

## **Icelandic Reconstructions: Asatru, Anglo-Saxon Paganism and Scholarship**

Neo-Paganism, sometimes called contemporary Paganism, is best thought of as a loosely connected bundle of religious faiths each with their own practices and social movements.<sup>1</sup> The diversity which the term 'Neo-Paganism' covers stems, at least partially, from the fact that many of these belief systems are reconstructionist in nature.<sup>2</sup> As such, Neo-Pagan practitioners often look toward ancient traditions, many of which changed drastically or vanished entirely when their areas of origin were Christianized. Hence, the multiplicity of Neo-Pagan beliefs has a direct correlation to the number of ancient religions which Neo-Pagans have chosen to reconstruct.

One of the religious spheres which some Neo-Pagans, such as Asatru or Anglo-Saxon Pagans, have chosen to focus upon is that which existed within Northern Europe and Scandinavia prior to the Christianization of these regions. Since the information pertaining to the belief system(s) that existed within the area prior to Christianity is scarce, Neo-Pagan practitioners, much like scholars, must decide what to focus upon and what to give propriety to. As such, just as within the greater realm of Neo-Paganism itself, there are several different faiths, each of which has chosen different, if interrelated, contexts from which to reconstruct their religious practices. Regardless of their specific focuses, many of the Neo-Pagan faiths which seek to reconstruct the pre-Christian northern European and Nordic religions draw upon the same sources, whether literary or material in nature. Since they draw upon the same literary sources, such as the Icelandic Sagas, they are intimately connected to one another. This connection has been viewed as both a blessing and burden as the various individuals and their communities struggle to reconnect with the past alluded to in the available sources. In order for the scholar to gain an understanding of these Neo-Pagan belief systems, it is fundamental that he or she try to gain an understanding of how they approach and make use of the sources available to them. The purpose of this paper is to support this thesis by providing a brief exploration of how the literary source materials have been considered and used by Neo-Pagan groups, such as the Asatru or Anglo-Saxons heathens. The focus here will not be on whether these groups have a 'correct' or legitimate understanding of the materials from which they reconstruct their various beliefs. Such a focus would be theological in nature and ultimately futile if there is any hope of understanding the practitioners themselves on their own terms. Rather, the focus here will be upon how these Neo-Pagan groups approach and use the literary sources available to them to create both metaphysical perspectives and religious rituals. To meet this goal, the paper will be divided into three sections. The first will offer a brief presentation of the Neo-Pagan groups mentioned above

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to capitalize the terms 'Paganism' and 'Neo-Paganism.' This is done to emphasize the fact that the traditions to which these terms refer should be considered by scholars as on par with the other religions of the world, such as Christianity or Buddhism. As such, they should be explored with all the scholarly considerations offered to other religious traditions. I am following Margot Adler's lead in this. See footnote beginning on page three of the work cited.

<sup>2</sup> There is some discussion within the Neo-Pagan/Pagan community over the use of the labels mentioned above. Some have suggested that the term 'Neo-Pagan' should be reserved for those faiths which seek to regain a religious worldview that ceased to exist at some point in the past. 'Pagan,' on the other hand, should be reserved for those faiths that have never ceased to have practitioners, regardless of whether or not their beliefs could be practiced openly. Wrapped up in this discussion are issues of legitimacy, authenticity and authority of which the scholar should take note. For simplicity, I have decided to use the term 'Neo-Paganism' to refer to all Neo-Pagan/Pagan faith, whether they have ceased to be practiced or are reconstructed. However, in the future, as my understanding of the groups grows, I may return to this categorization and reconsider it. Adler also discusses this issue on pages 9-10 of the work cited.

and provide the reader with some of their aspects that may prove problematic to scholarship. The second section will address how the literary text themselves, and the knowledge of pre-Christian Pagan beliefs they offer, are seen within these Neo-Pagan communities. The final section will present several specific cases where literature has had a direct impact upon the beliefs and rituals of the groups presented.

Before presenting a discussion of the specific Neo-Pagan faiths mentioned above it may prove beneficial to offer a brief discussion of Neo-Paganism itself and how its diversity, self-inclusion and dynamic nature may prove difficult for contemporary scholarship to address. Margot Adler, in *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, makes the diversity within Neo-Paganism by stating that "... these religious groups all differ in regard to tradition, scope, structure, organization, ritual, and the names of the religious and philosophical movement. They have a common name for themselves: Pagans or Neo-Pagans..." (Adler 3.) This diversity may prove problematic for scholarship because it is hard to categorize these groups in a way that proves useful. One may attempt to categorize the groups based upon commonalities which arise between the faith's practices and metaphysical worldviews. Adler herself does this when she tries to point out Neo-Paganism's most important principles and categorize groups accordingly.<sup>3</sup> However, while there may be commonalities between beliefs systems, the classification of 'Neo-Pagan' is ultimately made by the practitioners themselves and may not be based upon any specific ideological conceptions which they may adhere.<sup>4</sup> Helen A. Berger confirms this in her work, *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States*. She states, "Adherents' self-identification as either a Witch or a Neo-Pagan is regularly accepted by others in the religion" (Berger 10.) Hence, while initiation may occur for some traditions, many Neo-Pagan practitioners are such simply because they identify as such.<sup>5</sup> Using self-identification of Neo-Pagan practitioners may be a key to the goal of adequately categorizing it. However, the fact that self-identification is so widely accepted may also prove challenging for contemporary scholarship. This is especially true in fields where scholarship focuses its research upon the elites of a tradition, such as it theologians or ordained clergy.<sup>6</sup> While some Neo-Pagan groups may have similar categories of religious specialists, they are not usually considered to be individuals who represent the same sort of authority as found in other traditions, such as the Judeo-Christian traditions. Hence, the authority to describe religious practice is in the hands of every Neo-Pagan practitioner and this becomes extremely difficult when, as Adler states, "... *most Neo-Pagans disagree on almost everything...*" (Adler 24.) Since each practitioner helps to create and

<sup>3</sup> She attempts this sort of classification many times throughout her book. For instance, in Chapter 3 *The Pagan World View*, she offers polytheism as a major principle which exists amongst Neo-Pagans. However, she is always careful to include the words 'most' or 'some' and avoids using the term 'all'.

<sup>4</sup> A major drawback for this paper, and one that may ultimately lead to a limitation in its usefulness, is that I have had to rely solely upon written sources, such as websites, books and articles. While I have tried to include practitioner perspectives as much as possible, the lack of having any Neo-Pagan informants, especially those of Asatru or Anglo-Saxon adherence, means that the discussion I offer is based upon my own reflections of the materials available, reflections that may not adequately represent the beliefs of those I am trying to comprehend.

<sup>5</sup> The acceptance of an individual may vary depending upon the specific Neo-Pagan group and how that specific community addresses membership. The important thing to think of here is that one may easily self-identify as Neo-Pagan but need community acknowledgement to become a member of a specific group. For more on this, see Adler's discussion in Chapter 2 *A Religion without Converts*, in the work cited.

<sup>6</sup> In general, I find that the dismissal of the non-clergy member's viewpoints regarding on their own religious practices by scholarship to be a fundamental flaw in Religious Studies. Furthermore, I feel that one of the reasons that Neo-Paganism is not addressed more within the Academy is because it calls into question methodologies that have been thought to be universally applicable to the study of religious beliefs.

understand their tradition's metaphysical worldview, Neo-Paganism is extremely dynamic. Many Neo-Pagan faiths, such as Discordia or Reclaiming Wicca, embrace this ability for religious practices to be dynamic and ever changing.<sup>7</sup> Some scholars even see the dynamic nature of Neo-Paganism as its key component. Berger states, "Changes—in self, in nature, and in the social world—are all celebrated within Neo-Paganism" (Berger 100.)<sup>8</sup>

While the above discussion of Neo-Paganism is necessarily brief, it suggests that scholastic methodologies that require concrete categorizations, or seek to give rise to them, ultimately prove useless when the focus becomes Neo-Paganism. Scholars who use such methodologies must ultimately work to make their data conform to their categorizations, either by misrepresenting phenomena, omitting phenomena or glossing over the dynamic nature of phenomena.<sup>9</sup> Sadly, since scholarship focused upon Neo-Paganism is still in its infancy, there has not been any methodology put forward which deals adequately with the problems posed above. Therefore, the usefulness of this paper and the adequacy of its conclusions should be judged accordingly. With this in mind, this paper will focus upon a specific subset of Neo-Paganism: who self identify as Neo-Pagan and whose practitioners use Icelandic literary sources when reconstructing their religious practices.<sup>10</sup> Along with this narrower field of focus, the attempt will be made to draw extensively upon perspectives offered in the writings of the practitioner's themselves. It is hoped that by doing so, the reader will be able to hear the voice of the Neo-Pagan due to, or perhaps in spite of, the schematic according to which this paper offers it.

As mentioned above, this paper will focus upon two Neo-Pagan groups; the Asatru and Anglo-Saxon Pagans, which draw upon Icelandic literature in order to gain access to the religious traditions which they wish to reconstruct. While the groups have many similarities in regards to religious practices and concepts, the two groups are considered distinct by many of their practitioners. In *What is ASATRU?*, Stephen A. McNallen states, "Long before Christianity came to Northern Europe, the people there – our ancestors – had their own form of spirituality that influenced every aspect of their culture. One expression of this European spirituality was

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on Discordia see Adler's discussion of the Discordian Society in the work cited. For a discussion of Reclaiming Wicca see Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition contains an updated foreward and footnotes reflecting upon the past twenty years and how Starhawk's religious practices have changed or evolved.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the key concept of change and creativity that Berger finds within Neo-Paganism, at least within the traditions upon which she focuses, leads her to question in the later part of her work what will happen to Neo-Paganism as time goes on and it becomes form institutionalized.

<sup>9</sup> This discussion hints at several issues which arise when scholarship, specifically the religious studies scholarship with which I am most familiar, tries to address Neo-Paganism. The specific methodologies that I have encountered that have the most issues are those of an Eliadian nature. That is to say they draw from one religious tradition, or sometimes several, in hopes of providing a model by which all other phenomena can be understood. I feel that this simply does not work, in general, and, specifically, when addressing Neo-Paganism.

While I have kept my discussion firmly rooted in looking at the methodological concerns, Adler points out, "I have noticed that many intellectuals turn themselves off the instant they are confronted with the words *witchcraft*, *magic*, *occultism*, and *religion*, as if such ideas exert a dangerous power that might weaken their rational faculties...." (Adler 5.)

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted the claim that these traditions self-identify as Neo-Pagan (or Pagan) should be taken with some reservation. While the distinction may have been clearer for Adler during the time of her writing, published in 1979, there seems to be ambiguity amongst contemporary practitioners. This ambiguity is easily seen on Witchvox.com. Asatru practitioners sometimes identify themselves as Neo-Pagan (or Pagan) generally, Asatru specifically, see Gary Penzler "Pagan Clergy – Who Qualifies? An Asatru perspective" (2004.) Others identify themselves as simply Asatru. See Manny Olds "Asatru" (2001.) Still others separate Asatru from Neo-Paganism (but not Paganism). See Wren "Intro: Pagans, Pagans, and Recons" (2005). See work cited for full bibliographical information.

Asatru” (McNallen 1.) Another expression of European spirituality is Anglo-Saxon Paganism. Anglo-Saxon Pagans, who sometimes call themselves Heathen in order to draw a distinction between themselves and other pagans, focus more on Anglo-Saxon tribes, such as the Jutes, Saxons and Angles, the areas which they inhabited and their customs when constructing their beliefs (Wodening 2.) As Swain Wodening states, “Anglo-Saxony is intimately tied to Asatru (here used in the sense of only Norse version of Heathenry), the two being the same religion with only tribal variations the difference between the two” (Wodening 12.) Before looking specifically at how these two groups consider and use Icelandic texts, a brief discussion will be offered regarding their general traits to allow the reader a greater understanding of them.

Due to their intimate nature, the Asatru and Anglo-Saxon Pagans share many of the same traits; they are both consciously reconstructionists, communally based, and have moral/ethical codes. It is quite clear from the source material that both groups are considered by the practitioners themselves as reconstructionist in nature.<sup>11</sup> As such, the practitioners themselves are quite aware that they are reaching back through time in hopes of connecting with a practice that has long since ceased to exist. For instance, Wren states that Asatru “is a reconstructionist, polytheistic faith based on pre-Christian Northern European beliefs, Gods and Heroes” (Wren 2005.)<sup>12</sup> As such, the Asatru metaphysical worldview encompasses much of the phenomena found within the Icelandic texts or that can be derived from them.<sup>13</sup> They worship Scandinavian deities such as Thor, Odin and Freya.<sup>14</sup> They maintain a belief in Ragnorak and believe in the possibility of an afterlife, possibly dwelling in a hall in Asgard or with Hel (Olds 2001). Wodening states that the same is true of Anglo-Saxon Paganism and further adds, “The Anglo-Saxon troth [belief,] is, as reconstructionist religions go, a very difficult one to reconstruct. Not much lore survived that is Anglo-Saxon... Therefore modern Anglo-Saxon pagans must borrow from the Icelandic lore...”(Wodening 2.) The fact that both groups recognize that they are reconstructionist in nature leads to a level of honesty when looking at the connection between their modern beliefs and that of those who they are attempting to emulate. Wodening perhaps says it best when he states:

Modern Anglo-Saxon tribal religion will therefore never be the ancient form it was... Never the less, through comparative studies of festivals that survived into

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<sup>11</sup> The term ‘reconstructionist’ sometimes has negative connotations, both within scholarly circles and amongst practitioners. Much like the term ‘eclecticism,’ the term can be used to represent a belief system that is somehow invalid, foolish or flaky. However, its use here should not be seen with negative connotations. From my research, it has become clear that Asatru, as well as Anglo-Saxon Pagans, are quite aware that they are reconstructing a belief system that will never be identical with that which existed in Northern Europe or Scandinavia after the regions were Christianized.

<sup>12</sup> According to Wren, Asatru is also known as “Norse, Nordic, [and] Reginthroth Northern Heathenism” (Wren 2005.)

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that in discussions regarding magic and its use, Asatru practitioners usually state that they do not do magic. Manny Olds states, “Magic is not part of Asatru worship. In fact, many Asatruers don’t believe in magic at all. Others, however, practice various kinds of workings (such as rune divination) as a supplement to their religious practices” (Olds 2001.) It would be interesting to see how the definition of magic varies among Neo-Pagans and to question an Asatru practitioner as to why rune divination would not be magic when divination is considered magic by several other forms of Neo-Paganism. I suspect it has something to do with the distinction between cause-effect and belief-causation concepts amongst the groups.

<sup>14</sup> It would be interesting to explore how the various deities are seen in relation to one another from the perspective of the two groups mentioned. From a brief reading of the Icelandic texts, such as the Edda and the Poetic Edda, it appears that there is an ambiguity that exists in regards to the hierarchical structure of the deities. It would be interesting to see how these groups deal with this ambiguity.

Christian times, folk traditions, and folklore, it has been possible to reconstruct a religion that is unique in its perspective and perhaps close to what the ancient Anglo-Saxons practiced (Wodening 2.)

Perhaps, the most prominent fact about Asatru and Anglo-Saxon Paganism is that both are communal in nature. In regards to Asatru, the sagas seem to indicate that the pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia was communal. While you may practice as a lone-Asatru, and self-identify as such, there is an ongoing discussion as to whether you can really ‘be’ Asatru if there is no community. As Chad laments in “The Lone Heathen, “Asatru is a religion of fellowship, whether the Heathens practice and study alone or not. Something has to be done so that some of us, like me, can access kindreds and clergy so that we can all have a chance to experience something different, something other than loneliness on this path.” (Chad 2006.) These communities, which Chad calls kindreds,<sup>15</sup> put up websites for their practitioners which contain regional information regarding the local community as well as resources, such as textual lists, to educate their members, as well as outsiders, as to their beliefs and practices.<sup>16</sup> Anglo-Saxon heathenism also sees itself as communal, but goes a step further in this regard. Wodening, in discussing the differences which exist between Asatru and Anglo-Saxon Paganism, argues that “The Anglo Saxon troth... differs from Icelandic Heathenry [Asatru] in that it has been more innately ‘tribal’ ... in nature” (Wodening 13.) According to Wodening the Anglo-Saxon groups usually have a chieftain which is elected for life; it consists of adult members and a way for status to be determined amongst members (Wodening 13.)<sup>17</sup> The makeup of the groups themselves seems to change dynamically over time but the importance of the group itself, rather than a collection of individual practitioners, is almost always emphasized among both groups of practitioners.

Among Neo-Pagans, these two groups seem to have a reputation for being the more morally conservative and more given to moral imperatives than other Neo-Pagan groups. This may stem from the moral universe which exists within the Icelandic material which places great emphasis upon an honor code.<sup>18</sup> This moral code may be thought of as fluid without specific concepts. For instance, when discussing Asatru, McNallen presents a discussion of standards of behaviors. Among the proper attributes of an Asatru member are “strength, courage, joy, honor, freedom, loyalty to kin, realism, vigor, and the revering of our ancestors” (McNallen 6.) According to McNallen, these reflect the greatest ideals for Asatru. However, when it comes to specific actions and whether they are good or evil, McNallen offers the following remark, “Good and evil are not constants. In no case are good and evil dictated to us by edicts written by an authoritarian deity. We are expected to use our freedom, responsibility, and awareness of duty to serve the highest and best ends” (McNallen 7.) Like the Asatru, Anglo-Saxon Pagans also have codes of conduct and emphasize the use of moral character and ethical action. Wodening sets aside an entire chapter for discussion of the ‘thews’ and virtues of his practitioners. He begins his

<sup>15</sup> Olds states that kindreds are also known as ‘godhords, hearths, garths, or fellowships’ (Olds 2001.)

<sup>16</sup> There are numerous sites which are good references. See the works cited for a selection of them used for this paper.

<sup>17</sup> I’m not sure how ‘accurate’ Wodening’s portrayal of the Asatru community versus the Anglo-Saxon community is. However, he is the only individual I have found who compared both groups of practitioners. As such, I will simply let his comments stand until more information regarding a comparison is found.

<sup>18</sup> This is based upon an inference that came to me when looking at the various articles on Witchvox.com and other similar sites. The relationship which exists between Asatru or Anglo-Saxon Pagans and other Neo-Pagan groups, especially eclectic Wiccans, is strained because the former focus too much upon developing a moral code, something which the later finds to be a waste of time.

discussion with a caveat that the lists which exist among heathens, under which he appears to discuss both Asatru and Anglo-Saxon Paganism, are modern fabrications. As such, while they are useful today, they may not provide a direct link between the virtues of today and those of ancient Heathens (Wodening 40.) Regardless of this, he does argue that there is support for the existence of a moral code:

The old religion never relied on such things as a list of thews. Instead these thews were implicit in their laws, maxims, and gnomic verses. Many of them can be seen in 'Havamal' of the Elder Edda, others in the sagas and tales such as the Sigurd lays. Still others can be seen in the law codes of the time (Wodening 40.)

Many of the traits which he then goes on to discuss mirror that of McNellan's discussion and others found within various written sources.

From the brief discussion provided above, it should become clear that the Asatru and Anglo-Saxon Pagans require access to the pre-Christian religious traditions which existed in Northern Europe and Scandinavia. Without this access, they have no hope of developing the community which they want to recreate or understanding the metaphysical perspectives to which they wish to adhere. One of the few ways to access these beliefs is through literary sources. As such, their importance to these traditions cannot be dismissed. Wodening states:

Preserved in texts were many folkways. The Icelanders preserved the *Elder and Prose Eddas*, collections of myths of the Gods, as well as much information on rituals and other customs in the Icelandic sagas. The Danes preserved myths in the works of Saxo Grammaticus. Finally, the Anglo-Saxons preserved information in a rune poem, pagan charms, and the classic work *Beowulf* (Wodening 2.)

Both the Asatru and Anglo-Saxon Pagan communities are well aware of the important relationship they have with the literary source materials. As such, they take steps to both emphasize that the practitioners within their communities strive to gain an understanding of these materials and also strive to give them access to sources they find relevant and meaningful. One of the ways to emphasize this is by allowing their membership to gain direct access to the literary materials and commentaries, both scholarly and otherwise. It is often the case that the websites of the various kindred have links to information. For instance, the Raven Kindred, an Asatru community, put out a webbook called *Ravenbok*. This work provides a detailed analysis of the history of Nordic Paganism. It also provides a detailed discussion on Asatru and its main beliefs and practices and how this is linked to information found within the literary sources. Other sites, such as those run by the Swedish Asatru Society and The Troth provide links to scholarly discussions of the Icelandic texts and current religious practices.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the clearest way in which these groups have chosen to emphasize the need for gaining understanding of the literary materials is to link it to prestige within the community. For instance, some communities have created a priesthood or clergy whose members are commonly called a Gothi (Priest) or Gynthia (Priestess). This special category of individual, not to be confused with religious power or rank, is one who has a great deal of knowledge regarding the literary sources. *Ravenbok* states: "A competent Gothi should have studied the Eddas and Sagas and know the history of our religion. He or she should also know a bit about runes and the other

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<sup>19</sup> For the Swedish Asatru Society see works cited. The Troth website is [www.troth.org](http://www.troth.org).

mysteries of our tradition (Ravenbok.) Gary Penzler mirrors this outlook in his work, “Pagan Clergy – Who Qualifies? An Asatru Perspective”:

Gothar today tend to fall into the category of ‘experts.’ They are experts in the lore and literature, experts on the old ritual forms and their modern counterparts... Since modern gothar are expected to be experts in lore and ritual, this is the first qualification [of being one] – an excellent working knowledge of what has gone before, what has been written, and what is done today (Penzler 2004.)<sup>20</sup>

The above makes it clear that the communities, at least those who adhere to this system, are aware of and value knowledge of the text and its significance to their religious belief.

The question which remains is how they make use of the literary sources available to them in developing their religious beliefs and practices. There is much ambiguity within the texts themselves in regards to pre-Christian religious practices, as well as bias on the part of their Christian authors that the practitioner must deal with in order to come to a conclusion regarding a text’s usefulness. It is impossible here, due to space limitations, to fully address these questions. However, what will be offered are two examples of how these groups have chosen to deal with texts when discussing sacrifice and the seid. These explorations should be considered preliminary for future work and, therefore, not conclusive.

The discussion above may have suggested that the contemporary practitioners of Asatru and Anglo-Saxon Pagans strive to read the source material and to mirror it literally. However, this is certainly not the case. It would be incorrect to simply assume that these individuals take a literal and/or simplistic reading of the texts themselves. Perhaps, one of the best examples of the practitioners interacting with information found within literary sources, addressing it and ultimately or rejecting including it within contemporary practices surrounds the use of sacrifice.

Numerous times throughout the Iceland sources, as well as other important sources, there are descriptions of sacrifice taking place within religious ceremonies.<sup>21</sup> For instance, in the Snorre Sturlason’s *The History of Hacon the Good*, sacrificing an animal and sprinkling of their blood in honor of the Pagan deities is described in depth. Part of the description reads that the bonders would go to the temple of the king and:

There they also slew all kinds of cattle and horses, and all the blood which flowed from them was called *laut*, the bowls in which blood stood were called *laut-bowls* and *laut-teinar*, which were made like a sprinkler; with all this they should stain the stalls red and likewise the temple walls inside and out and likewise sprinkle it on all the men; the flesh was cooked as meat for the guests (*The History of Hacon the Good* 14.)

Descriptions such as these regarding pre-Christian belief are not unique to Icelandic literature but also occur in other texts describing Pagan beliefs. Another source which may be drawn from is

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<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that both Ravenbok and Penzler state that the other requirement is that the community accepts the Gothar as a religious specialist. If they do not see him as such then, regardless of his level of knowledge, he will never obtain the rank. For more on this, see their discussions in the articles cited.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that I have chosen the literary examples for this discussion. I have not found a discussion of sacrifice by the practitioners that have focused upon a specific passage or text. Furthermore, I chose to go beyond the Icelandic sources and offer Adam of Bremen’s description of Uppsala because it appears that parts of the *Ravenbok* draw specifically from it. See the heading of “The Gods in the Temple: Thor, Odin, and Frey.”

Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*. In this work, Adam describes a Pagan temple at Uppsala and the sacrifices that occur every nine years:

The sacrifice is of this nature: of every living thing male, they offer nine heads, with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple. Now this grove is so sacred in the eyes of the heathen that each and every tree in it is believed divine because of the death or putrefaction of the victims. Even dogs and horses hang there with men (*Adam of Bremen 27.*)

The fact that the subject of sacrificing occurs so often and in such clear way means that those wishing to reconstruct their belief from these sources must deal with its existence, whether or not they choose to accept it into their practice. In the case of Asatru, sacrifice, at least in terms of the sacrifice of animals or humans, is not practiced.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the Swedish Asatru Society, which discusses sacrifice on their website, the sacrifice of living animals would not result in an atmosphere which would be conducive to their ritual practice.<sup>23</sup> In short, while pre-Christian practitioners would not have a strong negative reaction to slaughter, contemporary practitioners, as well as the larger community of which they are a part, may have a very strong negative reaction to its use ([www.astrosamfundet.se](http://www.astrosamfundet.se) 2006.) This reason for not reconstructing this aspect of ritual ceremonies, such as the Blot, is reflected by the Raven Kindred in *Ravenbok*.<sup>24</sup>

The Blot is the most common ritual within Asatru. In its simplest form a blot is a sacrifice to the Gods. In the old days this was done by feasting on an animal consecrated to the Gods and then slaughtered. As we are no longer farmers and our needs are simpler today, the most common blot is an offering of mead or other alcoholic beverage to the deities (*Ravenbok*.)

While the Asatru and the Anglo-Saxon Pagans have chosen not to incorporate living sacrifice into their reconstruction of belief, there are times where they do draw directly from the sources in an effort to reconstruct belief and practice. One instance of this is the Seid. Jenny Blain in her work, *Nine-Worlds of Seid-Magic*, states:

They [practitioners] rely on accounts from sagas and Eddas, scholars' analysis of this literature, and parallels with shamanistic practices elsewhere, using these within a framework of Norse cosmology and beliefs about soul, afterlife, and the Nine Worlds. Seidworkers engage in faring-forth, trace-journeying, for a variety of ends, including healing and divination (Blain 31, 2002)

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<sup>22</sup> I have chosen to focus here upon animal and human sacrifice because it features more prominently in the sagas than other forms of sacrifice, such as symbolic types. It should also be noted that I have not found any Anglo-Saxon Pagan discussion of sacrifice and I'm assuming that their approach is rather similar, given the other commonalities between the traditions.

<sup>23</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Tracey Sands for helping me translate the website from Swedish into English.

<sup>24</sup> Due to the limitation of space, I have chosen not to address Blot within a wider context. Rather, I have chosen to narrow the picture to the concept of animal sacrifice as an example of how the Asatru, and by extension the Anglo-Saxon Pagans, deal with parts in the texts when they find them no longer relevant to today's practitioners. An in-depth discussion of the Blot would require a much deeper look at its context above and beyond sacrificing. Otherwise such a discussion runs the risk of being extremely skewed. It would be much like describing the Catholic Mass by simply focusing on the Eucharist and nothing more regarding its performance or purpose.

One of the texts available that alludes to the Seid ritual as it was practiced by those adhering to pre-Christian religious practices is found in the *Saga of Eirik the Red*, or *Eirik's Saga*.<sup>25</sup> In this saga a prophetess by the name of Thorbjorg, who is also known as the Little Sybil, performs a ritual which has been taken as an example of early seid practice. The saga describes, in great detail, the preparations which Thorbjorg goes through to get ready for the ritual. It also presents much of the ritual itself as well as the type of information which Thorbjorg is able to offer Gudrid, a woman prominent throughout the saga. Furthermore, the saga, through the description of Thorbjorg's dress and her interaction with the greater community for which the saga takes place can give readers some indication of her social status.

The ritual which Thorbjorg performs, with the help of Gudrid, is undertaken in order to tell when an epidemic within the community will end and to answer questions that individuals within the community have. The ritual itself is offered here in brief:

The women formed a circle round the ritual platform on which Thorbjorg seated herself. Then Gudrid sang the songs so well and beautifully that those present were sure they had heard no lovelier singing. The prophetess thanked her for the song.

'Many spirits are now present,' she said. 'which were charmed to hear the singing, and which previously had tried to shun us and would grant us no obedience. And now many things stand revealed to me which were hidden both from me and from others. (Magnusson 83.)

The importance of this account within *Eirik's Saga* cannot be underestimated. Blain suggests as much in her discussion of seid reconstruction, "And so I begin where everyone begins, Heathen, neo-shaman, or academic, with the narrative from the *Saga of Eirik the Red*" (Blain 32.) Blain goes on to state that the ceremony detailed above is the basis for the practice of at least one type of seid known, which she labels as 'oracular seid'.<sup>26</sup> According to Blain groups using this type of seid learned from the saga that in order for the ritual to be performed those performing the ritual must first become accustomed to the place in which the ritual will be performed. Secondly, the singing which takes place allows the person performing the ritual to gain access to the 'power' and the knowledge the 'powers' possess.

While *Eirik's Saga* is used as a foundation, it does not always provide all the answers which practitioners seek when reconstructing their seid ritual. For instance, Blain states that the *Saga of Eirik the Red* doesn't really tell the practitioners how to go about getting the practitioner into trance. For this, the practitioners must go to other sources (Blain 34.)<sup>27</sup> Wodening supports this in his work and says of *Eirik the Red's Saga* that it seems rather 'streamlined.' "We are told of no journey to Hel, in fact we are told explicitly that wights are called to the völva [seeress]

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<sup>25</sup> The fact that this ritual takes place at a time when Christian and 'pre-Christian' religious practitioners lived, and sometimes went through rituals together, points to the fact that the category of 'pre-Christian' religion, while useful in some contexts, should be rethought. I have chosen to use the term here simply because it is common in scholarly circles.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that Blain is not limiting her discussion along the lines of religious communities which draw from Icelandic sources like I have. Instead, her main focus is the seid and those who practice it. As such, she does not always mention which groups practice which type of Seid. I am assuming that Asatru and Anglo-Saxon practitioners who practice Seid would fall under her discussion.

<sup>27</sup> Blain states that for this other practitioners have gone to Eddic poems such as *Völuspá*, *Baldursdraumir* or *Völuspá in skamma*. For this discussion, see page 34 in the works cited

...” (Wodening 210.) He concludes that the most important aspect of the saga is that there is a high platform, that women form a circle around the seeress, that chanting happens and that talismans are important. Of these the chanting is the most important (Wodening 210-216.)<sup>28</sup>

The discussion presented here regarding the seid has been rather terse. One reason for this is that the focus has been solely upon stressing the connection which exists between the ritual and the literary sources from which it draws. It should be clear that the literary source is extremely important for the practitioner when reconstructing the ritual of the seid. However, a deeper exploration of the seid, while worthwhile, is not possible here because, as Blain states, practitioners offer meanings taken from the text and religious perspective, ‘...meanings which are not always simple or uncontested’ (Blain 31.) Furthermore, outside of the ritual performance itself, the seid causes issues to arise such as the link between seid, homosexuality and perversion which appear within the literary sources and which must be addressed by scholarship and the practitioner community if a more thorough understanding of seid is desired.<sup>29</sup>

From the discussions offered above, it should be clear that scholarship must do some serious rethinking of methodology when it comes to focusing upon Neo-Pagansim. If the scholar wishes to focus upon specific traditions that are reconstructionist in nature, such as Asatru or Anglo-Saxon Paganism, then they must acknowledge the relationship which exists between the practitioners reconstructions and the literature upon which they draw. While having a scholastic understanding of the literary sources themselves is always beneficial, it is simply not enough. The scholars must strive to gain an understanding of how the source material is used by practitioners themselves; how they deal with its ambiguities and its implications. Failure to do so results in a work regarding the viewpoint of the scholar yhat does not truly address the perspective of the religious community studied.

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<sup>28</sup> Wodening provides a full ritual which is mostly based upon the saga. See pages 210-216 of the work cited.

<sup>29</sup> Blain explores the link between seid practice, homosexuality and perversion in Chapter 7, “Ergi seidmen, queer transformations?” in the work cited.

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