

Al(t-Right) Father?

*Germanic Neopaganism, Nordic Nationalism, and
Modern Reception of Old Norse Religion and the Vikings*

Trevor Kieser



Master's Thesis in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies
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Summary

The purpose of this paper is to examine the modern reception of Old Norse religion and the image of the Vikings in a Nationalist context. I briefly describe the Old Norse pagan religion, as well as several extant sources on Old Norse pagan beliefs, before moving on to investigating the Germanic Neopagan movement which started in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. In order to explain this, however, there needs to be a necessary understanding of the creation and development of the Germanic *völkisch* movement, which directly led to Germanic Neopaganism.

Out of *völkisch* thinking came the modern-day forms of Germanic Neopaganism, manifesting chiefly in Asatru. Its relation to nationalist thinking and its focus on the Nordic gods have drawn comparisons between Asatruers and Nazis, but this line of thinking is unfair and diminishes the faith of all Asatruers. Nationalism in the Nordic countries has grown in the preceding decades and has used the shared Old Norse past as a thread, promoting White Nationalism and, at times, a new Nordic union with a singular government.

The use of the Old Norse past has been made contentious by nationalist groups using the same symbolism and sources as those wishing to show a patriotic love of their heritage. Groups like Norskk are taking the Vikings, commonly used in marketing to promote tourism in the Nordic countries, and turning them into symbols of White, male domination. While there is overlap between Asatru and some Nationalist groups like Norskk or the Nordic Resistance Movement, are they able to be separated, or Germanic Neopaganism's nationalist roots too deep?

Foreword

I would like to begin by thanking my advisor on this paper, Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, even though the topic was a little outside his wheelhouse. He was always there to challenge me on points that didn't quite land and encouraged me to investigate leads I wasn't sure would pan out. He was also understanding when I took a little longer than maybe I should have to send in a new chapter. More than once, I fell down the rabbit hole of researching and he was there to pull me out again.

To my parents, who have constantly supported me through all the crazy things I've done in my life: thank you. No matter where I've gone, you've been there to help pick me up when I fall. You've always encouraged me to make mistakes, even when you knew they would be disastrous, because you knew I would come out the other side smarter.

I wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for Julie, my rock in the storm. I had no idea that when she agreed to meet up for boardgames that we would be where we are today. This paper has driven me crazy and she has been there every step of the way to help bring me back to reality. From Denmark to Iceland, now Norway and then on to America, our love has been anything but typical, and I wouldn't have anyone else by my side.

I wish to thank all the teachers I've had along the way, specifically Pernille Hermann and Haraldur Bernharðsson. Pernille was the first teacher who really opened my eyes to the depths of memory studies and the Vikings. Without her class, "Introduction to the Viking Age," I would not have written this paper. Haraldur, likewise, gave me the opportunity to really explore my interests further and encouraging me to follow my passion within academia.

Finally, thank you to the friends I've made through these past couple years, both in Iceland as well as in Norway (especially Holly who helped me edit this all the way from Iceland). Your friendships and support have meant the world to me: from the long afternoons in Tjarnarbíó translating to the late nights at Rye's and Radio after a long week. I hope our paths won't be parted for long and I look forward to years of collaborations and conferences with you all.

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Introduction

The term “Viking” has gradually come more into fashion over the last few decades as interest in the Viking Age and early Medieval Scandinavia has grown, due in part to the mainstream media and pop culture. Movies depicting “Viking” warriors on the hunt for mythical monsters, like *The 13th Warrior* or *How to Train your Dragon*, or television shows such as *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* have opened the doors for the masses to look upon the idealized version of these medieval Nordic peoples. Music, too, has extolled the glory of the Viking with metal bands such as Týr singing their praises with songs like “Hold the Heathen Hammer High,” while other bands try to evoke a feeling of the Viking Age through folk instrumentation and shamanic imitation, like Wardruna and their *Runaljod* trilogy.

There are two key terms which need to be defined at the outset: *Nordic* and *Viking*. While *Nordic* traditionally refers to the land and peoples of modern-day Denmark, Finland, the Faeroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, for my purposes in this paper, when I use this term, it will mean all of those lands excluding Finland, and *Nordic peoples* will refer to only those who come from ethnically Germanic peoples groups. This excludes the Sámi of Northern Finland, Norway, and Sweden, as well as the Greenlandic Inuit.

As for the word *Viking*, there are several meanings attributed it, which makes it a difficult word to use consistently. According to Stefan Brink, it was used to mean a “sea warrior” as well as a “military expedition (over sea)” that these sea warriors undertook.¹ It could also be a reference to one who dwells in bays, known as *vík*, or what someone from the Oslo Fjord area was called, as the fjord was originally known as *Viken*.² He concludes that a “warrior-like semantic component seems to be found in the word.”³ The idea of the Viking as a strong, violent monolith of masculinity may then stem from these connotations.

“Viking” as a synecdoche for “medieval Scandinavian,” while common in modern nomenclature, is wrong. Popular culture has taken disparate views from multiple sources and cobbled them together into a Frankenstein’s monster of berserks and murderers, as seen in the above-mentioned multimedia platforms. While this may be representative of a small group of medieval Scandinavian peoples, it does not reflect all the nuance found within the various

¹ Stefan Brink, “Who were the Vikings?” in *The Viking World*, ed Stefan Brink and Neil Price, (London: Routledge, 2012), 6.

² Brink, “Who were the Vikings?” 6.

³ Brink, “Who were the Vikings?” 6.

societies of medieval Scandinavia. This variation and nuance also extends to the pagan Old Norse religions.

Within Old Norse pagan beliefs, there seemed to be a core group of gods and goddesses, as well as a common cosmology and eschatology with variations in the religious praxis across Scandinavia. Toponymic studies show greater popularity for certain gods depending on location. The god Tyr, for example, seems to have been popular in Denmark according to the high volume of place names associated with him, while the gods Ullr and Frey were popular in Northern Scandinavia.⁴ Modern-day Nordic pagans trace their religion back to these medieval Scandinavian beliefs, calling their religion *Asatru*, meaning “belief or faith in the Aesir.”⁵ Asatru focuses less on the Vikings and more on the surviving knowledge of the medieval Scandinavians. Two surviving texts are used extensively by Asatruers: the Eddic poems *Havamal* and *Voluspa*.⁶ *Havamal* is viewed as a guide for living a good life, while *Voluspa* lays out the stories of the creation and ending of the universe. These are not the only texts used, however, and many organizations often include the Icelandic sagas among their corpus as examples of daily pagan life in the Viking Age.

As stated before, the religious beliefs of the medieval pagan Scandinavians varied across the geography of the North. Not only do we see variance from within, but there is influence from without, namely from Christianity. By the time the above texts were written down, Christianity had been the dominant religion of the Nordic region for roughly 200-300 years, causing anything written about the pagan past to be filtered through a Christian point of view.⁷ This has not, however, stopped many Asatruers from staking their faith in this as an ancient religion.⁸ Asatru’s view of nature and antiquarian traditions connect it to a past that is uniquely Nordic and draws many to its interesting history.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Germanic academics and scholars, like Asatru later, looked at the medieval Scandinavians for inspiration in building a

⁴ Stefan Brink, “Naming the Land” in *The Viking World*, ed Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2012), 63.

⁵ Translation is my own.

⁶ I have chosen to Anglicize the titles of these poems for ease of reading. I have also done the same for Icelandic literary names. With regards to the races of supernatural beings, I have anglicized Aesir and Vanir, and individual deity’s names, but have left the other races in their Old Icelandic forms, as they are much less common in English and therefore do not have proper English forms.

⁷ Jens Peter Schjødt, *Det førkristne Norden: Religion og mytologi* (Copenhagen: Spektrum, 1999), 29.

⁸ “Home Page,” *Asatru Alliance*, accessed 12 May, 2019, <https://www.asatru.org/>. In their welcome message, the Asatru Alliance (an American Asatru organization) claims “Asatru is thousands of years old. It’s [sic] beginnings are lost in prehistory, but as an organized system, it is older by far than Christianity. Strictly speaking, since Asatru is the religion which springs from the specific spiritual beliefs of the Northern Europeans, it is as old as this branch of the human race, which came into being 40,000 years ago.” This line of thinking will be further explored in a later section, along with the *völkisch* movement.

new, Germanic religion. However, these thinkers had ulterior motives in that they were using their new religion to promote a racist, anti-Semitic agenda while “asserting the ethnocultural superiority of the Aryan race.”⁹ This line of thinking eventually led to the German National Socialist movement in the early twentieth century and the founding of the National Socialist German Workers Party, better known as the Nazis. While ultimately a failure, the underlying ideas behind National Socialism did not disappear but rather moved underground, resurfacing in the forms of right-wing extremist groups in the US and Europe. In the Nordic countries, these groups once more brought forward the image of medieval Scandinavians as Vikings, fashioning themselves as their modern-day counterparts and using various symbols and images to connect them to this Viking past.

My aim with this paper is to explore the connections between Asatru, modern Extremist Nationalist groups, Germanic Neopaganism, and the Viking past. I would like to answer the question of what symbols are being used, by whom, and for what purpose. I am also interested in whether the use and promotion of the Nordic or Germanic past is inherently racist, as groups like the Nazis and the more modern Nordic Resistance Movement have co-opted these histories for their own purposes. Linguistically, there is a difference between *nationalism* and *patriotism*, but what about in praxis? When souvenir shops in Iceland sell “Viking runes” carved into stones, is it harmless, or is there something more going on? I hope, most of all, to say that the reconstructed past of “pan-Nordic Nationalists” is not the future of medieval Nordic studies.

⁹ Eric Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 9.

Pagan Beliefs and the Sources

A Brief Overview of Medieval Paganism

It is difficult to say what exactly the Viking Age Nordic pagans believed as we have limited written accounts from that time. Most of our sources of the Viking Age come from archaeological witnesses and a handful of texts written after the time of action by Christians. Anders Hultgård puts it best when he writes, “[o]ur knowledge of ancient Scandinavian religion is thus primarily based on sources that have passed through the intermediary of Medieval Christian culture.”¹⁰ This is unfortunately of little help when it comes to reconstructing the beliefs of these peoples. What is known from the few surviving texts and archaeological sources are some ritual practices, names of deities, and some of the social norms and customs, at least in the North. As will be examined in a later section, what is now Germany also had a similar mythological structure, labeled Teutonic. Unfortunately, there is not much in the way of German sources, which is why later artists and philosophers turned to Norse mythology for inspiration (even blatant plagiarism). For the moment, it suffices to say that the Proto-Germanic peoples shared a common religion which branched out as the various people groups spread across Northern Europe. This accounts for the similarities between the names of the deities such as Wotan in Teutonic myth, Woden in Old English myth, and Odin (*Óðinn*) in Norse myth.¹¹

Within the pantheon of Norse gods and goddesses, there are two families, or tribes: the Aesir and the Vanir, who represent certain aspects of nature or humanity.¹² Thor, a member of the Aesir, is the defender of order, protecting the cosmos against chaos.¹³ Frey and Freya, Vanir twins, are often associated with fertility and magic. These tribes warred for a long time until a truce was made, and oaths were sworn, later collectively referred to as Aesir.¹⁴ There are many other divine or otherwise supernatural beings as well in Norse Paganism, such as the *jǫtnar* and the *dísir*. *Jǫtnar*, often translated as “giants” in English, were an race of beings often in conflict with the Aesir, although several mated or intermarried with the Aesir and even lived among them. Frey’s wife Gerd, for example, was a *jǫtunn*.¹⁵

¹⁰ Anders Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings” in *The Viking World*, ed Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2012), 213.

¹¹ E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), 70–72.

¹² Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings,” 213.

¹³ Jens Peter Schjødt, “The Old Norse Gods,” in *The Viking World*, ed Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2012), 221.

¹⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: David Campbell Publishers, 1995), 61.

¹⁵ Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion*, 165.

Dísir were most likely, “tutelary goddesses attached to one neighborhood, one family, perhaps even to one man.”¹⁶ They were also popular enough to have had festivals associated with them.¹⁷

As E.O.G. Turville-Petre writes in his book *Myth and Religion of the North*, “[t]he religion of the ancient Norsemen is one of the most difficult to describe, indeed far more so than the older religions of Rome, Greece” and others from antiquity.¹⁸ For Nordic Pagans, religion was not something that was practiced in a church; rather, “the belief in the divine and other supernatural beings permeated most aspects of human life.”¹⁹ There were some formalized rituals in the form of feasting and funerary rites, and even designated worship sites such as cult houses and, occasionally, temples, but the most common places to commune with the gods were outdoor areas like forest clearings.²⁰

As mentioned previously, most of the extant written knowledge about the Nordic pagan practices was written by the Christian descendants of the pagans. These writings are therefore, unfortunately, biased in their intentions. Some, such as Snorri Sturluson, intended to paint a picture of the Noble Heathen: a pagan who acted in Christian ways without having yet been introduced to Christianity. It was a way for Snorri to write about the Pagan past without aspersions being cast on his own character. He is credited with writing several of the most famous surviving Old Icelandic texts, including *The Prose Edda*, which does not exist in a complete manuscript form but within four key manuscripts.²¹ *The Poetic Edda*, later codified in the *Codex Regius*, contains poems which inspired Snorri’s own work and is often referred to as *The Elder Edda* or, in older scholarship, *Sæmundar-Edda*, as it was misattributed to Sæmundr Sigfússon as either author or compiler.²² This work contains two key texts for modern day Nordic Pagans, or Asatruers: *Havamal* and *Voluspa*.

Asatru Beliefs

It may be tempting to think of all Asatruers as having the same beliefs but, like any religion, there is no unified, global Asatru community. There are many different organizations which

¹⁶ Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion*, 221.

¹⁷ Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion*, 221

¹⁸ Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion*, 1.

¹⁹ Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings,” 213.

²⁰ Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings,” 215, 217.

²¹ Anthony Faulkes, “Introduction,” in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: David Campbell Publishers, 1995), xxix.

²² While the *Codex Regius* was codified at a later date than *the Prose Edda*, the poems contained within had existed in Iceland for centuries; Terry Gunnell, “Eddic Poetry,” in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 83.

call themselves Asatru and adhere to very similar beliefs. Much like the Old Nordic pagan religions, or even modern religions, there are differences based on geography, class, politics, etc. With that said, most Asatru groups build much of their beliefs on the previously mentioned “Havamal” and “Voluspa,” though both the Norwegian *Ásatrufellesskapet Bifrost* and the Icelandic *Ásatrúarfélagið* point to other sources, such as the entirety of *The Poetic Edda*, *The Prose Edda*, and the sagas of Icelanders, as key texts for understanding the faith.²³

These texts, central to Asatru, promote mindfulness, a respect for nature, and honoring of tradition. As the *Ásatrúarfélag* states in their definition of Asatru, “Asatru, or Heathen belief, is built on tolerance, honesty, honor, and respect for ancient heritage and nature. One of the belief’s main tenets is that each person should be responsible for oneself and one’s actions.”²⁴ This mindfulness should not only be to one’s self and others but should be extended to nature as well. The need for communion with the natural world in our modern era has a growing importance as electronic devices take more of our focus in our daily lives: nature should be honored and respected.²⁵ I will return to the topic of nature later in this paper, but for now, I will focus on Havamal, Voluspa, with additional material from the Sagas of Icelanders, and will briefly summarize them and their importance to Asatru.

Havamal, The Sayings of the High One

Havamal is a wisdom poem which consists of five sections outlining how one should live in order to have a good life. It is told from the perspective of both Odin and the poet composing the work. This poem is usually divided into five parts: *Gestaþáttur* (The Visitor’s Section), *Dæmi Óðins* (Odin’s Examples), *Loddfáfnismál* (Words for Loddfafnir), *Rúnatal* (List of Runes), and *Ljóðatal* (List of Chants).²⁶ *Gestaþáttur* deals with the proper ways to conduct one’s self and treat others. *Dæmi Óðins* lists Odin’s grievances with women. *Loddfáfnismál* is similar to *Gestaþáttur*, but is directed at a specific individual (Loddfafnir) rather than to a

²³ “Om Ásatru,” Ásatrufellesskapet Bifrost, <https://www.bifrost.no/om-asatru>, accessed March 21, 2019. “Vi har ingen hellige bøker eller læresetninger. Det nærmeste vi kommer en hellig tekst er den Poetiske eller Eldre Edda, der mange av gudekvadene er bevart. Disse er ubestridelig nedtegnet i kristen tid, men har et tydelig hedensk innhold som forteller og henviser til mange av de viktigste norrøne mytene;” “Lesefni um Ásatrú,” Ásatrúarfélagið, <https://asatru.is/lesefni-um-asatru>, accessed March 14, 2019. All translations are the authors own unless otherwise stated.

²⁴ “Ásatrú,” Ásatrúarfélagið, <https://asatru.is/asatru>, accessed 14 March 2019. “Ásatrú eða heiðinn siður byggist á umburðarlyndi, heiðarleika, drengskap og virðingu fyrir fornum menningararfi og náttúrunni. Eitt megininntak siðarins er að hver maður sé ábyrgur fyrir sjálfum sér og gerðum sínum.”

²⁵ Jón Helgason, ed., “Völuspá” in *Eddadigte. Völuspá, Hávamál* (Copenhagen: Nordisk Filologi, 1951), v. 4, ll. 1–2. “[...] Burs synir/ biððom um ypðo,/ þeir er miðgarð/ mæran skópo.” (Because the world was built by the Aesir, it is imbued with their spirit and should be honored).

²⁶ Terry Gunnell, “Eddic Poetry,” 82–100.

general audience. In this section, Odin seems to be imparting the lessons he has learned through his long life as he warns of the trials and tribulations faced by one who does not heed his advice. Finally, the poem turns to *Rúnatal* and *Ljóðatal*, twin sections where the first part discusses how Odin came to acquire and carve the runes and the second part describes what the runes, as magic spells, can do.²⁷

Voluspa, The Seeress's Prophecy

Voluspa contains the creation myth of the medieval Nordic pagans which differs from Snorri's depiction in *The Prose Edda*, wherein he recounts the Christian creation myth. The poem, translated as "The Seeress's Prophecy," is told from the perspective of a prophetess who has been summoned by Odin to divine the future. The poem opens with a call for silence and address to Odin: "I ask of all races, greater and lesser sons of Heimdall, to listen; Father of the Slain, you wished that I reckon well the ancient tales, those furthest back which I remember."²⁸ She describes how Ymir, a *jötunn*, made his settlement in the nothingness that was the universe before the sons of Bur (Odin and his two brothers) came and shaped the world, the sun, moon, stars, and even time. She goes on to list all the dwarves who were created at this time before describing how the first humans were created by the gods Odin, Hoenir, and Lodur.²⁹ Each gave the two new humans, named Ask and Embla, a gift: Odin gave breath, Hoenir gave mind, or thought, and Lodur gave blood and good color.³⁰ The prophetess continues by saying that underneath Yggdrasill lies Urd's Well where the Norns gather to read the future: three sisters named Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld.

The seeress remembers, she says, the first war between the gods and how *seiðr* was taught to the Aesir. The war rages between the two and the Aesir's stronghold was destroyed. A peace is reached, and a deal is struck with a master builder, a *jötunn* in disguise, but this deal was not honored, and Thor kills the builder before he can complete his work.³¹ The seeress addresses Odin directly, asking him why he bothers her. She says she knows his secrets, revealing some, and following with the question, "do you know yet, or what?"³²

²⁷ Gunnell, "Eddic Poetry," 85.

²⁸ Jón Helgason, "Völuspá," v 1, ll. 1–8. "Hlióðs bið ek allar/ <helgar> kindir,/ meiri ok minni/ mogo Heimdalar;/ vildo at ek, Valföðr/ vel fyr telia/ forn spiöll fira,/ þau er fremst um man."

²⁹ As noted in the introduction, I am using the Anglicized forms of these names. Here specifically, I am following Carolyne Larrington's spellings in her translation of *The Poetic Edda*.

³⁰ Jón Helgason, "Völuspá," v. 18, ll. 5–8.

³¹ This story is expanded upon in chapter 42 of "Gylfaginning" in Snorri's *Edda*.

³² Jón Helgason, "Völuspá," v. 27, l. 8. "vitoð ér enn, eða hvat."

From this, she moves on to describing the death of his son Baldr and the unraveling of the gods' lives. Baldr is killed by his brother Hod, and Odin sires another son to avenge Baldr's death. The seeress sees Loki held captive, with his wife by his side: these events herald the beginnings of Ragnarok, the end of the world. She looks further, on to a river of swords and knives, filled with evildoers: there are evil creatures doing evil deeds in dark places. They begin to come forth and redden the gods' fields with blood as all begins to grow dark and the weather itself becomes vicious. Three roosters crow, one in Gallows Wood, one outside Odin's hall, and the final one crows under the earth, in Hell.³³ Social order is upended as families begin fighting amongst themselves and "whoredom abounds."³⁴ Yggdrasill, the World Tree, catches fire and Heimdall begins to blow the Gjallarhorn, calling the gods to the final battle.

At this, literally all hell breaks loose: the wolf Fenrir and his brother, the World Serpent, begin to rage towards the gods, as the *jötnar* gather for battle themselves. The final war begins and gods and *jötnar* die in droves. Odin, Thor, the World Serpent, and even the sun, are dead. As the war ends, the land sinks back into the sea and the world dies. The stars go out, the burning land is extinguished, and steam rises to the heavens.

The seeress, not yet done, sees further into the future, to a time when the land will rise again from the sea and the Aesir will return to games and joy, as they once had before. These will not be the same Aesir, but rather a new generation; the children of the Old Gods. Baldr will live once more and be at peace with his brother and killer, Hod. The world will be better than before, golden and new. Just before she slips back into death, the seeress spies the dragon Nidhogg carrying corpses and flying over the plains of the gods, signaling a possible cyclical nature of destruction and rebirth.

The Sagas

Texts about the meanings and relevance of the sagas can and do fill whole sections of libraries and go well outside the scope of this paper. I will, however, attempt to discuss in brief their relevance for Asatru as well as the modern reception of the Vikings. The sagas are a genre of Icelandic literature which chronicle the lives of Icelandic families, key Christian

³³ Jón Helgason, "Völuspá," vv. 42–43. Here I have translated "gaglviði" (Bird-Wood) in Jón Helgason's edition as Gallows-Wood, following Carolyne Larrington's interpretation. Jón Helgason notes in his variant apparatus that in Hauksbók, the word is written as "galg-," a form of the Old Icelandic masculine noun *gálgi* meaning gallows.

³⁴ Carolyne Larrington, ed., "The Seeress' Prophecy" in *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), v. 44, l. 3. 9.

figures, kings, and epic heroes. For the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on the import of the sagas of Icelanders, which were set during the settlement period of Iceland, between the late eighth century and the mid-eleventh century.

The sagas were long thought to have been factual histories of Iceland, with many different sagas detailing the same accounts of how certain families arrived in Iceland. As saga studies have grown over the last centuries, however, it is no longer thought that the sagas are historically accurate. There may be truth within the individual texts, but they are not believed to be stories passed unchanged through oral tradition into writing. This does not remove the truth that they were vital to the lives of medieval Icelanders, as Jón Karl Helgason highlights in three points: “First of all, they supplied them with suitable role models; second, they provided them with a noble ancestry; and third, they offered a Golden Age of the past as a counter to contemporary miseries.”³⁵ These points will also be necessary for future *völkisch* thinkers, as they, too, will look to the sagas for role models and a Golden Age past to combat their own modern woes.

With this said, there are certainly strong characters found in the sagas which many people see as possessing a strong “Viking” persona, like Eirik the Red and his son Leif Eiriksson. Saga characters are also often portrayed as Vikings and pagans, as they are mostly set during the early settlement period, such as the saga of Hrafnkel Frey’s Godi.

In this saga, Hrafnkel is a *goði* and a servant for the god Frey who has dedicated his best horse, Freyfaxi, to him.³⁶ He hires a young man named Einar to watch after his sheep and says that he may ride any of Hrafnkel’s horses, except for Freyfaxi. One day, Einar is forced to ride the horse and Hrafnkel kills him for this offense. Einar’s family demands compensation for the killing, but Hrafnkel has never paid such compensation and refuses to still. His cousin, Sam, then sues Hrafnkel at the Assembly, or *Alþing*, that summer. Hrafnkel, thinking Sam no threat, came too late to the law rock and was unable to defend himself. Sam won the case, claiming Hrafnkel’s *goðorð* as well as his lands and all his possessions. Hrafnkel moves out of his home district and Sam becomes the new *goði*. Years pass, and Sam grows complacent. Eventually, Hrafnkel returns, having amassed wealth and power in his new district, and attacks Sam at home, unaware. Sam surrenders and is worse off than before

³⁵ Jón Karl Helgason “Continuity? The Icelandic Sagas in Post Medieval times” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 65.

³⁶ *Goði* (Anglicized “godi”) is a term used to refer to one who is both a chieftain and a religious figure. A *goði* is one who holds a *goðorð*, or a religious chieftaincy. Thomas A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1999), 65–6.

he sued. Hrafnkel, on the other hand, now has two farms, a *goðorð*, and all his previous wealth.

This saga is, among other things, “an exposition of the heathen code... found in the eddic poem *Sayings of the High One*.”³⁷ Hrafnkel treats many poorly and is, in turn, treated poorly for his deeds. However, Sam lets Hrafnkel live instead of killing him, which becomes a problem for him later. Sam’s associate Thorkel Thjostarson tells him as much following Hrafnkel’s flight from his farm, reflecting a verse from Havamal:

The foolish man, if he manages to get
money or the love of a woman,
his arrogance increases, but not his common sense;
on he goes deeply sunk in delusion.³⁸

The cycle of vengeance, or blood feud, is rather tame here compared to those found in other sagas, like the feud in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, where the feuds can last for generations. When Hrafnkel attacks Sam, he has just killed Sam’s brother and is exacting what he sees as just vengeance upon him. Hrafnkel offers Sam his life and whatever he brought with him to the farm, so long as others can vouch that he did bring it there. After returning briefly to his old farm, Sam travels to see his friend Thorkel and ask for his assistance in killing Hrafnkel. Thorkel reminds him of what he said when Sam spared Hrafnkel’s life and offers no help in Sam’s endeavor, instead asking him to stay at the farm and live out his life in peace with his friend. Sam denies this and claims Thorkel is a bad friend and leaves.

Within Asatru, the sagas are living lessons: portrayals of how Viking life was lived. The sagas show what happens when someone lives by the moral code set out by the gods, as well as what happens when they choose otherwise. Unlike Christianity, Odin never tells anyone that they must follow his words or be struck down. Rather, in the structure of Havamal, he lays out how one *should* act if they wish to have a good life. When Hrafnkel refuses to compensate Einar’s father for his slaying, he is sued. He assumes that his power will suffice when he gets to the Assembly, but it does not. As Havamal says:

The foolish man thinks that everyone
is his friend who laughs with him;

³⁷ Terry Gunnell, “The Story of Hrafnkel Frey’s Godi,” in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed by Örnólfur Thorsson (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2000), 436.

³⁸ Carolyne Larrington, ed., “Sayings of the High One” in *The Poetic Edda*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), v. 79.

but then he finds when he comes to the Assembly
that he has few friends to speak on his behalf.³⁹

Hrafinkel is brought low due to his arrogance and, through determination, is able to regain his lost honor in the end.

The Old Norse religions were the way people lived their lives throughout the Nordic lands for centuries. The gods provided for them and the people, in turn, made sacrifices and heeded their wisdom. Without a tradition of writing, the stories of the gods passed orally from generation to generation, changing as they moved through time and place, until the Teutonic tradition in Germany was no longer the same as the Nordic religions, and even the Nordic religions were different from each other. When the stories of the gods and heroes were finally written down, they were passed through the lens of Christianity and changed again. How much they were altered is impossible to know, but we can still see some of the original heathen beliefs through the veneer of Christianity.

Asatru aims to find these “heathen truths” and bring them back to life in a modern world and context. As I stated previously, Asatru does not base its values singularly in one text but in the several texts and traditions passed down through the centuries in the Nordic countries. “Voluspa” forms the core of the world view, “Havamal” gives the guidelines for a good life, and the sagas apply these lessons in a daily setting.

Even within Asatru communities, there is difference of opinion on the belief in the gods themselves: are they deities, or are they manifestations of our own inner truths? Some of these differences stem from the roots of Asatru itself, which will be explored in the next chapter.

³⁹ Larrington, “Sayings,” v. 25.

Early Germanic Neopaganism

The roots of Germanic Neopaganism can be traced back to the European Romantic period of the late-eighteenth century when the idea of a superior Nordic-Germanic race began to form in the minds of German, Swedish, and Danish philosophers and intelligentsia. In Germany, scholars were studying *Germania* by Tacitus; in Sweden, they were reading *Getica* by Jordanes; and in Denmark, they were studying runes and the *Poetic Edda*.⁴⁰ These texts were known and studied before this time, but they were revitalized in the Germanic states as a growing sense of nationalism spread across Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. This sentiment took especially strong hold in Germany in the form of pan-Germanism, a Germanic-centric type of patriotism which was less about a national spirit and more about the promotion of an ethnic German state.

The Beginnings of Germanic Neopaganism

The various Germanic peoples and societies of central Europe, dealing with the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, felt out of place in the progressive and rapidly industrializing Europe they saw around them. As Eric Kurlander notes, these peoples “[...] lacked a powerful nation state or colonial empire.”⁴¹ They began to reject the popular French culture and ideals, looking instead to their own history for a sense of identity. From this rejection emerged philosophers looking to unite the fractured German culture. Among these was Johann Gottfried Herder, who proposed the concept of the “folk soul,” or *Volkgeist*.⁴² Herder “launched a series of attacks on the Francophilia prevalent among the German literati of his day,” which helped spur the beginnings of the *völkisch* movement.⁴³

Herder had begun looking into the mythical past of Germany, spurred by the nationalistic atmosphere of the time. He “sought the roots of the German nation in ancient German folk tales and Norse mythology.”⁴⁴ Kurlander writes that, “[t]his nationalist yearning combined with a pre-existing ‘longing for myth’ to produce a utopian conception of Indo-Aryan racial purity... In this way supernatural fantasies about recovering a lost Indo-Aryan

⁴⁰ Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 18–19.

⁴¹ Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters*, 10.

⁴² Frederick Gregorius, *Modern Asatro: Att konstruera etnisk och kulturell identitet* (Lund: Centrum för Teologi och Religionsvetenskap, 2008), 56.

⁴³ Bernard Mees, *The Science of the Swastika* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 16.

⁴⁴ Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters*, 6.

civilization produced ‘potentials for liberation [.]’⁴⁵ Initially, the *völkisch* movement worked to Germanicize Christianity, since Herder was himself a Lutheran preacher.⁴⁶ However, Christianity was too closely associated with the French, and interest in German folklore and Norse mythology began to grow which, “[filled] an important gap in the German spiritual landscape, helping to occupy ‘the transcendental realm of mystic life’ vacated by Judeo-Christian traditions.”⁴⁷ This change in religious understanding was “akin to the twelfth century renaissance,” as Christianity was no longer sufficient for the Germans’ spiritual needs.⁴⁸

The *völkisch* movement preached a closeness with nature and many sought this closeness through a connection to occultism and paganism. Popular interest in the Eddas and sagas increased around this time and Wotanism was touted by many *völkisch* authors who were stressing the “influence of the landscape” and the need for a “German cult of nature.”⁴⁹ These ideas started also helped kickstart a biodynamic agriculture reform, which promoted organic farming practices and was “based on restoring the quasi-mystical relationship between the earth [sic] and the cosmos.”⁵⁰

Throughout Germany which had a symbiotic relationship with occultism, strengthening their adherents’ convictions. As Germany moved into the 20th century, its paganism was also reinforced by the general growing European interest in occultism, like Aleister Crowley and his *Order of the Golden Dawn*.⁵¹

Völkisch Occultism and Runes in the Early Twentieth Century

A main theme that came into the *völkisch* movement was one of anti-Semitism, with people like Paul de Lagarde, a leading voice in both the *völkisch* and Neopaganist circles, supporting the idea that Jews were an “anti-Volk” and “a race of parasitic aliens.”⁵² As he saw it, European Jews lacked that which constituted “a proper *Volk* according to the [prevailing] Romantic logic: rootedness in a homeland, a proper language, literature, and mythology.”⁵³

⁴⁵ Kurlander, *Hitler’s Monsters*, 10.

⁴⁶ Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 16.

⁴⁷ Kurlander, *Hitler’s Monsters*, 7

⁴⁸ Kurlander, *Hitler’s Monsters*, 13.

⁴⁹ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2004), 49. Guido von List claims the ancient Teutons practiced an occult religion named after their principle god, Wotan (German for “Odin”); Bernard Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 21

⁵⁰ Kurlander, *Hitler’s Monsters*, 28.

⁵¹ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*. 34

⁵² Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 19–20.

⁵³ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 27.

Lagarde's ideas got around quickly through his various writings, which included a "radical rhetoric of [Jewish] extinction that was to influence later German anti-Semitism, including leading National Socialists[.]"⁵⁴ Initially interested in Germanizing Christianity within the German *Kulturnation*,⁵⁵ these anti-Semitic sentiments forced the philosophers and intelligentsia to purge Christianity "of its 'Semitic...' notions [for] one reconstructed with 'native' Germanic elements."⁵⁶ At the same time, Ariosophy was also looking for answers to the question of what to do about a German religion from an Austrian point of view. Ariosophy at the time was an "esoteric version of modern occultism," and, like *völkisch* Christianity, "overtly racial."⁵⁷ It can be thought of as the "'Germanization' of contemporary occultism," as opposed to the *völkisch* tendency to Germanize Christianity, specifically Protestantism.⁵⁸ Ariosophy followed the trend of contemporary occult orders based on sexual magic and placed a strong emphasis on the power of human sexuality. One of its main goals was to purify the German race through sexual means, i.e. eugenics, which "became an integral part of the German(ic) faith throughout the 1920's."⁵⁹

When Nazism finally became the governing party, *völkisch* thought and interest in pagan beliefs were deeply ingrained in the zeitgeist, though it must be noted that neither paganism nor occultism were adopted by the entire party. They were instead an outlet for a small group who had far reaching connections. As von Schnurbein writes, "the movement counted amongst its ranks a considerable number of journalists, writers, artists, illustrators, teachers and scholars- (mostly male) members of an intellectual middle-class who were driven by the fear of losing influence and status in modern society."⁶⁰ This connection between paganism and a fear of losing power resurfaces in the modern day, but I will return to that in a later section.

A central figure in the Germanic occult community was a man named Guido von List. He was an Austrian Pan-Germanist journalist, influential author, and a pioneer of *völkisch* runic occultism. He was the first to link the Scandinavian writing system of futhark with the magic runes Odin recounted in *Rúnatal* in Havamal.⁶¹ When the runes were first studied, there were several seemingly disparate forms of the alphabet. The younger futhark was

⁵⁴ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 29.

⁵⁵ The loose confederation of states which identified as German, including then Austria and parts of Czech Republic.

⁵⁶ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 30.

⁵⁷ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 40.

⁵⁸ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 40–41.

⁵⁹ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 44.

⁶⁰ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 46.

⁶¹ Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots*, 50.

thought native to Scandinavia without any outside influence, as it varies greatly in appearance from elder futhark. This idea of native invention is known as the autochthonous, or *Urschrift*, theory.⁶² As runology progressed, the autochthonous theory was debunked by Danish runologist Ludvig Wimmer. He concluded that the various forms of futhark were connected and it became clear to him that they were not Scandinavian inventions after all, but derivations of Latin.⁶³ This did not, however, stop their popular appeal with the *völkisch* elite as a Germanic ancient writing system. Runes made their way into popular culture, art and even jewelry.⁶⁴ Runic studies flourished, thanks to their connection to Guido von List and his Ariosophic occultism, which relied heavily on the use of runes and his own understanding of *Rúnatal*. As if in defiance of Wimmer and others' work on runology, many self-styled *völkisch* runologists picked up the baton of the *Urschrift* thesis, chief among them Ludwig Wilser.⁶⁵

Wilser was an amateur antiquarian as well as an ardent anti-Semite whose papers on social Darwinism and eugenic reform found him as a leading voice in *völkisch* circles in the early 1900s.⁶⁶ His ideas on runes were quickly picked up by other *völkisch* thinkers and expanded upon by others, like Karl Schirmeisen, a schoolmaster who had written a paper on the origin of runes. This paper had been dismissed as “totally worthless” by leading academics of the day as his work was based on shaky evidence and thrown-together facts.⁶⁷ Despite professional runologists' disapproval of this and similar works, the *Urschrift* thesis thrived, eventually finding its way into proper German academia under *Sinnbildforschung*, or ideograph/symbol studies.⁶⁸

Between the 1910s and 1930s, runic occultism reached a fever pitch of interest with the runes interpreted as magical sigils: physical manifestations of greater cosmic truths and a link to the divine. They were glorified for their healing properties, like in “runic gymnastics,” which could see its practitioners posing in the shape of runes while chanting the runes' names.⁶⁹ Connected to these practices and studies were various interpretations of the Eddas by the Edda Society, which saw the myths contained in the works as “promissory of a new

⁶² Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 56.

⁶³ Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 57.

⁶⁴ Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 23.

⁶⁵ Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 62.

⁶⁶ Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots*, 13.

⁶⁷ Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 64.

⁶⁸ Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 13 and 65. This branch of academia is also interested in the swastika, among other Occult symbolism. I will not be talking about the swastika in this paper, however, as it is not of Scandinavian origin.

⁶⁹ Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots*, 161.

era, in which magic, mystical vision, and world-power would be restored to all true-born Germans.”⁷⁰ These practices, intrinsically linked to nationalist thought, would continue to grow and evolve throughout the Nazi rise and fall. It eventually went dormant, but reemerged in the 1970s as a new wave of Neopagans took up the mantle.

As the Germanic peoples were left wanting in the wake of a divisive war, the beliefs of their ancient ancestors reemerged in the modern world and were reinterpreted to sell a narrative of pan-Germanism. Like other Europeans at the end of the nineteenth century, Germans felt afraid and lacked a sense of national identity. This fear was a reaction to the changing world the elite saw around them, seeing the “German Republic as vulgar, corrupt, and the symbol of defeat.”⁷¹ Many turned to religion and occultism to hold on to that past where they could be heroes, just like the Vikings they saw as distant kin. They adopted their symbols and appropriated their alphabet, grasping at the idea of the *Volk* as they felt it slipping away from them. The texts they read were interpreted in pro-Germanic ways, promoting a proto-White Nationalist movement. The *Eddas* were a gift from their North Germanic ancestors, meant to lead them on the right path, while the runes were a gift from Odin to heal the body and gain knowledge on the workings of the universe.

The feelings which led to the *völkisch* movement continue today: the fear of being replaced by an “anti-*Volk*.” The same kinds of nationalistic sentiments are starting to lead a new generation down the same path where the belief in the “old ways” are again being brought forward and used to justify nationalist and supremacist thinking. White Nationalist groups are idolizing the Vikings for their brutality and savagery while runes once again fly on their banners. The Second World War stopped the Third Reich and Hitler, but it did not stamp out the ideology which created them. Today, we see the rise of hate groups calling for an end to immigration and closed borders. Jeffrey Kaplan writes that for White Nationalists, “the world remains a community of nation-states, and nationalism is alluring.”⁷² They see the White Race as on the verge of extinction and the only way to save it is to stop outsiders from moving in.

⁷⁰ Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots*, 163.

⁷¹ Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots*, 163.

⁷² Jeffrey Kaplan, “Religiosity in the Radical Right: Toward the Creation of a New Ethnic Identity,” in *Nation and Race*, ed. Jeffrey Kaplan and Tore Bjørgo (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 102.

Modern Asatru and Nationalist Extremism

Germanic paganism saw a resurgence in the 1970s in several places across Northern Europe, as well as in the United States, bolstered by the ideas of earlier esoteric movements.⁷³ At this time, Wicca, an esoteric movement often referred to simply as witchcraft, started to take hold in England and began spreading across Europe. Like Asatru, Wicca finds its roots in, “19th century European attempts to reconstruct ancient, pre-Christian religions.”⁷⁴ The popularity of Wicca in the 1970s helped make Germanic Neopaganism more approachable, as they had similar beginnings and even shared some elements of their belief systems.⁷⁵

The Asatru milieus in Germany, England, and the US grew out of ethnicist movements inspired by the earlier *völkisch* German Faith Movement. These groups were looking for an ethnic religion which tied them to their homelands, current or ancestral. Asatru groups which started in the Nordic countries, on the other hand, seemed to “emerge out of counter-cultural impulses.”⁷⁶ These groups, between the 1970s and 1990s, changed drastically as their memberships grew, their leadership changed and collapsed, and groups merged. Excepting a handful of groups, such as *Ásatrúarfélagið*, most of the groups were not recognized as actual religious groups around the time of their creation, nationally or otherwise. As the individual organizations worldwide grew, many of them began to break up and form smaller, cultish groups, typically for financial reasons or due to leadership disputes.

By the 1990s, the disparate communities had formed an, “international network of contacts” which consisted of many of the most outspoken leaders and members.⁷⁷ Through this network, they began to work towards more formal recognition and acceptance, placing a stronger emphasis on the original sources, like the Eddas and sagas, than it had before. Many groups began to distance themselves from the more radical racist elements of Germanic Neopaganism, especially as books and news articles were being written around this time concerning the seemingly “rampant racism” in this new movement and its connections to Nazi ideologies.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will be focusing on the Asatru communities of Iceland, Norway, and the United States and how they have changed from their inception in the 1970s. Specifically, I will discuss the ideas of Folkish and Universalist belief, as well as

⁷³ Gregorius, *Modern Asatro*, 71.

⁷⁴ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 51.

⁷⁵ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 54.

⁷⁶ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 59.

⁷⁷ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 62.

the importance of nature. From there, I will discuss Nationalism with emphasis on the Nordic Resistance Movement and its relationship to Asatru and “Viking” imagery.

Modern Day Asatru and its National Variations

Asatru has grown and changed over the years from its beginnings as an offshoot of Germanic Neopaganism and Wotanism to become something new. Stefanie von Schnurbein writes in her book *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism*: “Modern Asatru, as well as the current popular appeal of ‘Germanic’ or ‘Nordic’ themes and images, are outcomes of and contributors to a discourse of Germanic myth.”⁷⁸ During the 1950s, the growing Wicca movement in England “helped shift general attitudes toward [pagan] revivals and indirectly also influenced Asatru.”⁷⁹ While there is not a direct correlation, the popularity of Wicca in England allowed for wider acceptance of paganism, mysticism, and esotericism in general, especially in Germany and the Nordic states. In the wake of Nazism and its use of the occult, esoteric and pagan practices across Europe were either halted or driven underground. Gradually, the wounds of war began to heal, and many Europeans once again reached for something to help satisfy the spiritual emptiness they felt in the rapidly modernizing world around them.

Like the previous *völkisch* movement, many in Europe felt a disconnect with the globalizing society they saw around them, leading them to turn toward the Germanic Neopagan groups sprouting up across the world. Also, like the earlier *völkisch* movement, these new groups had a strong emphasis on ethnic religion and ethnic identity, though the extreme anti-Semitism that marked *völkisch* paganism in the early twentieth century was, at least initially, less important. This is not to say that it disappeared, however, as it most certainly did not. For example, Else Christensen, a Danish native who had become involved with the National Socialist movement in Denmark before emigrating to Canada, founded the *Odinist Fellowship*, and by extension, modern Odinism.⁸⁰ Her intentions were to design a, “discreet vehicle to establish cultural pessimist, anti-Semitic and radical racial agenda in a religious cloak.”⁸¹

Meanwhile, in the United States, Stephen McNallen established the *Viking Brotherhood*, which he said was motivated by anti-clerical sentiment rather than any sort of

⁷⁸ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 17.

⁷⁹ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 51.

⁸⁰ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 259.

⁸¹ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 58.

racial ideology.⁸² He disliked the idea of being beholden to a servant of a god, such as the Christian God, and admired the “Norsemen” for their bravery and heroism, especially their warlike nature and self-assertiveness.⁸³ However, his group, renamed the *Asatru Free Assembly* (AFA) in 1976, began to adopt a more ethnicist view of Germanic paganism as McNallen espoused his ideas on metagenetics, wherein he linked the ideas of an individual’s genealogy and spirituality. Even after publicly stating that the AFA takes the middle ground concerning racial issues, the organization was dissolved in 1987 due to internal issues.⁸⁴ Jeffrey Kaplan, a specialist in far-right extremism and racism, blames, “accusations and internal controversies around the AFA’s involvement with racists and National Socialists,” while McNallen himself says that he was merely overworked and unable to do more at the time.⁸⁵

The dissolution of the AFA led to the creation of two other organizations in the 1990s: *The Ring of Troth* (later renamed simply *The Troth*) and the *Asatru Alliance*. Eventually, the *Asatru Free Assembly* was rebuilt by McNallen and again renamed, now called the *Asatru Folk Assembly*.⁸⁶ Although there are no neat divisions to be made between the practices and ideologies of these three umbrella organizations, they can lean either towards more Folkish tendencies, or Universalist.

As the names might imply, “*Folkish*” Asatru groups are more ethnically oriented, granting membership to people with Nordic or Northern European ancestry and harkening back to Herder’s idea of the *Volkgeist* which I discussed in the previous chapter. Conversely, “*Universalist*” groups open membership to anyone who feels the pull of the gods inside them, regardless of their heritage. With that in mind, the *Asatru Alliance* and *Asatru Folk Assembly* are largely considered Folkish, while *The Troth* is more Universalist.⁸⁷

These fundamental differences have also led to animosity between the groups at times, though a shared devotion to the same cultural and spiritual beliefs, sources, and practices keeps this from getting too out of hand.⁸⁸ Michael Strmiska and Baldur Sigurvinsson point out that, due to the “decentralized structure of authority in Asatru and Heathenry, with the AFA, Troth, and Asatru Alliance only being umbrella organizations, not

⁸² Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 58.

⁸³ Gregorius, *Modern Asatro*, 77.

⁸⁴ Gregorius, *Modern Asatro*, 77.

⁸⁵ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 59. See also her footnote 15 on same page.

⁸⁶ Michael F. Strmiska and Baldur A. Sigurvinsson, “Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America,” in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*, ed. by Michael F. Strmiska (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO: 2005), 133. While these three are ostensibly the largest Asatru communities in the US, they are not the only ones.

⁸⁷ Strmiska and Baldur A. Sigurvinsson, “Asatru: Nordic Paganism,” 135.

⁸⁸ Strmiska and Baldur A. Sigurvinsson, “Asatru: Nordic Paganism,” 136.

hierarchical authorities delineating a strict party line for all to follow, individual kindreds⁸⁹ and persons take a wide range of positions on this and many other issues, regardless of the stances of [...] leading figures[.]”⁹⁰

The debate of Asatru as a Folkish or Universalist religion seems to be more important in the US than in either Iceland or Norway, as there is a much wider range of cultures and ethnicities living together in the US, as well as America’s fraught history with racial iniquity. Many modern Nordics see Asatru more as their cultural inheritance than as a novel spiritual or religious movement, looking to the source texts of the Eddas and sagas more as histories than religious writ. In Iceland, many Asatruers see their religion as intertwined with their history, with some members of *Ásatrúarfélagið* interested more in the preservation of their cultural identity rather than the religious aspects.⁹¹ This does run up against those with *völkisch* beliefs, some of whom started right-wing extremist, racial-religious groups, such as Varg Vikernes’ (now defunct) *Norwegian Heathen Front*, the rise of which was the impetus for groups like Norway’s *Ásatrufelleskapet Bifrost* to file for official recognition in the mid-1990s and in order to take a stance as an a-racist organization.⁹² Following *völkisch* thought in a different direction, many view Asatru not as a racial religion, but rather a nature religion.

A Nature Religion?

Nature and right-wing extremism here can be intertwined as the original *völkisch* movement was built on the premise of a simple country life, devoid of the trappings of a modern, industrial, urban existence. In this way, nature was extolled for its purity, much like the purity which adherents of *völkisch* thinking sought in the blood-and-soil rhetoric of people like Walther Dárre.⁹³ There was a large ecological movement which rose out of the *völkisch* movement and which persisted into the reconstruction of Neopaganism in the 1970’s. Many Neopagan groups were simultaneously focused on the racial-religious aspects of Neopaganism as well as the exaltation of nature. As these groups developed their core beliefs, they looked farther into their past and began seeking more ancient forms of nature worship, leaving behind the vestments of fin-de-siècle nature Romanticism.

⁸⁹ Strmiska and Baldur Sigurvinsson, “Asatru: Nordic Paganism,” 131. A Kindred is a local level association of worship bound together by oaths of loyalty and assistance.

⁹⁰ Strmiska and Baldur A. Sigurvinsson, “Asatru: Nordic Paganism,” 135.

⁹¹ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 70.

⁹² Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 63–4.

⁹³ Kurlander, *Hitler’s Monsters*, 55–6.

While nature and racial politics can and have been conflated, they are not always so linked in the minds of current Neopagans or Asatruers. The purity of nature began to be equated to the purity of the human soul as many groups moved away from racial-religious views. The gods of the old Norse were, for many Asatruers, gradually losing their White superiority and gaining a more nature-oriented perspective.

Many Asatruers see nature as an extension of the gods themselves and, through Asatru, find a holistic view of the world.⁹⁴ They view nature as a gift from the gods: a holy purity towards which they should strive, devoid of the trappings of White supremacy. Modern, ecologically-minded Asatruers who base their faith in a nature-focused Asatru organization, however, must reckon with the fact that these views can be traced back to a racial-religious movement aimed at racial purity.

Nationalism and the Nordic Resistance Movement

Before moving on, I would like to briefly discuss the terms *ethnicity*, *racism*, and *nationalism*, as they can be somewhat ambiguous. Beginning with *ethnicity*, Thomas Hylland-Eriksen points out the difficulty one faces in defining this term in his book, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*. He writes that in social anthropology, “[ethnicity] simply refers to aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive.”⁹⁵ He connects this to people’s understanding of the term *race*, saying that they “should be seen as kindred terms which partly overlap. Notions about cultural uniqueness and social solidarity tend to be stronger with respect to ethnic categorisations, while the idea of biological... difference is stronger in racist thought and practice.”⁹⁶ He does not like to give credence to the use of *race* in a scientific sense, stating that, “[race] is not a scientific term. Whereas it was for some time fashionable to divide humanity into four main races, ... modern genetics tends not to speak of races.”⁹⁷ He does allow for its usefulness, though, writing that the concept of races is relevant, “to the extent that they inform peoples actions; at this level, race exists as a cultural construct, whether it has a biological reality or not.”⁹⁸

I have tried to find a definition of race which disentangles it from ethnicity, but I have not succeeded. There seems to be no biological difference amongst those whom the term *race*

⁹⁴ Gregorius, *Modern Asatru*, 192.

⁹⁵ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 5.

⁹⁶ Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 9.

⁹⁷ Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 5–6.

⁹⁸ Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 6.

has in the past separated. *Race* has also come to be interpreted as cultural differences, but this meaning has also been attributed to *ethnicity*. *Racism*, compared to race, is simple to define. It is discrimination based on race. Katrine Fangen defines it as, “a belief in the superiority of one particular race, and prejudice based on this conception.”⁹⁹ Unfortunately, this leaves us still with the question, “what is *race*?” For this reason, I will use the terms race and ethnicity interchangeably, unless in quotes or otherwise stated. In the same article, Fangen discusses “new racism,” which she defines as being discrimination based more on cultural differences than racial, equating it to nationalism.¹⁰⁰

Ernest Gellner defines *nationalism* as “a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state... should not separate the power-holders from the rest.”¹⁰¹ Essentially, *nationalism* is a “political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be [ethnically] congruent.”¹⁰²

The Nordic countries, at present, are going through a monumental change, as is most of Europe. This change has been going on for the past few decades but seems to have peaked with the refugee crisis. The Nordic countries’ populations have swelled with historically non-Nordic peoples, and many feel as though they are losing their Nordic/White identity, especially as many of the immigrants are Muslims escaping war and poverty in Africa and the Middle-East. Much like the German *Kulturnation* following the Franco-Prussian war, Nordic countries are drawing in on themselves and trying to keep their countries “pure.”¹⁰³

In the last few decades, as Nordic history has come to the forefront of popular culture, with television, movies, and music praising the Vikings as a monolith of Nordic-ness, neo-*völkisch* groups have risen developed to take up the flag of the old *völkisch* thinkers.¹⁰⁴ Many neo-*völkisch* groups idolize these fictionalized Vikings for their ruthless tendencies while praising them for their sense of personal honor and integrity. Mathias Nordvig points out that

⁹⁹ Katrine Fangen, “Living Out Our Ethnic Instincts: Ideological Beliefs Among Right-Wing Activists in Norway,” in *Nation and Race*, ed Jeffrey Kalplan and Tore Bjørgo (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 228. Note 48.

¹⁰⁰ Fangen, “Living out our Ethnic Instincts,” 215.

¹⁰¹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 1.

¹⁰² Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 1.

¹⁰³ I should stress here that this is not everyone in the Nordic countries, but rather a small minority. I would also like to remind the reader that the *völkisch* movement began as a small minority and that while the Germanic paganist aspects of the movement never fully saturated the *Volkgeist*, it influenced much of the National Socialist ideologies which followed.

¹⁰⁴ “Neo- *völkisch*,” The Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed April 30, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/neo-volkisch>. The SPLC defines neo-*völkisch* groups as hate groups, stating “At the cross-section of hypermasculinity and ethnocentricity, this movement seeks to defend against the unfounded threats of the extermination of white people and their children.”

the “concept of the Viking as a symbol of whiteness and masculinity is widely reproduced among many contemporary Nordic-themed Neopagan revivalists, such as Odinists and the Ásatrú.”¹⁰⁵ Here, neo-*völkisch* thinking mixes with a fear of being replaced, which has led to the creation of extremist groups invoking Nordic heritage, including the old Nordic gods, in their quest for Nordic purity/superiority. Among these neo-*völkisch* groups is the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM).

The NRM was founded by Klas Lund in 1997 as a political organization under the original name of *Svenska motståndsrörelsen* (Swedish Resistance Movement).¹⁰⁶ They are self-described National Socialists with a “highly progressive, revolutionary and modern worldview.”¹⁰⁷ They do not outwardly subscribe to a Viking mentality, though they tap into the same sort of ideologies which draw many Nordics to Asatru including the use of runes in their symbols. On their banners, they use the Tyr rune, which they say stands for “courage, self-sacrifice, struggle and victory,” and the Ing rune, which for them symbolizes “fertility, creative energy, purposefulness and focus.”¹⁰⁸ For their parliamentary symbol, they reuse the Tyr rune, which is then surrounded by a red cog. The Tyr rune here represents both the Norse god Tyr, as well as the NRM’s determination to move forward and fight for the survival of the white race “no matter what the cost.”¹⁰⁹

The NRM mirrors both the *völkisch* movement of the early twentieth century and the Nazi party. However, they do not see themselves necessarily as the descendants of either group, though they do praise Hitler and his work for National Socialism often. Unlike the earlier *völkisch* movement, the NRM sees itself as progressive, wanting to move forward rather than back. This is a very surface reading, however, as in their party manifesto, *Vår Väg* (*Our Path*), they lay out their political platform as nine key points. The first is to immediately stop mass immigration into the Nordic countries by non-Northern Europeans and send them back to their own countries.¹¹⁰ By, “[i]mmediately stopping mass immigration” and deporting

¹⁰⁵ Mathias Nordvig, “Neo-Paganism” in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Herman, and Stephen Mitchell (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 728.

¹⁰⁶ Daniel Olsson, “Från Vitt ariskt motstånd till Nordiska motståndsrörelsen,” *Göteborgs-Tidningen*, September 30, 2017, <https://www.expressen.se/gt/fran-vitt-ariskt-motstand-till-nordiska-motstandsrörelsen/>. Accessed April 29, 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Jimmy Thunlind, “We are not ‘right-wing extremists,’” *Nordic Resistance Movement*, November 30, 2016, <https://nordicresistancemovement.org/we-are-not-right-wing-extremists/>. Accessed April 29, 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Editorial Staff, “Our Symbols,” *Nordic Resistance Movement*, December 29, 2018, <https://nordicresistancemovement.org/our-symbols/>. Accessed April 30, 2019.

¹⁰⁹ “Our Symbols,”

¹¹⁰ Editorial Staff, “Our Path,” *Nordic Resistance Movement*, November 17, 2018, <https://nordicresistancemovement.org/our-path/>. While their party manifesto is found online, it is presented in a paginated format. The above citation is from page 12.

those whom they see as foreigners, they are trying to reset what they see as an imbalance of racial purity among the Nordic peoples.

One of the clearest through lines from both previous ideologies is anti-Semitism. The NRM proudly stands against what it calls the “global Zionist elite,” with their second point stating “by all available means, and with long-term perspective, [we must] work to regain power from the global Zionist elite who have economically and militarily occupied the greater part of our world.”¹¹¹ Their definition of Zionists is reminiscent of Paul de Lagarde’s sentiments of Jewish peoples as an anti-*Volk*:

The current goal of the global Zionist elite [is] to contribute to long-term instability in all nations who may pose a threat to their power structure. This includes, not least, the ethnically homogenous countries of the Western world. Therefore, all global Zionists work towards not only multiculturalism and mass immigration, but other socially disintegrating ideologies such as liberalism and norm-dissolving cultural Marxism.¹¹²

The NRM here is seemingly trying to move forward while preserving their Viking past through idolization of modern Viking reception. This idolization is not limited to interest in Old Norse pagan religion, but extends also to the perceived heroic, often hyper-masculine stereotypes of gods and men portrayed in the sagas and Eddas, which can be seen in the seventh point of the NRM’s platform.

The seventh point states that the NRM wants to establish a National Socialist society with a strong welfare state that encourages innovation and entrepreneurship, which, on the surface, does not promote any sort of particularly masculine or racial ideals. It is in the fine print where this mentality comes forward. They claim to be for gender equality, stating they are against male chauvinism and feminism, as both act to, “[turn] men and women against each other as opposed to what nature originally intended: for them to complement each other. Both male chauvinism and feminism are not only a threat to a national community, but they have also led to a decline in mental health among women.”¹¹³ They continue by saying that they are not inspired by a “desert religion,” hinting at a perceived inferiority of the Abrahamic faiths, but that their views on women are, “derived directly from the natural and egalitarian vision of our Nordic ancestors. In accordance with the traditional Nordic viewpoint, the natural role of women as the one responsible for the unity and well-being of

¹¹¹ “Our Path,” page 16.

¹¹² “Our Path,” page 16.

¹¹³ “Our Path,” page 38.

the family unit must be asserted.”¹¹⁴ This point also hits on the extreme anti-homosexual viewpoint found in neo-*völkisch* groups. The NRM writes that they will, “[o]utlaw the homosexual lobby and other propaganda targeted at natural family units,” and “[b]an flagrant homosexuality in the public realm” while trying to say that they understand that homosexuals are misguided and are allowed to continue in what the NRM sees as a transgressive lifestyle.¹¹⁵

National Socialists like the NRM are currently in the political minority, but Nationalist and White Power groups are slowly growing throughout the Nordic countries, specifically in Sweden and Denmark.¹¹⁶ The NRM may not be directly inspired by Germanic Neopaganism, but they certainly draw lines back to the Viking Age and further, looking to align themselves with those they consider true, honorable warriors. Nordvig describes this as the “Wotan Archetype,” a “form of remembering the Viking past as a symbol of white, masculine primitivism, which derives from the collective of the fearless Viking.”¹¹⁷ The Eddas and sagas provide ample evidence for such characters, like the god Tyr. He courageously placed his hand in the mouth of the monstrous wolf Fenrir in order to fetter the beast. Similarly, there is Hrafnkel Frey’s Godi, who stood by his principles in not paying compensation to family of a man he had slain. While he made mistakes, he learned from them and was ultimately rewarded. If one listens to the words of Odin found in Havamal, they will surely live a good life.

Asatru has a troubled past, as many of the current organizations originated from racial-religious thinking. There are those who espouse a Folkish view, claiming that Asatru is only for ethnically Nordic peoples. This is not explicitly racist or bigoted, but it is a very fine distinction. There are, on the other hand, also those who ascribe to a Universalist understanding of the religion and see it as open to anyone who hears the call of the gods.

¹¹⁴ “Our Path,” page 38.

¹¹⁵ “Our Path,” page 39.

¹¹⁶ Anders Dalbo, “Rekordmånga vit makt-aktiviteter under 2018,” *Expo*, April 30, 2019, [https://jyllands-posten.dk/indland/politiretsvaesen/ECE10198061/pet-truslen-fra-hoejreekstremistisk-terror-er-stigende-i-danmark/?fbclid=IwAR0zKjj6rTXNd99o9y_OwoUxUDKSQ9JtsDqm6JYJJX99KbbRFYqZ_VmeXGw](https://expo.se/2019/04/rekordm%C3%A5nga-vit-makt-aktiviteter-under-2018?fbclid=IwAR2yrIE2tzwuKuMy2mAlWOgRLNAg28oGc3YcsiSSnujhd4V52WnPKbOcjTo; Steen A. Jørgensen, “PET: Truslen fra højreekstremistisk terror er stigende i Danmark,” <i>Jyllands-Posten</i>, January 12, 2018, <a href=).

¹¹⁷ Nordvig, “Neo-Paganism,” 730.

They may also not care at all about these things and instead care most about treating nature and our world with love and care, seeing the gods in the forests and mountains around them.

While there are many connections between neo-*völkisch* extremist groups and Neopagan religious groups, the two are not exclusively linked. They can both be traced back to a philosophical movement in the German *Kulturnation* at the end of the 19th century, but they have evolved into very separate entities. *Völkisch* ideology can be problematic for several reasons which come into play in for both groups, but that does not mean that Asatruers are necessarily white supremacists. There are some whose ideologies place them in both groups, but they are not one and the same. As with the NRM, one can also be a so-called “pan-Nordic Nationalist” without ascribing to Asatru. There will certainly be some cross-over, but that is more of an exception than a rule.

Vikings in Reception

Nationalism and Patriotism

Nationalism and *patriotism* are sometimes used synonymously, but the confusion of terms often leads to misinformation. Even though they are both forms of national pride, there are key differences which set them apart from one another. While *nationalism* would seem to refer exclusively to a nation, it has occasionally been widened beyond national borders, as in the cases of White Nationalism or pan-Scandinavianism. According to Eric Kaufman, White Nationalism is, “the belief that national identity should be built around white ethnicity, and that white people should therefore maintain both a demographic majority and dominance of the nation’s culture and public life.”¹¹⁸ Pan-Scandinavianism, similarly, revolves around the pan-Nationalist belief of “uniting the Scandinavian brethren [of Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland] in a Scandinavian federation or even a Scandinavian state.”¹¹⁹

In a Nordic neo-*völkisch* sense, *nationalism* may not be the proper word to describe the sentiments of the type of pan-Nordic cooperation aimed at by groups such as the NRM, nor pan-Scandinavianism, as that grew out of nineteenth century Romanticism and fell apart in 1864, “when the Swedish government refused to aid Denmark [during the Second Schleswig War].”¹²⁰ In this vein, the sentiments expressed by the NRM could be called a modern “pan-Nordic Nationalism.”

A much simpler idea to explain here is that of *patriotism*. According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, *patriotism* is defined as a, “feeling of attachment and commitment to a country, nation, or political community[, a] love of country.”¹²¹ *Patriotism*, for the purpose of this chapter, will then similarly refer to a broader pan-Nordic patriotism.

The Nordic countries love to call upon their shared past for tourist and advertising purposes. In Norway, the word Viking is emblazoned upon everything from towing companies to condensed milk, with a similar situation in Iceland and Denmark. Souvenir shops sell t-shirts with the national flags, much like anywhere else, but they also sell Viking longships, plastic “Viking” battle axes and swords, plastic horned helmets, and more. The image of the Vikings has become co-opted for the sale of knick-knacks. This use can be seen

¹¹⁸ Amanda Taub, “‘White Nationalism,’ Explained,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/world/americas/white-nationalism-explained.html?_r=0.

¹¹⁹ Mats Wickström, “Nordic brothers before strangers: pan-national boundary making in the post-war naturalization policies of the Nordic countries,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40:4 (2017), 677.

¹²⁰ Wickström, “Nordic brothers,” 677.

¹²¹ Andrea Baumeister, “Patriotism,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed May 2, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/patriotism-sociology>.

as a form of patriotism, a pride in one's country and cultural heritage, but this veers into nationalistic territory when it comes at the expense of others. The NRM and other National Socialist groups see Nordics as the sole inheritors of the Vikings. Moreover, the Vikings have been used by these groups to spread a message of fear and hate. This presents a problem for those hoping to display their patriotism, national or pan-Nordic, through the Vikings.

Vikings in Reception

Much like Asatru, the modern reception of Vikings has come under scrutiny for its association with National Socialist groups. In music, for example, there are several Nordic folk and metal bands who write about the Viking and pagan past, as well as the natural beauty of the Nordic lands. Jón Karl Helgason makes note of the fact that, "[t]he most fanatical bands in the Viking metal tradition have been linked to Neopagan groups and in some cases to National Socialist black metal. Other bands have rejected neo-Nazism and racism and associate pagan elements of their music with other political interests."¹²²

Some, like the Viking metal band Tyr, have been very vocal about their stance on neo-Nazism and racism. Their song "Shadow of the Swastika" is a loud admonition of these ideologies, as well as a call to stand up against those who would try to pull others into their National Socialist ways of thinking:

You who think the hue of your hide means you get to blame
The black for your own faults and so bring humanity shame
Make sure you count me out of the ranks of your inbred morons
With your sewer gas and kiss my Scandinavian ass.¹²³

Other bands, like Viking Rock band Ultima Thule, claim they are patriotic and that their songs praise "Sweden's virtues."¹²⁴ These examples bring into question the matter of intent. Did these bands intend to make music for extremist nationalist groups to enjoy, or was that just a consequence of their own patriotism? Tyr takes a hard stance on this, telling off National Socialists through their lyrics.

¹²² Jón Karl Helgason, *Echoes of Valhalla: The Afterlife of the Eddas and Sagas* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), 149.

¹²³ "Shadow of the Swastika lyrics," *Genius*, accessed 13 May, 2019, <https://genius.com/Tyr-shadow-of-the-swastika-lyrics>.

¹²⁴ Benjamin Teitelbaum, *Lions of the North*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20. Teitelbaum makes the distinction between the two types of music thusly: "Viking rock differs fundamentally from Viking metal in its sound, lyrical themes, and political associations. Whereas Viking rock is tied to organized nationalist and conservative politics, links between organized politics and the Viking metal scene [...] are inconsistent." 178, note 31.

Nationalism, as a label meant to signify an extreme viewpoint, is often connected to other extreme sociopolitical positions, like misogyny, racism, and homophobia. It is important to make the distinction that while these ideologies often overlap in group settings, they are not directly linked to each other. With that said, there are certainly many places where all of these come together under the guise of protecting white ethnicity or white heritage, such as the online “Viking” community, Norskk [sic], based in Tromsø, Norway. The groups mission statement, as found on their website is as follows:

We are a brotherhood of *víkingar*, *Berserkir* and *Úlfhéðnar* living by ancestral pre-christianization [sic] Norse traditions, including the *Víkinga Code*: Courage, Honor, Strength, Brotherhood, Loyalty, Integrity, Discipline, Determination, Simplicity. We share our ancestral traditions, our skills, and our wisdom to make you a true *víkingr*, to ensure your survival in harsh or hostile environments, to build tribes, to traditionally heal you, and to care for your beard and body... Among a few other things.¹²⁵

Here, they reference the “*Víkinga Code*,” also known as the Nine Noble Virtues, which were written by John Yeowell and John Gibbs-Bailey, two of the founding members of the *Odinic Rite*, an early leader in ethnicist Asatru.¹²⁶ The *Odinic Rite*’s website claims that the two men, later calling themselves Stubba and Hoskuld, codified this “moral code” out of the Eddic poems Havamal and Sigurdrefumal.¹²⁷

The *Odinic Rite* is a branch of Odinism, a religion they describe as, “[t]he natural religion for the Indo European peoples (often called Northern European),” and is often equated with Asatru.¹²⁸ It should be noted that the equation of Indo-European and Northern European here done by the *Odinic Rite* is not correct. Though they do not specify on their website, this line of thinking could lead back to Gustaf Kossinna, an early German Philologist and *völkisch* thinker. He suggested that “Indo-Europeans were indigenous to Germany,” and that other Indo-European civilizations stemmed from there.¹²⁹ According to Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Odinism is a response to Christianity and its Middle-Eastern roots which articulates “an unabashed racial paganism, invoking the gods of the Norse and Teutonic

¹²⁵ “Home page,” *Norskk*, accessed May 3, 2019. <https://norskk.com/>. Italicizing is done by me.

¹²⁶ Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 57–8.

¹²⁷ “The Nine Noble Virtues and Charges of the *Odinic Rite*,” *Odinic Rite*, accessed May 3, 2019, <http://odinic-rite.org/main/the-nine-noble-virtues-and-charges-of-the-odinic-rite/>.

¹²⁸ “What is Odinism?” *Odinic Rite*, accessed May 6, 2014, <https://odinic-rite.org/main/about/what-is-odinism/>.

¹²⁹ Mees, *Science of the Swastika*, 79.

pantheons... Odinism today represents the battle front of racist paganism in support of a white Aryan revolutionary path.”¹³⁰

The “*Vikinga Code*” is problematic here, not for what it says, but rather how and by whom it is interpreted. As stated in the first chapter of this paper, Asatru does not have holy scripture and every organization interprets Asatru in its own way. These codes were used by many groups for a while as a way of unifying Asatru, but the creators were very much ethnicist Asatruers and this, in turn, connected their interpretations of these Noble Virtues with a neo-*völkisch* understanding.

Norskk it is difficult to define. Neo-*völkisch* in only the loosest terms, they could more properly be called “Viking Extremists.” They do not tolerate anything negative said about Vikings and, while not overtly racist, they have multiple articles on their website where they discuss the whiteness of the Vikings and how important it is that the Vikings were, in fact, white. They also have two sections on their website labeled “Warrior Facts” and “Viking Facts.” Where the “Warrior Facts” are purely misogynist, the “Viking Facts” assert a more White supremacist tone, with facts like “Vikings were never black” and a definition of Vikings as “White biological sexist males and tribal warriors who enslaved, raped, and killed incompatible cultures while on an animal protein diet and without using weed or mushrooms.”¹³¹ This emphasis on eating animal protein and not using “weed or mushrooms” is due to keeping the body pure and natural; not polluting oneself. Following the nationalist thinking of neo-*völkisch* groups, Norskk also promotes the anachronistic Viking fact, “Vikings had closed borders.”¹³²

Groups like Norskk, while not inherently ethnicists or Asatru, are very much invested in the idea of the Viking patriarchy mentioned in the previous chapter. They use the idea of the Viking and turn all men into potential Vikings, aiming to destroy what they call the “feminization of society.”¹³³ While I would like to discuss the misogyny found here, it would do better in a separate paper devoted to the topic of gender and Vikings in modern reception. What can be discussed here is that Vikings are an intriguing international subject which have

¹³⁰ Goodrick Clarke, *Black Sun*, 257

¹³¹ “Viking Facts,” Norskk, accessed May 6, 2019, <https://norskk.com/viking-facts-list>.

¹³² “Viking Facts,” Norskk, accessed May 6, 2019.

¹³³ “Surviving a Feminized Society,” *Norskk*, accessed May 5, 2019, <https://norskk.com/skills/2019/5/5/surviving-a-feminized-society>.

been embraced by the Nordic countries as a symbol of their shared history. They have been made mascots for the Nordic countries, and while many people visit due to the appeal of Vikings, there are those who have turned the Vikings into a warning instead; a mascot not for tourism but National Socialism. Norsk and the NRM, even certain Asatru groups like the *Odinic Rite*, have promoted the Vikings and their perceived ethics to further their own agendas of nationalism, racism, misogyny, etc. No longer patriotic in their support of their heritage, they have turned to oppressive nationalism. They see the Vikings as a beacon of hope for the White race and try to recreate what they see as a Viking society in a modern context.

Conclusion

As should be understood by this point, Germanic Neopaganism is a complex topic. I have briefly touched on the pagan religion of the Viking Age Nordic peoples, as well as the sources from which most Germanic Neopagans derive a majority of their beliefs.

Reinterpretations of these sources led to the *völkisch* movement, which has been presented to show how modern peoples have recontextualized these texts with their own history, searching for and constructing a new cultural identity based on their perceptions of the past. While this ideology seemingly disappeared for a time in the mid-twentieth century, it resurfaced towards its end, with Asatru groups forming themselves on some of the same principles as the *völkisch* movement.

Those who deeply believed in the racial-religious aspect of Asatru began organizations to preserve what they saw as the “endangered White race,” but this ideology is not exclusive to Folkish Asatru and is certainly not synonymous with the religion. Others saw the more secular aspect of the Viking Age peoples as something to emulate, interpreting certain facets of these peoples’ cultures and working to implement them in extreme ways. Some of these interpretations manifested as White Nationalism or pan-Nordic Nationalism, while others looked upon Asatru and its sources as their cultural heritage, seeing themselves as simply patriotic for promoting the image of the Vikings in a positive, welcoming manner.

This thesis was meant as an exploration of the modern reception of the Vikings and Old Norse religions. It may not come as a shock that Asatru has often been linked with nationalism and racism, but the depth of that connection is intriguing. Asatru’s shared roots with the *völkisch* movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and with contemporary National Socialists have forever linked it to such thought. That said, Asatru is just as much the cultural heritage of the Nordic peoples, and it makes sense that there would be many who would want to defend that culture from those whom they see as outsiders.

I began my research with the assumption that the form of pan-Nordic Nationalism touted by the NRM was inevitable, with *völkisch*-style thinking occurring in a Germanic setting regardless of the historical circumstances. During the course of writing, it became clear that this was not a foregone conclusion after all. The *völkisch* movement was born out of a combination of circumstances, which serendipitously (or not, depending on one’s view) hapened around the same time, bringing together many like-minded people and influencing the course of human history. I stated previously that there are similar conditions occurring today, leading people down a similar path. We do not have the loss of the enormously

influential French culture with which to contend; instead, we have social media and rapid globalization to seemingly “strip away” national identities,” creating a sort of global monoculture.

Not only do social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook serve to “homogenize” our cultures, they are also becoming the new soap boxes upon which neo-*völkisch* leaders can proselytize. Granted, these platforms are private companies and liable to shut down these communities (as well as banning leading voices within said communities), but they serve as a jumping off point for many people who then find their way into more private corners of the internet. I, myself, was directed to Norskk by someone I met online while looking for living accommodations in Iceland. After hearing about my studies, he directed me to their website (which I did not go to at the time). I found out after moving in with him that he had National Socialist ties and was trying to bring me into Norskk’s Viking brotherhood.

I am not fully convinced, however, that there would be a *völkisch*-type movement today without its the initial growth in the nineteenth century. The use of social media does work to bring people together from across the world, but a fear of outsiders and foreigners is found everywhere. If *völkisch* thinking did not start in the German *Kultur*nation, it could have started elsewhere. This is something we can only speculate, but we should be mindful of this regardless.

I must conclude that Germanic Neopaganism cannot separate itself from earlier *völkisch* thinking or extreme nationalist views, despite the efforts of individual groups to distance themselves from that kind of rhetoric. While there is not a strong link between neo-*völkisch* groups like the NRM and Asatru, they do share some common sources of inspiration. The strong sense of patriarchy found in the NRM traces back to a perceived “Viking” mentality found in the Eddas and the sagas, though it is more socio-politically, rather than religiously, inspired.

There were several things I would like to further investigate, one of which being Norskk’s reception of the Vikings as “sexist males and tribal warriors who... raped.”¹³⁴ Vikings are at the intersection of many fields of study, especially gender and race studies, and the discussion about Viking patriarchy is a growing topic. I am not a gender studies expert; however, I would have liked to explore this path further and I look forward to possibly working in collaboration with others on this topic in the future. This reception of Vikings as an extremely masculine totem makes though those in Norskk seem afraid of losing their own

¹³⁴ “Viking Facts,” *Norskk*, accessed May 6, 2019, <https://norskk.com/viking-facts-list>.

masculinity and are putting all their fears of emasculation into a Viking-shaped golem. Interviews with members of the NRM and Norskk would be interesting, though perhaps a bit difficult. First-hand accounts are valuable in situations like this, even if the information relayed is somewhat unreliable. The way the subjects discuss their views is just as telling as anything they say.

My intentions with this paper were to explore the reception of the Vikings and Old Norse religions within a Nordic milieu. I would certainly like to follow this up with an investigation of the same topics within an American context, due to the United States' history of deeply ingrained, systemic racism which feeds easily off *völkisch* thought. Identity politics are of important note, as, while it is a difficult subject to discuss without tempers flaring, it is necessary. There are many White supremacists who have entered academia in both the US and Europe with the intent of proving their racial superiority, though this claim is hotly debated.¹³⁵ Finally, I would like to expand this paper by interviewing members of the various Germanic Neopagan communities to understand their interpretations of their beliefs, as well as to further investigate the Nature worship aspect of Neopaganism.

Returning to the research questions I started with, I am not sure I can answer them satisfactorily. I can say that many Nordic nationalist extremist groups use runes to symbolize their Nordic-ness, but not necessarily to show their association to Asatru or to Old Norse religion in general. There are other symbols in use, too, like the Nazi swastika, but runes seem most common among the various groups. Within the Nordic countries, Asatru takes on a different meaning than in the US, with less of a focus on Folkish versus Universalist, and more on preserving cultural heritage. There are extreme right-wing Asatru groups in the US, but since I have tried to specifically focus on the Nordic milieu, I will not expand upon the US's organizations here. The NRM's use of runes is minimal and for the explicit purpose of reclaiming their Nordic-ness, while Norskk revels in the use of runes and Viking imagery, promoting a savagery they deem to be the "natural state for men."

Within Asatru, the Eddas and the sagas help to guide Asatruers in their daily lives. They see the teachings of Odin from Havamal reflected in the daily lives of the saga

¹³⁵ Jennifer Schuessler, "Medieval Scholars Joust with White Nationalists. And One Another," *New York Times*, May 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/05/arts/the-battle-for-medieval-studies-white-supremacy.html>.

characters and they use this knowledge to live their own lives as best they can. Some believe the creation of the world was done by Odin and his brothers and that the world will end in a fiery battle between the gods and the *jotnar*. Others look at the simplistic agrarian lives of these people as ideals and seek a closer relationship with nature as a result.

This leaves one last question, then: is Neopaganism inherently racist? The short answer is no. There is no monolith that we may look upon for all the answers. Germanic Neopaganism can be problematic, certainly, especially when approached from a Folkish, racial-religious point-of-view in our post-World War Two world. Asatru especially can be adapted for “nefarious” purposes when combined with neo-*völkisch* thinking and a violent reception of the Vikings, but to think that all who self-identify as Asatru or Neopagan are racists or extremist nationalists shows a misunderstanding of the intricacies of religion and history.

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