group were singled out as being ineligible for religious accommodation from the Chaplain Corps, the new regulation would violate the spirit of this ruling and of the First Amendment.

In response to the attack on the civil rights of Pagan military personnel, several Pagan organizations came together to form a united front (Russell 1999). The combined effort of twenty-six Pagan religious organizations and businesses released a joint statement on July 4, 1999:

Pagan leaders are calling for Interfaith dialogue and support of First Amendment freedoms. Members of other faiths need not fear working, training, fighting, or even dying alongside Wiccans and other Pagans. [As Angie Buchanan has commented, most Pagans in the U.S., including those in the military] respect all Americans' right to worship as they choose. We do not proselytize or seek in any way converts. We welcome and support interfaith dialogue, exploring our similarities and differences. Pagans are proud to serve alongside members of all faiths, upholding a Constitution which supports [the rights of all Americans]. (Buchanan 1999, 6)

Throughout the summer of 1999, Pagan organizations undertook a large and well-organized response, making sure that both the public and

the government were aware of their situation and sentiments. In addition to group responses, individual Pagans participated in a letter-writing campaign. The Internet was the primary medium of organization, with countless websites posting press releases, joint statements, and individual editorials, along with the names, addresses, e-mails, and fax numbers of Washington politicians. Some posts also included instructions for writing to politicians, and some savvy individuals photocopied these pages, placing them as handouts in occult shops and other Pagan-friendly outlets.

Meanwhile, Representative Barr had to face his Pagan constituents at his local town hall meetings. "Bob Barr would have preferred that about 25% of the constituents present at his Memorial Day town meeting in Marietta, Georgia on Saturday May 29th, just vanish, with a nod of his head or a twitch of his nose. <poof!> That 25% represented a small sampling of the Wiccan/Pagan population in Barr's 7th District constituency" (Buchanan 1999, 1). Throughout the meeting, the military Wiccan matter was raised again and again by Pagans in attendance, and Barr was forced to confront real people rather than nameless stereotypes. At least one Pagan came to the meeting holding his military shadow box, which is made for a military person when he or she retires and holds a folded American flag along with the military member's medals.

In Texas, the press had stirred a veritable hornet's nest. The Pagans that attended the Fort Hood Open Circle and those that lived in the surrounding areas, such as Waco and Killeen, had to contend with fierce opposition led by a local Texas minister, Reverend Jack Harvey. In a July 26, 1999, article entitled "Witches Able to Worship on U.S. Military Bases, Fundamentalists Demand End to Moonlit Rituals" by John Boudreau, published in the *San Jose Mercury News*, the reverend was quoted as saying, "We believe that God hates witches . . . I'd like to see them saved. But they are a bunch of wicked witches. They are pacifists. They are nature lovers. They admit this. We don't need those kinds of people in the Army."

On September 1, 1999, the Lady Liberty League, the legal defense and civil rights arm of Circle Sanctuary, a well-established Pagan organization in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, announced that in the course of organizing an "anti-Witch march," Harvey had instructed at least one of his followers to bring a handgun to the march "in case a warlock tries to grab one of our kids." He was convinced that Pagans, especially Witches, were practitioners of infanticide and cannibalism. According to one New Age shop owner, Heidi Morrow, Harvey had repeatedly made comments to her and others that "all Witches should be dead" (Lady Liberty League 1999, 1). Many felt threatened by the reverend's vitriolic words, and the Fort Hood authorities were obliged to increase security on the base.

Harvey's "March Against Wickedness" took place on Labor Day in 1999, and the Pagans and other supportive citizens staged a counterdemonstration. An editorial appeared in the September 1999 issue of the *Delaware Valley Pagan Network's Spirit Guide*, an online Pagan publication. The author, under the pseudonym of Laughing Fox, gave a firsthand account of the march:

At about 5 PM the Reverend and about 40 followers showed up by bus. And waiting there for them were almost 200 Pagans and supporters, folks from all across the state, including Christians, Wiccans, Pagans from the local military base, and representatives of the many Pagan rights groups. I think the following confrontation was best summed up by a non-Pagan attendee, John Bennett of Irving, Texas. "Harvey said some nasty things, so we danced at him." (Laughing Fox 1999)

The Pagans and their supporters responded to the violent tone of Harvey's speech with generosity: "Harvey encouraged his members to bring guns, our folk [Pagans] brought drinking water for the day's heat, and offered it to the picketers" (ibid.). This conciliatory attitude was also seen by many as helping to heal the rift between military Pagans and pacifist or antiestablishment Pagans.

The press had brought the existence of the military Pagan community to the attention of Representative Barr, but what the press could not convey was the size of the Pagan community and its ability to organize a response. Previously, the nonorganized nature of Paganism made coherent and timely responses difficult or impossible, but through the use of the Internet, this diverse and nonhierarchical religious community had marshaled itself to protect its membership from hostile political and social forces.

Military Pagans have learned to take every opportunity to use the online Pagan community, as well as the broader media in general, to their advantage in response to attacks on the viability of Paganism in the military. The press is followed closely through online news outlets, and stories about military Pagans are sent to countless readers and posted on numerous bulletin boards. As a result, politicians are becoming hesitant to target military Pagans, who now have the ability to garner support from their own members, from the greater Pagan community, and from many interfaith organizations as well.

Military Pagans in the Twenty-First Century

Military Pagans have overcome many difficulties in the last several decades. They have established their presence with positive precedent, and the

majority have done their best to blend seamlessly into the U.S. armed forces by conforming to military regulations. The next obstacles in their path will involve prompting the military to begin a servicewide census of military Pagans, the appointment of Pagan chaplains, and the approval of Pagan symbols for veterans' gravestones.

Currently, the U.S. Air Force is the only service branch that monitors Pagans within its ranks. The air force began tracking Pagans in the spring of 2001; however, the data was removed from public domain in November 2003. Although the information still exists and is being updated, it is not available for public viewing due to security concerns. It was clear at that time, however, that soon there would be more Pagans in the air force than Muslims or Jews. It also appears that the figures provided by the air force did not account for the number of Pagan dependents. At last count, there were 1,410 active-duty air force Pagans (Peerman e-mail communication 2004). In addition, many Pagans still do not list their religious affiliation in their official military records, though that too is slowly changing.

The lack of verifiable demographic data has proven to be an advantage to those opposing religious accommodation for military Pagans. As long as Pagans are not visible as a sizable population in the armed services, their religious needs have to be expressed through separate, special requests, which are responded to on a case-by-case basis. This also ensures that there is no anticipation of the presence of Pagans on most installations or naval vessels as there is for members of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In 1999, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Maginnis (retired) provided an example of the invisibility and deniability of military Pagans when he published a Military Readiness Project Policy paper for a conservative watchdog group known as the Family Research Council:

In 1988, the Defense Manpower Data Center found that most service members identify with the Christian Faith: 330,703 Roman Catholic; 252,855 Baptist (not including Southern Baptist); 43,056 Lutheran; 40,053 Methodist; 25,833 Southern Baptist Convention; 62,063 Protestant but with no denominational preference; and 96,259 labeling themselves as Christians with no denominational preference. Twenty percent (283,836) have "no religious preference." Other religious preferences include Judaism (3,913), Muslim (4,080), and Buddhism (2,228). No Wiccans were identified. (Maginnis 1999, 1)

What Maginnis omitted from his analysis is one very important reason why no Wiccans or Pagans were identified in 1988 (or again in 1999): there was no classification available through the DoD at that time for Pagans, so there was, in fact, no available avenue for Pagans to identify themselves in the kind of religious census cited by Maginnis. No service member could

have Wiccan, Druid, or any other Pagan designation printed on their dog tags or entered into a DoD database. Most Pagans had listed their faith as “Other” or “No Preference.” To Maginnis, Paganism’s lack of visibility in the DoD’s religious demographics was a compelling reason to refuse Wiccans religious accommodation in a military that is “overwhelmingly Christian” (Maginnis 1999, 5).

The absence of an official count also results in overly conservative estimates by military officials. A news story carried by the *San Jose Mercury News*, dated July 26, 1999, quoted the chairman of the Armed Forces Chaplains Board, Major General Richard Carr of the U.S. Air Force, as stating that “fewer than 100 people on active duty, out of a force of about 1.4 million people, practice Wicca.” By contrast, the executive director of the Military Pagan Network estimated that there were approximately 10,000 military Pagans servicewide and that when General Carr made his educated guess, there were at least 150 members of the Fort Hood Open Circle alone (Machate 1994, 9–11). This did not account for the number of personnel who attended the eleven additional Open Circles (Pagan services) documented by the Military Pagan Network during that period (Machate 1994, 2), but without an official count, neither side could support its argument.

In the October 26, 1987, issue of the *Air Force Times*, the executive director of the Armed Forces Chaplains Board, Colonel John Mann of the U.S. Air Force, indicated that “as long as the armed services don’t count pagans separately, they can continue to ignore pagans’ needs.” The U.S. Army had recognized this issue much earlier and had attributed the absence of documentation to Pagan fears of persecution (DoD 1993). Prior to March 15, 2001, few Pagans were able to get their religious affiliation stamped on their dog tags through official channels (Sunfell 2001, 1). Some personnel records may have reflected an individual’s actual religious designation, but when that information was entered into a military database, either it was part of an official list of recognized religious traditions or the data was entered in the “Other” or “No religious preference” categories.

This situation was a source of concern for those military Pagans who wanted to be accurately counted as such. After all, they were serving their country and defending its constitution, but they could not choose to have their religion on their military identification tags (Sampson 1981, 33–35). In all fairness, the reason for this was not due to discrimination or bigotry on the part of the military. The DoD religious database was still organized as it had been in the 1980s, and Paganism had only recently appeared in American culture and was hardly ever spoken of in the same terms as the larger mainstream denominations. In fact, the military had no basis for understanding the nature of Paganism when the first accommodation requests were submitted in the 1970s. Furthermore, the service branches do not nec-

essarily communicate with each other on religious matters, so a step forward in the army would mean little to Pagans in the other service branches.

Maj. Anthony Gatlin of the U.S. Air Force expressed a common sentiment among active-duty Pagans when he said: "I had reached a point in my life where I wanted to become public with my religion. I figured a good place to start would be changing my religious preference on my dog tags and my personnel file" (Quoted in Kennedy 2001, 1). Major Gatlin was responsible for facilitating the addition of contemporary Pagan categories to the list of approved religious designations in the air force personnel database. He was also the first to register as a Pagan in March 2001, and his success constituted a breakthrough on a par with the publication of the Army Chaplain's Handbook. This accomplishment benefits Pagans in several ways. The database addition has set the precedent for similar requests in other service branches. It has also furthered the efforts of other groups to gain a Pagan chaplain in the armed forces: "This step of adding four faith groups to the Air Force's PC-III Personnel Data System is a giant leap toward reaching that goal. The personnel system can be used to determine the numbers of various faith groups, and may be used in the future to determine the need for a chaplain for Neopagan faith groups" (Russell 2001, 1).

Gatlin's accomplishment is particularly important to Circle Sanctuary, a well-known Pagan community founded in 1974 by Selena Fox in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, which serves the international Pagan community as a networking, counseling, and educational entity. Circle Sanctuary was one of the first Pagan organizations that offered support and aid to military Pagans in the 1970s, and it was Fox who helped to update the Army Chaplain's Handbook in 1987. Circle Sanctuary has been waiting since 1998 for final approval on its request to become an ecclesiastical endorsing agency because only recognized religious organizations can submit candidates to the military's Chaplain Corps. The group's primary candidate is a former air force officer who is also a licensed mental health professional and an ordained minister (Fox e-mail communication 2003). In addition to Circle Sanctuary, another Pagan church, the Sacred Well Congregation, has also begun the process to become an ecclesiastical endorsing agency. When a Pagan chaplain is appointed to the Chaplain Corps, it will mark the beginning of a profound change in the way in which military Pagans relate to the military chain of command.

Currently, lay leaders coordinate activities when Pagans gather to worship or study on military installations. Military commands usually require a lay leader to show some proof of qualification for the job, and this includes having a religious sponsor. Several organizations sponsor Pagan lay leaders presently. Some of the well-known sponsors are Circle Sanctuary, Isis Invicta, the Military Pagan Network, and the Sacred Well Congregation. How-

ever, individual covens and circles may also function in the capacity of sponsor. The DoD defines a lay leader as

a volunteer (“lay leader” in the Army and Air Force; “lay reader” in the Navy and Marine Corps) appointed by the commanding officer and supervised and trained by the command chaplain to serve for a period of time to meet the needs of a particular religious faith group when their military chaplains are not available. The lay leader or reader may conduct services, but may not exercise any other activities usually reserved for ordained clergy. (DoD 2003)

Since there are no Pagan chaplains yet within the U.S. military, lay leaders are of prime importance because the services they conduct would be contrary to the Abrahamic canonical restrictions against polytheism, pantheism, and animism. The need for Pagan lay leaders is not based on a difference in the interpretation of a common religious doctrine but is instead rooted in the conflicting paradigms of the cosmology, theology, and ideology of the Abrahamic traditions versus the Pagan traditions. Chaplains are required to facilitate religious support for all personnel, but they are not required to perform religious services that would violate the religious doctrine of that chaplain’s ecclesiastical endorsing agency (DoD 1993).

The challenges of an interfaith force are nothing new to the military. It has been dealing with religious pluralism in its ranks since the Civil War. In fact, the army has set several groundbreaking precedents in the interests of cultural diversity and religious plurality, and the publication of the *Handbook for Military Chaplains* in 1978 was an extension of that tradition. The army was responsible for the commission of the first Jewish chaplain in 1862 and the first African American chaplain in 1863, and if not for the opposition of the War Department, the first female chaplain would have been commissioned in 1864. The first female chaplain was finally commissioned in 1974 (DoD 2003). In 1993, the army commissioned the first Muslim chaplain, Capt. Rashid Mohammed (Rassan 1999).

The main issue is that all “professionally qualified clergy shall be appointed as chaplains to provide for the free exercise of religion for all members of the military services, their dependents, and other authorized persons” (DoD 1993, 1). The U.S. armed forces have proven repeatedly that religious pluralism and cultural diversity need not interfere with mission readiness, unit cohesion, or general good order and discipline. The creation of a coherent military Pagan community has been successful, but it will have to keep adapting to the ever-changing expressions of faith within the greater Pagan community. Though it confounds the mainstream with its nonstructured, nonhierarchical, and rhizomorphic qualities, it has counterintuitively and effectively merged with American military culture.

Military Pagan Interviews

A number of interviews were conducted in the process of writing this chapter. The subjects are kept anonymous here in order to protect their privacy, since some are still on active duty or active reserve in the armed services. This discretion is also necessary to protect their personal security during the current war in Iraq. Each of the individuals interviewed for this project were asked to discuss their personal experiences in the U.S. military, with the disclaimer that each is speaking as an individual and *not* as a spokesperson for the entire military. The individuals were also questioned about their ideas of religious “authenticity,” the role of ethnicity in their Pagan religion, and whether their Pagan values conflicted with their military duties or their sense of patriotism.

An attempt was made to provide the broadest possible cross section of the different types of Paganism represented in the U.S. military. However, many military Pagans were reluctant to be interviewed. Among those who chose to participate, most identified themselves as Wiccan. Only three participants identified themselves as Reconstructionists, which included one Heathen or Nordic Reconstructionist, one Celtic Reconstructionist, and one practitioner of *Religio Romana*, a Roman Reconstructionist Pagan movement.

Interview 1: Subject L

Subject L is a female in her early fifties who served in the U.S. Navy and Naval Reserve as a first-class petty officer. She served for six years on active-duty status in the regular navy and then fourteen years as a naval reservist. She holds two master’s degrees and refers to herself as a Celtic-Fae Witch, which she distinguishes from a Celtic Reconstructionist. She explains, “I feel it totally inappropriate to try and reconstruct a religion from 2,000 or so years ago, rather than to divine its basic tenets and adapt them to the modern world. After all, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have been adapting in this manner for the entire time span.” Subject L considers authenticity a purely personal matter, though she describes that other groups identify authenticity through spiritual lineage (initiations): “I am concerned with authenticity in my spirituality, period. It is a matter of being true to myself . . . I have been ‘initiated’ into a group—we are a very eclectic group of Pagans, but our High Priestess happens to be Dianic Wiccan, and for the sake of attending various rituals at neighboring Pagan Circles/Covens, we all agreed to undergo a sort of ceremony to satisfy this demand for initiations which certain groups want.” Although Subject L states that authenticity is personal, she refers to practices that she considers unambiguously in-

authentic. “I had met some so-called witches in college, who basically were all about getting naked and having orgies (not that I have anything against this, mind)—I did not think they were interested in spirituality so much as partying, so I steered clear of them.”

She went on searching for other Pagans with similar values and finally found a “family-friendly coven,” composed of individuals who reminded her of the “type of people I had been meeting in church for years. The difference was, all these nice people prayed to a Goddess just like I did.” She joined this group while she was a reservist; however, she indicated that her past-life experiences were the defining moments of her Pagan conversion, whereas her acceptance into this family-friendly coven was simply a validation of her Pagan beliefs:

My parents, who were raised Free Methodist, converted to Methodist before my birth, and they raised me in that extremely tolerant, liberal Methodist tradition. I never really bought into the whole thing (again, at age 8, I argued with my Sunday School teacher about how Joshua killed babies, and was therefore a bad person). I did not realize until very recently (within the last 10 years) that other people believed like I did, prayed to ancient Goddesses like Sulis/Minerva, Mari-Aphrodite, Diana, Isis. So I sang in Methodist and Catholic choirs and took my children to the services—while stressing the feminist side of spirituality at home.

It is interesting to note that older female Pagans interviewed for this article appeared to be more likely to apply the term *feminist* to their ideological stance, whereas younger female Pagans seemed to avoid the topic of feminism altogether.

Subject L’s ethnicity has influenced her religious path, in a manner that she explains as follows: “I happen to believe in reincarnation, by my personal experiences dragging me, kicking and screaming to an acceptance of its reality. I think I chose my current ethnicity; Celtic-Welsh in my matrilineal line. I have studied ancient Welsh, am an Arthurian scholar, etc. I also am a practitioner of Religio Romano.”

Her reference to ethnicity carries some weight, but for her, ethnicity is not generally used as a means for limiting one’s religious resources. This would fly in the face of Eclectic Paganism, which places great value on innovation that develops from a kind of interethnic and interreligious alchemy. Subject L is acquainted with her basic familial bloodlines, but in every question dealing with her conversion or her ethnicity, she refers back to her past-life experiences as a driving force in her Pagan identity.

One issue that Subject L has faced that was unique to her military service as a Pagan was how to plan her retirement ceremony. The warm and

accommodating demeanor of those in her chain of command pleasantly surprised her:

My unit commander, a young lieutenant, came through with flying colors—did me proud. Our Master Chief, an old timer and a good ole’ boy, did the same, which utterly overwhelmed me. I had a lot of support, and I had people who did not support me, yet were too afraid or whatever to talk to me about it (those buddies who couldn’t come due to their own religious beliefs told me beforehand). It was very interesting and all in all extremely rewarding.

This twenty-year veteran only met other military Pagans in the last two years of her naval service. She comments, “I cannot imagine anyone admitting to being Pagans (other than Native American and Hindu) before 1985.” That is when she read for the first time that the army had published an official document for chaplains describing different aspects of Wicca.

Subject L identified pacifism as the main ideological difference between military Pagans and their civilian counterparts. She stated that most of the time, she is antiwar, yet she feels that “there is a great need for a standing military, as a protection.” Though she did march against the 2002 invasion of Iraq, she felt other conflicts that occurred between the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and Desert Shield had been justified:

I was a hippie chick, and I joined the Navy in 1974. This caused a huge uproar among my college friends, who could NOT understand the fact that just because I didn’t agree with the Vietnam nonsense did not mean that I disliked the idea of having a military. My dad lost his leg in the Battle of the Bulge, in WWII. I am proud that my dad had a Purple Heart, and is a WWII vet, just as I am proud that I am retired Navy. Lots of civilians haven’t a clue about that. And lots of my Pagan acquaintances happen to be former military.

She does not feel that her faith conflicts with her patriotism or her military service, though she acknowledges that her religious affiliation may sometimes conflict with other citizens’ ideals of patriotism.

Interview 2: Subject Q

Subject Q is a female in her early thirties who retired from the army after serving from 1992 to 1996. She has remained active in the military Pagan community as a retiree. She has some college education in addition to her army technical training. She identifies herself as a Southern European Pagan, following a path that became clear to her after having a religious experi-

ence while visiting an Isis temple in Trier, Germany. Though her earlier Pagan affiliation was with an Afro-Caribbean Wiccan group, her membership in that group was not a positive experience for her. She states that she “learned about ‘what not to do,’ which helped me learn what I need to do. And then I was formally initiated into the Temple of Isis.” She is currently part of the Isis Invicta Military Mission that provides training and sponsorship for military Pagan lay leaders. She has extensive experience as a volunteer for the Pagan community and as a priestess, and she feels accepted as both.

Authenticity is a quality conferred through recognition by her fellow Pagans. She explains: “Authenticity is not an issue when what you have going seems to work for yourself and your community. I know I hold a respected position in my community and that others find my work worthwhile.” She states that sincerity and personal research will provide validity to personal practices, noting, “There are a lot of people who are fly-by-night. They are day-trippers. Our lack of a Bible is no excuse for a lack of personal education in one’s faiths and practices.” By her description, inauthentic practitioners of Paganism are not driven to find gnosis, true spiritual knowledge; they misunderstand the lack of community-wide dogma and equate that absence with implied permission to wallow in a shallow pseudoreligion.

Subject Q discussed her European ancestry as a factor that plays a certain role in her religious path, jokingly referring to her “Heinz-57 [variety] American” ethnicity. She explained, “I enjoy researching the Italian [Strega] and Gypsy [Roma] aspects and incorporating them into my belief system. I have also traveled and lived in Europe, where I was heavily influenced by Roman ruins in Southern Germany.”

Subject Q states that she was “raised as a Catholic Witch.” Her mother practiced Witchcraft in the home using Christian deities and saints. She indicates that she has no problem reconciling Catholicism with Witchcraft: “Yep, its just like Santeria [Afro-Caribbean religion increasingly popular in the United States]. My mother was praying to Mother Mary and putting voodoo potatoes, you know poppets in the freezer. She claimed that it was an old Irish folk practice to use potatoes because they rot so well.”

At one point, Subject Q revealed that she and her mother conducted “drive-by hexings.” When queried about the Wiccan Rede and Three-Fold Law, the karmalike notion that whatever one does comes back on us with threefold effect, she responded, “I really think that the Three-Fold Law is full of crap. Witchcraft existed prior to the Three-Fold Law. People have been trying to manipulate the world for quite some time. Cursing happens, what do you want me to say? Prayer [and] sorcery happens with Christians, what’s the difference?”

She credits her mother’s example as one of the influences that drew her to Witchcraft and Paganism. In addition, the patriarchal nature of

Christianity left her looking for strong, divine, female role models. “To be honest, I did not relate well to male authority figures, and Jehovah was one of them. I related well to the Virgin Mary. When I was exposed to a religion that honored female deities, I was hooked.” She felt very comfortable in the ritual atmosphere of Paganism, which for her felt similar in some respects to Catholicism.

Subject Q believes that the main difference between military Pagans and their civilian counterparts is age and experience. She posits that the stress of military life forces individuals to mature faster and become more proficient at organizing and leading people. She believes that civilian Pagans place more emphasis on the appearance of age or how long one has been in the Pagan community. “In the military, leadership is based on skill and merit . . . It’s all about efficiency, who can get the job done, and who can get the job done right . . . Age is less a consideration when weighed against skill and charisma.” She feels this sometimes causes confusion when military Pagans interact with their civilian counterparts. “What happens when . . . we are ten or twenty years younger but with the same skill compressed into a shorter period of experiences? We have to be self-reliant and innovative, and it [is] often wrapped up in a young looking package.” She used herself as an example, stating that at the age of twenty-eight, she led a group of twenty-four other military Pagans, organized the annual festivals, and worked directly with the chaplain and the base command. She felt that this would not have been possible for her had she been interacting with the civilian community.

Subject Q identified other issues that affected her directly and uniquely as a military Pagan but from within the ranks. Her period of service was prior to the widespread accessibility of the Internet, making the location of other Pagans, even on their own military installations, difficult. “We had many issues finding others of like mindedness,” she remarked, “and when we did find others, we had issues trying to build communities for ourselves. We often struggled finding meeting places for not only worship, but for socializing, etc.” She stated that six months could pass between each introduction, which left little time to build a coherent group because of individuals transferring to other military installations, as well as regular deployments. After the advent of the Internet, she said, “you could find contacts before you even get stationed somewhere.” In addition to communication difficulties, Subject Q highlights issues she had within her spouse’s chain of command.

She and another military Pagan had gone to the base chaplain to ask about the process of becoming a lay leader. Instead of directing her to the regulations that cover this process, he would send her and the other Pagan out to accomplish one task at a time. She described it as an attempt to make the process “so long and drawn out . . . hoping I would leave in frustration.” When she identified this tactic, she went to the base library and lo-

cated the official procedure herself. Completing the prerequisites, she presented her request and the completed paperwork to an astonished chaplain. The person who had begun this request before her had quit in frustration under similar circumstances.

Her request was considered so unusual that it was sent to the commanding general of the European theater. Typically, this kind of request would have been handled by a U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) chaplain—"No one underneath the General wanted to be the person to approve or disapprove it [her official request]." Her request was approved, allowing this group to begin meeting under her leadership as well as the direction of the base chapel. However, some local Christians actively objected to her group's meetings and protested until the chaplain instructed the protesters to leave. More Pagan groups with lay leaders began appearing on military installations and naval vessels, and Subject Q felt this caused the military to realize that Pagans had become a permanent fixture in the military.

She felt there was no conflict between her patriotism and her religious affiliation: "When 9/11 happened, everyone concentrated on 'God Bless America,' 'United We Stand,' 'One Nation under God,' etc., but one of our biggest symbols in New York is Lady Liberty, she is as big a goddess symbol as they come. How can Pagans be unpatriotic when we have our own national goddess?"

She associates her military service with the service of ancient Pagan soldiers of the past: "While in Germany, I studied Roman Paganism and traveled to many Roman temple ruins. I think Paganism and soldiering go hand in hand . . . many deities are specifically military minded."

This illustrates a difference in how civilian and military Pagans interpret martial deities and their roles. Civilian Pagans often construe the qualities of martial deities as an abstracted source of strength to conquer everyday obstacles and fortify one's individual sense of purpose. Military Pagans are more likely to apply these roles, qualities, and powers literally, seeing these war gods and goddesses as role models and patron deities for military service.

Regarding the general situation of military Pagans in relation to the military and to other Pagans in general, Subject Q felt that the civilian Pagan community might be friendly but was somewhat clueless as to the needs of military Pagans, whereas the military in general was guarded and at times surreptitiously hostile to the Pagans in their midst.

Interview 3: Subject C

Subject C is a female in her late twenties who served in the air force from 1994 to 2004. She retired as a staff sergeant. She identifies herself as an

Eclectic Pagan who is “a self-dedicated solitary who thrives off of learning from others.” In discussing the sources of her religion, she ignored the subject of authenticity and instead focused on ethnicity and its influence on her religious practices. Her Celtic and Germanic ancestry have inclined her to study material from those cultures, but she explains, “I have by no means let my ancestral paths set up barriers to my exploration process. In order to become enlightened and grow in each life (my own personal point of view), you have to broaden yourself.” Subject C implies that it is unrealistic to attempt to reconstruct religious practices based on racial or ethnic purity, since in her research no one possesses racial or ethnic purity either in Europe or in the United States.

Subject C was raised by military parents who were nonreligious but had conservative social values. She rebelled against her secular parents by getting “‘saved’ [in the Christian sense] as a Protestant at the base installation chapel.” She later came into contact with Wiccans at her high school and became curious. She converted to Paganism three years after joining the military. Subject C felt as if she had “finally found her spiritual niche,” and she has been researching Paganism and refining her knowledge since that time.

Subject C indicated that job security and contractual issues are the main differences between military Pagans and their civilian counterparts: “In the military, you cannot be fired from your job for being Neopagan. You are bound by a contract with the United States to dedicate yourself to your country, regardless of your spiritual path. The only way to get fired is to breach your contract.” She points out that civilian Pagans do not have that contractual safety net. In some areas that are more ideologically conservative, Pagans must hide their religious affiliation to protect their employment status. “Granted a [civilian] employer cannot legally fire you because of your religious beliefs,” she states, “but they can find a number of other reasons to eliminate your position.”

Subject C says she sometimes felt as if she were “held hostage in small quarters while on TDY [Temporary Duty Yonder] with people who are convinced you drink goats’ blood, are afraid you are going to sacrifice their children to the devil, and convinced it is their sole duty to ‘save’ you . . . for months at a time.” She now regrets not filing a formal complaint against a particularly intolerant Evangelical Christian soldier and states that the situation became so stressful that she “could not be around this man without getting physically ill.” She dreaded going to work knowing she would either find antiliberal literature or religious tracts at her work area. At times, this individual would confront Subject C by asking her to attend church with him or “advise” her to seek spiritual guidance from a military chaplain.

Subject C has mixed feelings about how to reconcile the requirements of military service and her religious ethics. She feels that the military would be in conflict with her personal beliefs when there is war, especially if she were part of an unjust, occupying force. “I am totally against the concept of going into other countries to dictate how things will be run there,” she emphasizes. However, she concedes that there are mitigating circumstances that do allow for war and military conflict: “On the other hand, I also understand the fact that in order to keep extreme evils from getting out of hand, someone [i.e., the U.S. armed forces] has to step up and neutralize those extreme evils.”

Interview 4: Subject J

Subject J is a male in his early forties who is a twenty-five-year veteran of the U.S. Air National Guard. He holds a bachelor’s degree in psychology and sociology in addition to certificates acquired through various military technical schools. Subject J identifies himself as a Gardnerian Wiccan. He was, he says, “initiated to First, Second and Third Degrees according to Gardnerian Law by a valid Gardnerian High Priestess.”

In his view, authenticity can only be attained through a so-called lineaged tradition. This refers to a certain bifurcation or dichotomy within the overall community of Wicca. Lineaged Wiccans of the Gardnerian Wicca tradition claim a higher spiritual status and greater degree of spiritual authenticity by virtue of having been initiated into a long line—a lineage—of secretly initiated Wiccan predecessors. These lineaged Wiccans set themselves further apart through special ceremonies, rituals, and retreats that are closed to the nonlineaged.

Subject J therefore expressed a certain hostility toward nonlineaged Pagans, whom he characterizes as mere “book-Pagans,” referring to those Pagans and/or Wiccans who are self-taught by reading various books on Wicca or other forms of contemporary Paganism. He expressed an attitude that is often found among representatives of the British traditionalist form of Wicca and is a point of contention within the Pagan community that often sparks heated exchanges.

Subject J converted to Paganism in 1971. His parents were hostile to the idea of his new faith. He was originally an atheist, but he became curious about Wicca after seeing an advertisement: “I saw an ad from Sybil Leek, [a] famous Witch and decided to see who this freak was. She made sense, I studied more then realized that the morals and beliefs were the same ones I had developed on my own.” Subject J did not describe his ethnicity as an

aspect of his life that strongly influences his religious practices. He stated, “Ha! I’m Irish, My family feels that if I must be Pagan, couldn’t I choose an Irish tradition instead of a British one?”

Subject J admitted that there were sometimes conflicts between his religious beliefs and what he regards as patriotism. “The [Wiccan] Rede,” he says, “tells me to Harm None but the government tells me to invade and conquer other nations.” Interpretations of the Wiccan Rede vary from person to person. Some Pagans feel that it allows for self-defense, but others presume that it demands that believers be pacifists. Subject J does not explain how he reconciles this conflict between following lawful orders and adhering to the moral code of his religious tradition. The twenty-five years he spent in the service suggest that this conflict is not serious enough to cause him to leave the service or disobey lawful orders.

The special issues that Subject J faced as a Pagan in the service were being isolated from fellow Pagans and being ordered to perform actions that civilian Pagans would oppose. “We tend to be more solitary as we are transferred from our coven to our new location,” he notes, “and in most bases, we are the only Pagans within hundreds of miles. Try and find another Witch in Saudi Arabia!” This isolation encouraged Pagans to be more eclectic and self-reliant, but he acknowledged a change in the ease of communication with the rise of Internet access.

Another matter Subject J confronted was his inability to list his religious affiliation in his official military record: “After fighting for months with CBPO [Consolidated Base Personnel Office], I finally enlisted the chaplain. [I] gave him some material to read, then talked to him about my religious freedom and his job to assist me, and he and a major went with me to CBPO to force them to change my records.”

He added that things have changed and that the system has been modified to allow Pagans to list their religious affiliation. He attributes this change to the actions of people like himself who were willing to demand fair and equitable treatment, and he asserts that most military Pagans would get better accommodation within the military if they would “approach it right and show them [the chain of command] some courtesy.” Subject J appears to have a good relationship with the military in general. At some point in his career, he was asked by a chaplain to supervise the Pagan Study Group at the Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. He believes that most military members are accepting of Pagans in the service and that he experiences tolerance mixed with humor. He states that civilian Pagans do not understand his contractual obligations to the military. He also believes that the newest generation of military Pagans is ignorant of the issues his generation faced and overcame to gain acceptance within the ranks.

Interview 5: Subject A1

Subject A1 is a male in his early thirties. He has served in the military for fourteen years, as a member of the U.S. Army, the Army National Guard, and the Air National Guard. In the course of his duties, he has served as rifleman team leader, tank crewman, and infantryman team leader. Subject A1 identifies himself as a member of the Nova Roma, a Roman Reconstructionist Pagan group, and a *Camillus* (student priest) of Minerva. He distinguishes his tradition from other types of Paganism:

Like many Recons [Reconstructionists] I am not completely comfortable with the Neopagan label—not necessarily because I find it inappropriate, but because it has become almost totally associated with Wicca and its offshoots. My religion has no more in common with Wicca than it does with Christianity or Hinduism, and while I am not adverse to the idea of unity among Pagan faiths, I am troubled by the tendency of the Wiccan mainstream to assume they are the voice of all Neopagans.

This sentiment is commonly found among military Heathens or Asatru members (Nordic Reconstructionist Pagans) as well. Reconstructionists see themselves as separate and independent from those in other forms of Paganism, particularly Wicca, by virtue of what they consider their greater dedication to accurately “reconstructing” and reestablishing ancient Pagan faiths. Many Reconstructionist Pagans dismiss Wicca as lacking the authenticity of true roots in the European past, and they object to what they perceive as Wiccans’s everywhere-and-nowhere eclecticism and overly lax requirements for membership. Another point of difference is that Reconstructionists often have noticeably more conservative social mores than do members of Wicca, who tend to be more accepting of alternative lifestyles.

Subject A1 was attracted to Wicca at some point but was repelled by the influence of popular culture that he perceived in Wicca. For those seekers attempting to find a legitimate means of expressing their Pagan faith without feeling pressured to accept everyone who identifies with Pagan, Reconstructionist traditions offer a more orderly and solemn means of achieving that goal. However, all of these groups still contain the primary structural qualities of Paganism, which are polytheism, pantheism, and animism.

Subject A1 did not feel that his ethnicity influenced his choice of religious practices: “Ethnically I am Celtic [Scots-Irish] with a touch of English and German. I have looked into Celtic Recon[structionist] Paganism a bit, but I never felt connected to it the way I do with Religio Romana.” He

described his family as “half Roman Catholic, half Congregationalist, both somewhat laissez-faire about religion.” His conversion to Religio Romana took place during his military career. He described himself prior to this conversion as “casually agnostic.” As he matured, he felt agnosticism created a spiritual void in his life, which instigated his exploration of different religions: “[The] Abrahamic faiths were out, since I could never intellectually stomach the absolutism of monotheism. Eastern religions looked interesting, but the cultural gap was too wide. Wicca held some attraction at first, but I was soon put off by much of the ‘popular’ culture and ‘psuedo-history’ that seemed to go with it. It just struck me as too ‘trendy,’ almost all style and no substance.”

He discovered Nova Roma, a website dedicated to Roman Reconstructionism on the Internet, while researching Roman history, and from this grew his eventual embrace of this Reconstructionist form of Paganism.

Subject A1 asserts that Pagans experience a higher level of tolerance in the military now than in the past. He believes that this is the product of increasing general acceptance by society, but he does not think that his civilian counterparts understand or want to understand his contractual obligations to the military. This fact is evident to him through the sometimes flamboyant alternative lifestyles flaunted by some civilian Pagans, such as the Goth and Fetish lifestyles, and the partial acceptance of illegal drug use in the civilian Pagan community. In addition, he perceives hostilities between military and civilian Pagans over ideological differences.

Subject A1’s major complaint about the military is that “there is no Religio Romana option for [his] dog tags,” which means that in his own branch of the armed services, he is unable to choose a religious designation that officially and accurately portrays his religious affiliation. Nevertheless, this visible lack of support for his specific tradition does not affect his desire to serve his country. He feels that there is no conflict between his religious beliefs and the concept of patriotism, stating, “I see Patriotism as a virtue and a civic duty in the finest Roman tradition.”

Interview 6: Subject B

Subject B is a male in his late twenties. He is a first-class petty officer in the U.S. Navy and has served in the military for twelve years. The subject primarily identifies himself as a Shaman, as well as “a member of a coven [Wiccan community] who has developed ways to interweave various spiritual paths into Neopaganism.” He has been initiated twice, once into a Sumerian Wiccan coven in 1987 and then, in 1997, by the coven to which he currently belongs.

Subject B is not troubled by the issue of authenticity. For him, authenticity is not determined by scholarship, tradition, or ethnicity but by an expanded consciousness and an examined life: “I do, act and believe in a way that feels right to me. My main goal is to act without regret. Authentic Neopaganism cannot be found in a book . . . to me authentic Neopaganism is following your heart and instincts where they lead you. To be totally aware of life around you—not just human life—and embrace it. To have an understanding of [the] environment and what direct consequences my acts may have on it.”

Subject B was brought up in the Church of Christ, a denomination in which his adoptive father was a minister. The subject explains that “at the age of 10, I started to actually listen to his sermons from the pulpit. At age 12, I realized I couldn’t make his interpretations work for me spiritually.” By fourteen, he had stopped attending church services. He could not reconcile his inner spiritual life with traditional interpretations of biblical Scripture. This profound dissatisfaction led Subject B on a lengthy spiritual search. He explored various aspects of the Abrahamic faiths, which included attending an assortment of churches, temples, and synagogues. The subject found Paganism after a long and careful search.

Subject B does not feel that his ethnicity influenced his choice of religious traditions. As an adopted child, he has only just discovered his biological mother’s ethnic ancestry is Native American. He has researched his mother’s people and their customs and language, “but speaking fluently in Apache dialect isn’t a goal of mine. [It] would be nice to do some day but it isn’t a priority.”

The unique issues that Subject B faced as a military Pagan occurred mainly in boot camp. Prior to his enlistment, he was already a member of a Wiccan coven, and this obliged him to educate his chain of command regarding his religious identity from the very beginning of his service: “Upon my arrival at boot camp in San Diego I was immediately told that only authorized religious jewelry could be worn. I was wearing a pentagram and was told to remove it. After a few calm words, followed by a few harsh words . . . I found myself standing in front of the Commanding Officer. A conference call was placed to the chaplain and the pentagram stayed.”

Subject B displayed considerable courage in that moment. Company commanders are intimidating creatures, especially in the face of any behavior that might be considered insubordinate. Although the option of communication with the commanding officer is available, it is not a simple social call; taking any complaint that far up the chain of command can prove treacherous if the commanding officer decides that the complaint is without merit or, worse yet, that the plaintiff has committed an infraction. In boot camp, the best thing to do is to blend in with the other recruits. The

less attention you draw to yourself, the less likely you are to attract the divine wrath of your company commander. Subject B singled himself out by refusing an order to remove his religious medal and by visiting the commanding officer over the matter. This process had other implications for the subject: “While in boot camp—essentially confined with 80 others [recruits]—news of this spread like wildfire. During the first few days I was referred to by many names intending to be hurtful, some of them quite original, such as ‘Witch.’ A few times I attempted to explain my beliefs but once realization set in that my elucidations were falling on deaf ears, I dismissed their statements and chose not to respond.” Eventually, the teasing stopped, and Subject B was able to assimilate successfully into his company.

At a later point in his career, another incident occurred in which the subject had to struggle to explain and defend another aspect of his religious practices. This incident was the closest Subject B ever came to filing a formal complaint against a command. He was “denied a security clearance” because he had acknowledged having had “out-of-body experiences.” Fortunately, “a phone call to the Central Adjudication Facility cleared the matter up. I was granted clearance.”

In the military, some might construe an out-of-body experience to be a sign of mental instability, just as claiming to be following the will of a god could also be construed as hearing voices. Interpreting the mental health implication of spiritual and religious experience is a highly subjective endeavor. Subject B stood his ground, explained himself and his religious perspective, and was ultimately able to overcome the skepticism and suspicion that others felt toward him. Currently, Subject B is called on by his chaplain to be the point of contact for Pagans within his command and to make himself available for any questions the chaplain might have about Paganism.

Subject B feels that the military is becoming increasingly tolerant of military Pagans: “This, in my belief, is due to the number of Pagan service men and women who have stood up and said, “Yes, I’m Pagan.” He believes that if Pagans want to receive recognition and accommodation like members of other faiths, they must stand up and be counted. In addition, he maintains that civilian Pagan organizations need to support military Pagans and help them reach their goals without conflicting with the mission of the military. He feels that civilians who live in areas around military installations are more understanding of his contractual obligations to the military but that such knowledge is not common in other areas where civilian Pagans are less informed about military life.

In his opinion, many of the difficulties he has experienced are due to a poor impression made by military Pagans who forget that they are in the military, such as “younger service members who feel the need to have a

sword and candles and incense to be spiritual. These things cannot be kept on a base. No matter what the religion. Unfortunately the youth of today is smothered in [publisher's name removed] books and New Age garbage that tells them they *must* have these items." According to military regulations, candles and incense are considered fire hazards on vessels or in the barracks; swords, knives, and other weapons must be kept in the armory, not in one's locker.

When questioned if his notion of patriotism conflicted with his interpretation of his religion, Subject B answered quite eloquently: "Blind patriotism, yes. Questioning patriotism, no. To question the methods and reasoning behind decisions is to exercise free will. To blindly follow is to exercise the phrase 'ignorance is bliss.' Patriotism . . . has been used as a weapon against individuals exercising their constitutional right to protest. I feel that protesters are just [as] patriotic as those in support of policies made by our legislative branches."

The subject expresses the belief that the U.S. Constitution protects dissenting speech as well as supportive speech, and he understands that he is oath-bound, under the Constitution of the United States, to protect the right of free speech for all citizens.

Interview 7: Subject H

Subject H is a member of the U.S. Air Force. He is a captain in his late twenties and has served in the armed forces for ten years. He is a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy and currently serves as a staff officer. He identifies himself as a member of Asatru, a form of Nordic Reconstructionist Paganism also known as Heathenism. Before the subject answered the first few questions of his interview, he provided a disclaimer:

On the surface, many lump us [Heathens] together with Neopagans, as we do follow many gods, and have a magical system (such as runes or Seidr). However, Heathens and Asatruar do not consider themselves to be Neopagan, as we believe there is nothing "neo" or new to our faith. We try, as best as possible, to re-create and follow the native religions of our ancestors (in Europe), before the influence of outside religious (such as Christianity, Islam, or Judaism). This translates into various differences from the Neopagan movement—i.e., our lack of use of the Pentagram (which originated from Greece), lack of priests and priestess, lack of ceremonial robes, etc. In fact most Heathens and Asatruar believe our way is more in-tune with Hinduism . . . given the similarities we have with Hinduism and the fact that our peoples were once one (Indo-European).

Subject H wished to establish a particular religious context for his answers, since he objected to the use of the word *Pagan* or *Neopagan*, even as an umbrella term for the diverse expression of contemporary Pagan practices.

Subject H is very concerned with his authenticity and relates this to ethnicity. As he explains, “I strive to practice the religion of my ancestors. And I am lucky in that there are hundreds of resources to draw from to do so, because so much of Scandinavia never fell to the Roman Empire and remained very isolated and Heathen until the eleventh century.”

For Subject H, authenticity can only be achieved through careful reconstruction of historically attested forms of past Pagan religion. He offers Asatru, Huna, and Hinduism as examples of authentic Paganism. He shared the following observations about the lack of authenticity among non-Reconstructionist paths of Paganism: “I think the term ‘authentic Neopaganism’ is an oxymoron. Neopaganism is a wide movement, and a religion, and many Neopagans blatantly admit that it is a new tradition, not an old one. They would also argue [that] this fact, in and of itself, does not hurt its authenticity; for to them, what makes something authentic is whether or not it works for them, not whether or not someone else was doing it hundreds of years ago.”

The knowledge that others might invent or alter the worship of Pagan deities or openly practice mix-and-match syncretism is repugnant to Subject H as well as many other Heathens and Asatru members. Subject H’s statements are in accord with the statements of other Heathens interviewed for this project.

Ethnicity strongly influences Subject H: “Most of my family is German by ethnicity, along with a little American Indian. I do extensive research on my family tree, and try to follow as closely as possible the practices of this ethnic group prior to the conversion to Christianity. In actuality, much of modern day Germany and Scandinavia still celebrate Heathen festivals and live out Heathen principles anyway.”

As this statement bears out, Subject H feels strongly that his religion provides him with a direct link to his ancestors and to their native land. This belief is quite different from the position of many modern Eclectic Pagans, such as Wiccans, for whom spiritual value or religious truth is not related to ancestry to the degree that it is for Heathens.

Subject H was raised by Christian parents. He had been a practicing Fundamentalist Christian for twenty-two years before he converted to Heathenry. This conversion happened during his military career, and he stated, “My realization was extremely painful.” Ironically, he pointed out, “I hate to use the word convert, because in many ways I’ve always been the way that I am now. Even my given name . . . is Heathen.” His given or legal name rep-

resented a kind of spiritual validation in regard to his membership in the Heathen community.

Subject H stated that he faced no special issues unique to his situation as a Heathen in the military. However, he did indicate that he has considered making a formal complaint on a recent incident at his military installation:

A Neopagan group I work with at a [military] post just started experiencing harassment from the military police [MP]. The MPs broke up their ritual (I was not present for this particular event) and demanded to see paperwork, which they [the MPs] had already been given prior to the event. Then they aggressively patrolled the area all night, disturbing the concentration and enjoyment of those present. Furthermore, they revoked the group's right to meet outside (which is necessary, given they are a nature religion), despite the fact that the group was abiding [by] all [military] regulations. Then the MPs harassed one of the members who is also an MP. I believe this issue will be resolved, however. They are in the process of letting the Chaplain staff know, whom I am sure will rectify the situation. Through I do believe this is religious persecution, I think it centered on the fact that Pagans are different, not that they are non-Christian.

Subject H makes it clear that this was an isolated incident. He believes that the increasing number of Pagans, officers and enlisteds alike, are increasingly compelling the rest of the personnel to accept Paganism in the ranks.

Subject H does not feel that his religious beliefs are in conflict with the concept of patriotism, but he does explore the different approaches of Pagans and Heathens in this matter. He observes that most Wiccans adhere to the Wiccan Rede and in particular the key principle "An' it harm none, do what ye will." Subject H believes that it is the Rede that "centers the Neopagan movement around harmony, balance, and peace" and adds that, though these are "noble traits," the Rede "leads some Neopagans to the dilemma of when, if ever, to use force."

Subject H makes it clear that the Heathens do not follow the Rede and that "at the heart of all Asatru is conflict, not harmony; conflict between good and evil, order and chaos." Conflict is accepted and even encouraged because it generates change, which Asatru value as a force that resists inaction or stagnation. Subject H further states, "Add to this an extreme regard for faithfulness (oath-taking), loyalty (the Germanic peoples were bound to their tribe), and a love of freedom (some Heathen nations, such as Iceland, did not even have a king, but were ruled by a democracy called the Althing). Patriotism, therefore, is only natural among Asatruars, because it celebrates freedom, loyalty, and a just fight against those who oppose it."

He feels that this is underscored by the fact that he has “been to many moots [large Heathen gatherings] where all present were veterans.” Subject H implies that his patriotism as an American is enhanced by his membership in the Asatru community, which is in turn supported by his connection to his ancestral past.

Interview 8: Subject A2

Subject A2 is a male in his early thirties. He is a staff sergeant in the U.S. Air Force who has served for eight years. He has two years of college in addition to his education in military technical schools. He identifies himself as a self-trained, “self-dedicated,” solitary Wiccan: “[I] have not been part of a group, instead, [I am] self dedicated to Dragon Tradition Wicca because of my solitary orientation. I feel it would be difficult to join a particular group then receive orders to have to relocate overseas or to a different state.”

For military personnel, relocation is a common obstacle to involvement in religious communities or religious training. Subject A2 has overcome part of this by enrolling online in an instruction course for novice Wiccans. The Internet provides military personnel with the opportunity to create a stable support system in virtual reality.

Subject A2 views authenticity as a spiritual quality, partly an internalized quality of individual adherents and partly universal, such that it can be found in other religious traditions besides Wicca: “The term has only as much relevance as we place on it. There are a lot of different traditions out there, each with their own concepts. But the spirit of Wicca is within them all and I believe that is where the authenticity resides.”

Subject A2 converted to Wicca during his military service, and he describes the process of his conversion as “gradual”: “I use that term because I didn’t wake up one morning and say, ‘I think I’ll be Pagan from now on.’” He reports that he was forced to attend Christian church in his youth and was discouraged from questioning Christian beliefs.

“Deep inside I knew there was much more out there, all I had to do was free myself from the chains of blind dogma and go find it. What drew me away from Christianity was the closed-mindedness and the inability to answer questions,” he adds. “I was not raised a Pagan. I became aware of it and was very interested but did not convert for a few years until I realized that my entire life had been lived as a Pagan.”

Subject A2, a Native American of Cherokee descent, did not ascribe great importance to his ethnicity as a contributing factor to his religious beliefs or identity, but neither did he reject the importance of ethnicity out of hand: “My ethnic background has not affected my personal practices but it

does provide me with resources on which to draw upon.” He did not discuss how his membership in an indigenous tribal community or his adherence to contemporary Pagan Witchcraft affects his status or acceptance in either group.

According to this subject, “The only issue I have faced [in the military] is the [reaction of shock] . . . when I tell people what I believe. After I break down their stereotypes and educate them, the issue goes away.” While stationed in Baghdad, he set up time and space so his subordinates could hold a weekly Bible study, making religious fellowship accessible to those who might not otherwise find the time or energy to attend regular Christian services while working in a combat zone. Ironically, he approached the chapel officials about Pagan services “to ask if they could start a Pagan group but [he] was brushed off and told that they were too busy and that [he] should call back later.” He did not pursue the matter further because of other pressing duties.

Subject A2 expressed cautious optimism about the military’s treatment of and attitude toward Pagans. He feels that the most important change that needs to happen would be “the full recognition of the Pagan faith in the military.” He acknowledges a lot of changes have occurred over the preceding decade: “Ten years ago it would [have] been impossible for someone to have Wicca on their dog tags. Mine has it stamped on it today. Another change is the use of military facilities. Ten years ago if a Pagan wanted to worship indoors, they would have been thrown out and ridiculed. Today we call the Chaplain, who will provide us with the accommodations we need.”

This account of improved treatment by the military authorities is in contrast to what he feels is the general attitude toward Pagans of other military members. “From what I have seen and experienced,” he notes, “the general attitude towards Pagans in the military is one of disbelief or disgust.”

Subject A2 feels that there is no conflict between his Wiccan beliefs and his patriotism. He sees patriotic feelings as purely subjective: “To me, Patriotism is a concept created by each individual. How one chooses to support their country is totally up to them because we live in a free society.”

These interviews with Pagans serving in the military demonstrate the variety of forms of Paganism represented in the U.S. armed forces, as well as the variety of attitudes among those Pagans. As Americans who are both Pagans and soldiers, they face special challenges in juggling their various identities, values, beliefs, and commitments. If we take the past experience of African Americans in the U.S. military as a guide, it may be that military society will accept and respect Pagans as equal members of their communities some time before mainstream American society is ready to take this step. If Colin Powell, the African American son of Caribbean immigrants,

could rise to become the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and then Secretary of state, perhaps the day will come when a Pagan American can also aspire to such a high position.

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Glossary of Terms

Abrahamic A term used to denote the three great monotheistic, Middle Eastern–derived religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, referring to the position of the Old Testament patriarch Abraham as the earliest prophet of all three religions.

Aesir The main family of Norse deities, whose ranks include: Odin, the multi-functional, one-eyed, Shamanistic god of wisdom, magic, war, death, healing, and poetry who endlessly roams the Nine Worlds in search of knowledge and wisdom; Frigg, the equally wise wife of Odin, who is said to “know all but say nothing”; Thor, the jovial yet short-tempered, hard-drinking, and sometimes buffoonish thunder god who fights giants and other demonic beings and so protects mankind with his weapon of choice, a short-handled hammer, and rides the heavens in a cart drawn by a goat; Tyr, god of truth and victory, who lost one hand in a scheme to deceive and trap the dangerous wolf Fenrir; Baldur, the kind and honest god, son of Odin, whose untimely death was mourned by all the gods except the malevolent trickster Loki; Heimdall, the watchman of the gods, whose job it will be to warn the gods of the approach of an army of gods and demons, led by Loki, that will presage the world-destroying Battle of Ragnarok, which will lay waste to the world and claim the lives of all the gods except for Baldur, his brother Hoth, and Thor’s son Magni, who will together reign when the world is re-created from its destruction. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Aitvaras (pl. aitvarai) Lithuanian demigods, sometimes portrayed as fiery beings or dragons, who bring good luck and prosperity to those they favor. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Algiz A rune in the Germanic runic alphabet, sacred in Nordic-Germanic Pagan Reconstruction movements such as Asatru and Heathenry. (See Runes.) Algiz symbolizes the powerful antlers of the elk as well as the sharp-leaved sedge plant. On the magical or metaphysical level, algiz is believed to provide personal protection, repel evil, and safeguard property against known and unknown forces. *Relates to Pagans in the U.S. Military and to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Allsherjargodi (Allsherjargoði) The highest-ranking priest and spiritual authority in medieval Icelandic Pagan religion and in modern Nordic Paganism in Iceland; not found in modern Nordic Paganism in the United States or other countries. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Althing In medieval Iceland, the annual Thing gathering of Godi and their followers from around Iceland. At this gathering, the same activities would be conducted as at a regional Thing but with a higher level of authority, so that decisions and judgments made at the Althing would have priority over those formed at a regional Thing. Althings in modern Nordic Paganism are primarily ritual events in both Iceland and the United States. (See Thing.) *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Ard-bandraoí Female high Druid, from the Irish *bean* (woman) and *draoí*, (See Druid.) *Relates to Druidry.*

Ard Draoi High Druid, a term used by the Owl Grove and other Irish Druids to signify the leader or overseer of a grove. *Relates to Druidry.*

Asatru (Ásatrú) Literally, trust/troth in the Aesir, the main family of gods in Norse-Scandinavian mythology; belief in the Norse gods. More popularly, a common term for modern Nordic religious Pagan movements. (See Aesir and Heathen.) *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Athame A type of double-bladed ritual knife used by Neopagan Witches and some other Neopagans. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Bard (also Bard in Irish language) A member of an ancient rank of Celtic poets (poet in Irish is *file*, pl. *filid*). *Relates to Druidry.*

Befana In Italian folklore, a good Witch who flies down the chimney on the Day of the Epiphany of the Magi (January 6) and leaves gifts for well-behaved children. Possibly derived from a corruption of the Latin *epifania* (epiphany), although there is some evidence of a local deity named Befanus from late Roman antiquity. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Benandante (pl. benandanti) Literally, “good walkers.” In seventeenth-century Friuli, Italy, peasants who claimed they traveled in spirit to battle evil sorcerers over the fertility of the crops during certain appointed times of year. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Benevento A town outside of Naples where Witches were said to assemble for their sabbats around an ancient walnut tree. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Blogas (also blogybe) Lithuanian term for badness or evil. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Blot (Blót) Literally, blood; in pre-Christian times, the primary ritual of animal sacrifice, with blood of slain animals sprinkled on worshippers and statues of the gods. In modern Nordic Paganism, a bloodless ritual in which mead is substituted for blood. The mead is contained in a sacred bowl and sprinkled onto the partici-

pants and onto altars and images of the gods by the priest (godī) or priestess (gythia). The mead is poured into the ground or into the fire as a final offering to the gods or ancestral spirits. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Boschetto (pl. boschetti) Literally, a grove or copse; in Italian American Stregheria, a small group of practitioners who meet regularly for worship. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Breve (pl. brevi) In Italian folk practice, a small cloth bag filled with good luck charms, worn around the neck for protection. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Celt A member of a cultural group of peoples who inhabited parts of Europe and Asia Minor in pre-Roman times. The definition extends to a speaker of one of the Indo-European family of languages, including Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Breton, Welsh, Manx, and Cornish. *Relates to Druidry.*

Celtic-Based Spirituality Relating to spirituality that incorporates Celtic qualities or a Reconstructionist system of belief and practice based on that of the ancient Celtic peoples. *Relates to Druidry.*

Command Chaplain The senior chaplain assigned to or designated by a commander of a staff, command, or unit. *Relates to Pagans in the U.S. military.*

Contadino (pl. contadini) Peasant; a landless serf who performs agricultural labor for a landowner in exchange for rent and sometimes other benefits. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Dagotuves Autumn festival in Lithuania celebrating the planting of rye.

Daina (pl. dainas) Lithuanian folk songs understood as sacred texts within Romuva and Lithuanian Pagan religion.

Darna Lithuanian term meaning “harmony,” cognate with Indian term *dharma*. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Defixionum Tabellae (Latin) Clay or lead tablets inscribed with curses directed at specific individuals; a form of Roman magic. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Deiseal Irish-language word meaning “clockwise.” *Deiseal* has the meaning of turning to the right but also has connotations of “positive,” “exact,” and “pleasant.” The word *Deosil* (sunwise) is part of Neopagan terminology and is most likely an anglicized form of the Irish word. *Relates to Druidry.*

Dievas Lithuanian sky god, the chief creator god in Lithuanian mythology, whose name is cognate with many “god” terms in Indo-European languages, such as the

English “divine,” the French “dieu,” and the Sanskrit “deva.” *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Directive A military communication in which policy is established or a specific action is ordered. Broadly speaking, any military communication that initiates or governs action, conduct, or procedure. *Relates to Pagans in the U.S. military.*

Draíocht Irish-language word for magic. *Relates to Druidry.*

Druid A priest in the ancient Celtic religion or a follower of modern earth-based spirituality.

Druidry A system of belief and/or practice of an ancient Celtic priest or a system of belief and/or practice of a modern follower of earth-based spirituality.

Dual Faith The phenomenon, first noted by George P. Fedotov in his classic work *The Russian Religious Mind*, of simultaneously believing or participating in two different religious traditions without concern for possible contradictions between them. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism; found in other traditions as well.*

Eclectic The form of modern Paganism that freely combines pre-Christian European religions of different regions, peoples, and historical periods without great concern for historical accuracy, often displaying considerable artistic creativity. The best-known form of Eclectic Paganism is Wicca. Contrasts with Reconstructionist.

Equinizio d’Autunno The autumn equinox; celebrated by Italian American Streghe on September 21. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Equinozio della Primavera The spring equinox; celebrated by Italian American Streghe on March 21. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Fanarra In Italian American Stregheria, the name of one of the three branches of the tradition, said to be from northern Italy. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Festa dell’Estate Literally, “the summer feast.” In Italian American Stregheria, the holiday celebrated on June 21 in honor of the summer solstice. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Festa dell’Ombra Literally, “the feast of the shadow.” In Italian American Stregheria, the holiday celebrated on November 1. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Festa di Lupercus Literally, “the feast of Lupercus.” In Italian American Stregheria, the holiday celebrated in early February in honor of the Roman Lupercalia, a purification festival. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Festa d'Inverno Literally, “the winter feast.” In Italian American Stregheria, the holiday celebrated on December 21 in honor of the winter solstice. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Folkish The position of modern Asatru followers or Heathens who believe that the Nordic religious heritage can only be truly understood, appreciated, and acted on by persons of Nordic-Germanic ancestry. This requirement limits membership in Asatru or Heathen communities and participation in Nordic Pagan rituals to persons who can make a plausible case for an ancestral link to past peoples of Germanic Northern Europe. The Folkish position is usually defined in opposition to the less restrictive Universalist position, but it is worth noting there are also Nordic Pagans who take mediating positions between these two opposing points of view. (See Universalist.) *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Folletto (pl. folletti) In Italian folklore, an elf or nature sprite. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Fylgja An Old Norse term meaning “follower”; in the Nordic Reconstructionist, Neoshamanic practice known as seidr, an animal ally or personal spirit helper. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Gabija Lithuanian goddess of fire, particularly the hearth fire, somewhat akin to the Greek goddess Hestia. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Gediminas Lithuanian Grand Duke from 1316 to 1341 who founded the capital city of Vilnius, resisted the encroachment of Germanic crusaders through both military and diplomatic means, and greatly expanded the size and power of the Duchy of Lithuania. A statue of Gediminas was erected in the late 1990s and now stands near the great Catholic cathedral in modern Vilnius. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Giornata di Diana Literally, “Diana’s day.” Celebrated by Italian American Streghe on May 1. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Godi (Goði) A chieftain with religious authority in medieval Iceland; in modern Nordic Paganism, a priest who performs Blots and other rituals. The female form is gythia (gyðia). *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Grigori In Stregheria, the spiritual guardians of the four cardinal directions: east, south, west, and north.

Grimas In Stregheria, the leader of one of the three branches of the tradition.

Grove A Druidic group or an assemblage of Druids for the purpose of practicing ritual. *Relates to Druidry.*

Heathen Common term for modern Nordic Reconstructionist Pagans, based on a word used in ancient writings to describe non-Christian Germanic peoples. It is popular among Nordic Pagans who object to the terms *Pagan* and *Paganism*. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism*.

Heathenry Common term for modern Nordic Paganism, preferred by Heathens. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism*.

Hetman Cossack (Kozak) military-political leader. *Relates to Ukrainian Paganism*.

Hierophany A spiritual experience in which gods, goddesses, or other divine powers reveal themselves to a person.

Hof Nordic Pagan temple. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism*.

Hromada Congregation; community. *Relates to Ukrainian Paganism*.

Janara (pl. janare) Neapolitan dialect word for “witch.” *Relates to Stregheria*.

Janarra In Italian American Stregheria, the name of one of the three branches of the tradition, said to be from central Italy. *Relates to Stregheria*.

Jogaila Lithuanian Grand Duke from 1377 to 1387, king of Poland from 1386 to 1434. Jogaila accepted conversion to Christianity in 1387 as part of a military alliance with Poland that successfully defeated the crusading Teutonic Knights in the Battle of Grunwald/Zalgiris in 1410. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism*.

Jore Lithuanian spring fertility festival celebrated in April. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism*.

Kaledos Merry midwinter festival celebrated in Lithuania to mark the rebirth of the sun goddess Saule with songs, masquerades, and other joyful festivities. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism*.

Kankles Zither- or harplike stringed instrument used in Lithuanian folk music. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism*.

Kaukai Diminutive demigods in Lithuanian mythology, similar to dwarfs or elves in Scandinavian folklore. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism*.

Kernave A United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site because of archaeological evidence of occupation as far back as the Stone Age or Paleolithic era, the town of Kernave was a regional capital of medieval Lithuanian tribes until it was laid to waste by the Teutonic Knights in 1365 and again in 1390. The now bucolic hills of Kernave are the past

sites of forts, castles, and fierce battles. Because of its historical significance and natural beauty, Kernave is now a favored site for the Rasa/Kupoline summer solstice celebration. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Kindred A local fellowship or association of Nordic Pagans or Heathens who meet for rituals and other religious matters. The members of such an association are bound together by oaths of loyalty and mutual assistance, forming a supportive, often closely knit community. Such organizations range in size from as few as several members to as many as a hundred. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Kniaz' Commonly translated as "prince" or "grand prince." The function of the kniaz' evolved from that of tribal leader to something more akin to a monarch (by the eleventh century). *Relates to Ukrainian Paganism.*

Krivis High priest of Romuva, described in medieval sources as a kind of "Pagan pope" in the Baltic region of Prussia. This position was revived in 2002 by Romuva and is now occupied by Jonas Trinkunas. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Kucios Somber midwinter festival with focus on commemorating the dead, celebrated the night before Kaledos. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Kyïvan Rus' (Kievan Rus) The state that grew around Kyïv (Kiev) in the ninth and tenth centuries, with authority consolidated under the kniaz'es of the Rurykovich dynasty. It collapsed in the twelfth century as a result of internecine conflicts and Mongol invasions. Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarussian historians have all claimed it as part of their heritage. Ukrainian claims for a special relationship to Kyïvan Rus' are based on the territorial coincidence of Kyïvan Rus' and the modern territory of Ukraine, but these claims had been suppressed under czarist and Soviet rule and, though flourishing in the Ukrainian diaspora, have only reemerged within Ukraine since 1991. *Relates to Ukrainian Paganism.*

Laima Lithuanian goddess of fate and destiny and a highly revered deity. The month July and the linden tree are sacred to her. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Lararium In classical Roman practice, an ancestor shrine located in each home, maintained by the male head of the family. Reclaimed by Italian American Streghe as a household shrine to the ancestors. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Lares Classical Roman ancestor spirits, reclaimed by Italian American Streghe. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Lasa (See *Lares*.) *Relates to Stregheria.*

Lay Leader/Lay Reader A volunteer (“lay leader” in U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force; “lay reader” in U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps) appointed by the commanding officer and supervised and trained by the command chaplain to serve for a period of time to meet the needs of a particular religious faith group when their military chaplains are not available. The lay leader or lay reader may conduct services but may not perform any other activities usually reserved for the ordained clergy. *Relates to Pagans in the U.S. military.*

Linchetto (pl. *linchetti*) In Italian folklore, a spiritual being thought to cause nightmares, tangle the manes of horses, and do other mischief around the farm. In Stregheria, a helpful spiritual being; an elf or fairy.

Lios (pl. *liosanna*) Irish-language word for a ring fort or hill fort. (See Ráth, Síð.) *Relates to Druidry.*

Lucifero Literally, “light bearer.” According to Charles G. Leland’s *Aradia*, brother and lover of the goddess Diana; father of Aradia. In Italian folklore, a character sometimes associated with the evening star; later assimilated to Lucifer, the Christian Satan. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Lucino A character in Italian folktales. (See Lucifero.) *Relates to Stregheria.*

Malocchio The evil eye; in the folklore of much of the Mediterranean, the belief that certain individuals can harm others simply by looking at them. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Mindaugas Thirteenth-century Lithuanian leader who united Lithuanian tribes into a single entity, converted to Christianity, and was crowned king in 1253, ruling until 1263 when he was assassinated. His true religious affiliation is unclear, as there are some indications that he maintained Pagan attitudes after his coronation as a Christian monarch. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Nanta Bag In Italian American Stregheria, a bag with charms and amulets worn around the neck for protection. (See Breve.)

Nemeton A Celtic word for an ancient sacred grove, which most likely evolved from the Greek word for a sacred grove. The Irish-language word for sacred grove is *fíodhneimhidh*. *Relates to Druidry.*

Neopaganism (alternately, Neo-paganism) Modern-day Pagan religion, with the prefix *neo* denoting the new and contemporary nature of these religious movements and *Paganism* identifying the past religious traditions that the modern movements see themselves as building on. In the title of this volume and in several of the essays, the term *modern Paganism* is preferred to *Neopaganism*, with respect to the wishes expressed by actual members and practitioners of such religions.

Nonna Italian for “grandmother.” In author Tomie De Paola’s children’s story of the same name, a character named Strega Nonna (Grandma Witch) has various magical adventures. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Nordic Referring to Northern Europe or Scandinavia, geographically speaking; in linguistic terms, the related Germanic languages that prevail in Northern Europe. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Norse Referring to the language, literature, and pre-Christian mythology of Scandinavian peoples of the Viking era. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Ollamh (pl. Ollúna) Irish-language term for the rank of master-poet. *Relates to Druidry.*

Örlög Concept of individual fate or destiny in Norse religious tradition, as opposed to Wyrd, the overall fate in the cosmos as a whole. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Pagan In ancient and medieval times, a believer in pre-Christian religions of Europe. In modern times, a person involved in reviving such pre-Christian religions and adapting them for contemporary society. (See Paganism.)

Paganism The religion of pre-Christian Europe and its modern revivals. The term is open to various meanings and interpretations. Paganism can also be understood in a broader and more general sense to refer to pre-Christian and non-Christian religions of Indigenous peoples worldwide, but the term is used in this book in the more limited European sense.

Pasavario Lyge A fertility festival celebrated in Lithuania at the time of the spring equinox, March 21 or 22, to greet the arrival of spring. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Perkunas Lithuanian god of sky, storm, fertility, and justice, associated with oak trees and lightning bolts, similar to the Greek god Zeus, the Norse Thor, or the Vedic Indra. Perkunas was the chief god of Lithuanian rulers in the final centuries of Paganism before the conversion of Jogaila in 1387. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Pilkape or Piliakalniiai Ancient grave mounds in Lithuania, sacred to modern Lithuanian Pagans as non-Christian grave sites. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Pravoslavia Orthodoxy; literally, right worship; also the name of the yazychnyk congregation/community led by Halyna Lozko. *Relates to Ukrainian Paganism.*

Ragnarok In Norse myth, the cataclysmic battle in which demonic forces of chaos, led by the trickster god Loki, overpower the combined forces Odin, Thor, and other Norse gods and destroy the world in fire and flood. (See Aesir.) *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Rasa/Kupoline/Jonines Three different names for the summer solstice celebration in Lithuania, typically held in a natural setting with a river or other body of water nearby. *Rasa* means “dew,” referring to the power of fertility and healing believed to be present in the dew of midsummer’s eve and morning. *Kupoline* refers to the *kupole*, a decorated branch or pole that is a chief ornamentation during the holiday. *Jonines* is the Christianized name for the festival, referring to the name of John the Baptist, probably in connection with the emphasis on water in the celebration. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Ráth (pl. Ráthanna) Modern Irish-language term for a ringfort or hill fort. *Relates to Druidry.*

Reconstructionist The type of modern Paganism that seeks to revive, reconstruct, and reinterpret ancient European religious traditions of particular geographic locations and ethnic origins with a high degree of accuracy, using folklore, mythology, historical records, archaeological data, and other sources. Contrasts with Eclectic.

Ridnovir Believer in and follower of the (Ukrainian) Native Faith religious movement. *Relates to Ukrainian Paganism.*

Ridnovira Native Faith movement. *Relates to Ukrainian Paganism.*

Ridnovirstvo Native Faith-ism. *Relates to Ukrainian Paganism.*

Rugiu Svente Lithuanian rye harvest festival celebrated at the end of July, essentially a festival of thanksgiving for the rye crop. Festivities include making and displaying doll-like figurines created out of the rye plant, representing the spirit of the harvest, and adorning cows and other animals with wreaths and garlands woven from rye. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Runes Ancient Germanic writing system or alphabet in which characters (runes) were carved or painted to convey brief messages. There are several different runic alphabets. For Heathens, Asatruarmenn, and other followers of Nordic-Germanic Reconstructionist Paganism, runes are believed to possess mystical significance and magical power. *Relates to Pagans in the U.S. military and to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

RUNVira The Native Ukrainian National Faith, a Neopagan religious movement. *Relates to Ukrainian Paganism.*

Runvíst Believer/member of the Native Ukrainian National Faith movement RUNVira. *Relates to Ukrainian Paganism.*

Samboriai Fertility festival celebrated in May in Lithuania. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Satanic Panic A term used to refer to sensationalized media attention to supposed cases of Satanism and devil worship in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the United States. For Pagans and Wiccans, such media-fed hysteria is a major problem, as it energizes commonly held stereotypes of Pagans and Wiccans as dangerous, psychopathic degenerates. *Relates to Pagans in the U.S. military and to modern American Paganism in general.*

Saule Lithuanian goddess of the sun, one of the chief deities of the pantheon, prominent in both the Rasa summer solstice festival and Kaledos winter solstice celebration. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Seid or Seith (Seiðr) In ancient Norse religion and as revived in modern Nordic Paganism, a Shamanistic practice of trancelike, oracular states used for contacting gods and spirits. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Síd The physical locations on the landscape that, in Irish folk tradition, are believed to be the entrances to the Otherworld and the dwelling place of the fairies. The most common loci for this belief are the archaeological features that remain of Iron Age ringforts. These structures now appear as circular mounds on the landscape, also called *liosanna* or *ráthanna* in the Irish language, and legends abound about them. *Relates to Druidry.*

Sidhe The fairies of Irish folk belief. *Relates to Druidry.*

Silvani In classical Roman folklore, forest-dwelling nature spirits. Reclaimed by Italian American Streghe.

Slua Sí The fairy host that inhabits the Otherworld of vernacular Irish tradition. *Relates to Druidry.*

Spae An Old Norse term meaning “speaking,” referring to a practice of divination or foretelling the future in Norse religious traditions now under reconstruction in modern Nordic Asatru/Heathenry/Paganism.

Spakona or Spamadur Male or female seers or diviners in Norse religious tradition. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Strega (pl. streghe) Literally, “witch.” When capitalized in Chapter 2, indicates a member of Italian American Stregheria.

Stregheria Italian American Neopagan Witchcraft.

Sumbel A drinking ritual featuring toasts to the gods and ancestors, the swearing of oaths, and other verbal expressions, considered sacred actions in this ritual context. A carved drinking horn, modeled on those of medieval times, is a popular ritual implement at such gatherings. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Thing In medieval Iceland, a regional assembly at which the Godi chieftains, supported by their Thingmen retinue, would gather to discuss legal, political, and business matters; review the legal code; adjudicate disputes; socialize; and trade in goods. It is a point of pride to Icelanders to consider the Thing an early form of democratic government. In modern Nordic Paganism, a regional assembly of Nordic Pagans at which they meet to affirm their religious and personal bonds, share information, conduct training workshops, perform Blots or other rituals, and socialize. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Three-Fold Law/Law of Three A concept found within Wiccan ethical teaching that the effects of any magical act will return to the practitioner with the same purpose as his or her original intentions, with threefold force.

Trinacrian Rose Coven Coven founded by Leo Martello and Lori Bruno in New York City; the first Italian American coven in the United States. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Triskele (Triskelion) A figure consisting of three curves, legs, lines, or arcs radiating from a center; a sacred symbol found in Celtic art and in the Neo-pagan Druid tradition. *Relates to Druidry.*

Tuathal Irish-language word meaning “counterclockwise” (*ag dul tuathal*: to go counterclockwise). This word has connotations of awkwardness or imprecision; for example, *an taobh tuathail* means the “left-hand side” but can also mean the “wrong side.” *Relates to Druidry.*

Universalist The position of modern Asatru followers or Heathens who believe that the Nordic religious heritage is of value for all mankind regardless of racial, genetic, or cultural background and that persons of any background who express a sincere dedication to Nordic gods and/or traditions should be allowed to participate in Asatru or Heathen communities and rituals. This position is usually defined in opposition to the more restrictive Folkish position, but it is worth noting that there are also Nordic Pagans who take mediating positions between these two opposing points of view. (See Folkish.) *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Vanir The second main families of deities, whose primary members are Njord (Njord), god of oceans, sailing and fishing; Freyja, daughter of Njord, goddess of

fertility, war, and death; and Freyr, twin brother of Freyja, god of fertility and peace. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Vecchia Religione Literally, “the old religion”; the allegedly pre-Christian worship of Diana and her daughter and prophetess, Aradia. *Relates to Stregheria.*

Vegan A vegetarian who consumes no animal products of any kind, including dairy or eggs.

Veglia In Italian folklore, a wake. In parts of Tuscany, may also refer to a night of song, dance, and music at a private home, often to celebrate the New Year or another special event. Reclaimed by Italian American Stregheria.

Velines Lithuanian Day of the Dead, celebrated November 1 with visits to ancestral graves and a family meal in which the dead are honored. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Velnias Lithuanian god of wisdom, magic, and the underworld, similar to the Norse god Odin or the Vedic god Varuna. He assists Dievas in creating the world in the main Lithuanian creation myth. In later times, under the influence of Christianity, Velnias became identified with the Christian devil. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Velykos A Lithuanian spring holiday that both welcomes the spring and commemorates the ancestors, as somewhat of a spring counterpart to Velines. Celebrated in early to mid-April. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Volva Seeress or female diviner in Norse religious tradition, prominent in the Norse mythological poem *Voluspá*, which tells of the god Odin’s consultation of a dead Volva, and in the *Saga of Erik the Red*.

Vydunas Lithuanian scholar and mystic, also known as Vilius Storosta, who lived from 1868 to 1953 and promoted revival of Lithuanian Pagan traditions along with attention to Lithuanian-Hindu parallels. He is understood as something of a founding father of Romuva. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

Weather Working A magical ritual done to alter the weather. *Relates to Druidry.*

Wheel of the Year The Neo-pagan term for the annual seasonal cycle. *Relates to Druidry.*

Wicca Neopagan Witchcraft derived from the writings and teachings of Gerald B. Gardner and his followers. More broadly, any type of Neopagan Witchcraft.

Wiccan Rede The core ethical principle of Wicca: “An’ it harm done, do what ye will.”

Working To practice ritual. When a Druidic group does a ritual, it is sometimes called a “working.” *Relates to Druidry.*

Wyrd Overall concept of fate in Norse religious tradition; fate in the cosmos as a whole, as opposed to *Ørlög*, or individual destiny. *Relates to Asatru/Heathenry/Nordic Paganism.*

Yazychnyk Ukrainian term for pagan, heathen, polytheist. *Relates to Ukrainian Paganism.*

Zemyna Lithuanian earth goddess. One of the most highly revered Lithuanian deities. In traditional Lithuanian belief, one should not strike the earth or spit on it. In Lithuanian, the word for human, *zmogus*, is etymologically derived from the word for earth, *zeme*. Humans are literally “earthlings” in Lithuanian. *Relates to Romuva and Lithuanian Paganism.*

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