

**Putting the Blood back into Blót:  
The Revival of Animal Sacrifice in Modern Nordic Paganism\***

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**Abstract**

The meaning of animal sacrifice has fascinated historians of religion for decades. In addition, it goes against trends of professed concern for animals in contemporary Western culture, although the notion of sacrifice remains important in Christianity, and animal sacrifice is still practiced at the feast of Id al-Adha in Islam. Scholars of religion have viewed it variously as a bribe to divine powers (Edward Tylor), as reinforcing the community of believers (Robertson Smith, Émile Durkheim, and others), as recapitulating a primal event (Mircea Eliade, Sigmund Freud), as deflecting social tensions (René Girard), and as a substitute for hunting (Walter Burkert) or hunting's structure idealized in the face of primal chaos (Jonathan Z. Smith). Today, some followers of Modern Nordic Paganism (e.g. Ásatrú) have revived animal sacrifice as part of the ritual of blót, which honors important turning points in the ritual calendar. Fieldwork among these Pagans suggests that perhaps Burkert's vision of animal sacrifice as a privileged vestige of prehistoric hunting culture offers the best lens for understanding this controversial practice.

In Norse myth, the creation of the world is brought about by the sacrifice of the primal being Ymir, as recounted in the *Grímnismál* and several other poems of the collection known as the *Poetic Edda*,

Of Ymir's flesh, the earth was shaped,  
Of his blood, the briny sea  
Of his hair, the trees, the hills of his bones,  
Out of his skull the sky.<sup>1</sup>

\* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual American Academy of Religion conference in San Antonio, Texas, in November of 2004. I am grateful to those who have commented on various versions and provided constructive criticism and alternative viewpoints.

1. *Grímnismál*, verse 41, in *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Lee Hollander, 2nd rev.

Animal sacrifice was a key religious practice of the pre-Christian peoples of Germanic Northern Europe. It is now being revived by some modern Pagans who reconstruct pre-Christian Germanic religious traditions, drawing on medieval Icelandic literature as well as Anglo-Saxon literature and other related sources.<sup>2</sup> This revival, variously known by such names as Ásatrú, Heathenry, and Forn Seð, has been emerging since the mid-1990s as a transnational religious movement, with religious associations established or now being established in all of the Scandinavian countries as well as Germany, Belgium, France, Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia.<sup>3</sup> In searching for an umbrella term that would cover this broad range of different but related religious groups, I have come to refer to this growing phenomenon as Modern Nordic Paganism, though others prefer to speak of it as Northern European Paganism.<sup>4</sup>

edn (Austin: University of Texas, 1986 [1962]), 61. See also the Eddic poems *Völuspá* and *Vafthrúðnismál*.

2. For surveys of pre-Christian Scandinavian-Germanic-Anglo-Saxon religion, see H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1964); E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, rev. edn (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975); and Thomas Dubois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1999).

3. For an overview which compares several national formations of this type of Paganism, see Michael F. Strmiska and Baldur A. Sigurvinsson, "Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America," in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael Strmiska (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 127-80. Other important studies include Jenny Blain, "Heathenry, The Past and Sacred Sites in Today's Britain," in *Modern Paganism*, ed. Strmiska, 181-208; Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-Shamanism in Northern European Paganism* (London: Routledge, 2002); Graham Harvey, "Heathenism: A North European Pagan Tradition," in *Pagan Pathways: A Guide to the Ancient Earth Traditions*, ed. Graham Harvey and Charlotte Hardman, 2nd edn (London: Thorsons, 2000), 49-64, and Michael Strmiska, "Ásatrú in Iceland: The Revival of Nordic Paganism?," *Nova Religio* 4.1 (2000): 106-32. One of the Nordic Pagans profiled in my 2005 publication and further consulted for this research, Galina Krasskova, has written a fine introductory volume from an insider's perspective, *Exploring the Northern Tradition: A Guide to the Gods, Lore, Rites and Celebrations from the Norse, German, and Anglo-Saxon Traditions* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press/New Page Books, 2005).

4. Scholars who prefer the term "Northern European Paganism" to my preferred term of "Nordic Paganism" have noted that "Nordic" would seem to leave out "Anglo-Saxon" traditions, certainly a valid concern. My own misgiving about the term "Northern European" is that it might be seen to also encompass Celtic, Slavic and Baltic traditions, which are distinct from the Scandinavian-Germanic (including Anglo-Saxon, as a subset of Germanic) body of traditions at the core of contemporary Nordic Paganism. The term "Heathenry" might seem a solution to these vexing issues

What I here call “Modern” Paganism has commonly been labeled “Neopaganism” or “neo-Paganism” by other scholars. I prefer to speak of “Modern” Paganism because of the concern expressed to me by a number of Pagans that the “neo-” prefix seemed to them to represent a veiled judgment of their religion as being in some way inferior or inauthentic. When I argued with one Pagan leader that I thought the “neo” prefix a useful indicator of the very modern, quite contemporary nature of today’s Paganism as revived and rebuilt forms of long repressed religions, he responded, “Then why don’t you call modern forms of Christianity neo-Christianity, or modern forms of Judaism neo-Judaism?”<sup>5</sup> I found this to be a convincing argument, and have since chosen to use “Modern Paganism” as a more simple and neutral appellation than the possibly loaded “neo” term.<sup>6</sup>

Modern Nordic Paganism is to be distinguished from the most popular modern Pagan or neo-Pagan religious movement, Wicca, on two accounts: first, its exclusive focus on related Scandinavian, Germanic, and Anglo-Saxon forms of pre-Christian European religion; and second, the sustained effort by its leaders and most dedicated followers to reconstruct and recreate this religious heritage as accurately as possible. A small but growing number of Modern Nordic Pagans have begun to experiment with reviving the practice of animal sacrifice as part of the seasonal feast known as the blót. In this article, I will explore some of the meanings and motivations involved in this development, but I begin with some general remarks about contemporary attitudes and cultural representations that shape responses to animal sacrifice.

### *Opposition to Sacrifice in Contemporary Society and Culture*

Animal sacrifice grates against popular contemporary attitudes and sensibilities by pushing into plain view certain facts of life and moral

of regional definition, and has the further value of being a term of self-designation found in the source literature itself, but has the disadvantage of being generally understood as a synonym for Paganism. There is no simple way of adequately addressing all these concerns of inclusiveness and exclusivity. “Pan-Germanic Paganism” might be best, except that for some, “Germanic” carries echoes of the Nazi period, when Scandinavian mythology and Germanic folklore were used to bolster the racist, anti-Semitic, Nazi regime. For the time being, this author will stick with the term Nordic Paganism, but I fully acknowledge the drawbacks.

5. Jonas Stundzia (leader of the Lithuanian Pagan movement Romuva), 2004.

6. For further discussion of these interminable terminological issues, see my introductory chapter, “Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives,” in *Modern Paganism*, ed. Strmiska, 1-54.

ambiguities that most people customarily avoid, particularly the reality that animals are regularly killed to provide humans with meat as a substantial portion of their daily diet. Though most people today eat meat, only a tiny fraction of the population is involved in slaughtering the animals from whose mechanically processed bodies emerge the steaks, hamburgers, and chicken breasts that show up on supermarket shelves in plastic wrap. One hundred or more years ago, many people in the USA, and other nations also, lived on farms and butchered their own animals, and a good number of people obtained some of their meat from hunting. Now, as far as most people can tell from their daily experience, meat is simply a manufactured consumer product like shampoo or light bulbs.

Paired with the sanitization and sterilization in modern industrialized life is an attitude of romanticization of nature, including animals.<sup>7</sup> Many modern people yearn for contact with the world of nature from which they feel so alienated. This is often expressed in a prettified, almost Disney-like view of nature that overlooks the basic order of the animal world, in which animals do in fact attack, kill, and eat each other as a matter of course. Even domesticated cats treated like pampered children have their moments of bloodlust in which they hunt and overpower smaller animals. Many a modern pet owner has been horrified to see the animal carcasses that their dear little Fluffy periodically deposits on the family doorstep, which one might imagine as a feline ritual offering to his or her almighty master. The actual hunting and killing which are natural activities for cats are given a humorous and bloodless treatment in the *Tom and Jerry* animated cartoons and similar popular entertainments, which playfully evoke the unending antagonism between cats and mice and other animals. The romanticism that sweetly distorts naturally carnivorous animals into fluffy dolls and furry angels is unlikely to foster a mindset that would look favorably on the practice of animal sacrifice.

Indeed, a fair degree of moral prestige is commonly accorded to vegetarianism in much of the popular media and among certain segments of the population, while the opposite is true of animal sacrifice as a religious practice.<sup>8</sup> Given the contrasting stereotyped images of a peaceful Buddhist

7. Catherine Albanese explores shifting attitudes toward nature in America in her fine study, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

8. To mention but a few examples of the burgeoning body of pro-vegetarian literature, John L. Hill, *The Case for Vegetarianism: Philosophy for a Small Planet* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996) and Michael Allan Fox, *Deep Vegetarianism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999). A range of religious perspectives are

monk who lives on a virtuous diet of rice and greens and a “savage” or “primitive” who worships his or her gods by inviting them to feast on the raw or cooked body parts of a freshly slain animal, there can be little doubt that the former representation is more pleasing to modern sensibilities.<sup>9</sup> Hollywood and contemporary popular culture have long been engaged in teaching horror movie fans in America and beyond that animal sacrifice, and its higher-value alternative, human sacrifice, are among the most reliable warning signs of evil, often Satanic cults dedicated to total destruction of the world.<sup>10</sup>

The animal-rights movement is another response to our modern alienation from nature with relevance to the question of animal sacrifice.<sup>11</sup> This is a large and diverse movement, ranging from those who reject all violence of any sort against animals and embrace a Buddhist vegetarian ethic to those who believe that certain forms of violence toward and killing of animals, such as those which are done for survival purposes, are acceptable, while others, such as testing the effects of potentially harmful chemicals on laboratory animals, are not.<sup>12</sup> For animal-rights activists who unilaterally condemn all violence against animals, the religious use of animals in ritual sacrifice would seem totally abhorrent as well as unnecessary, given the availability of less violent ways of worshipping the divine. However, for those willing to grant that certain acts of violence against animals may be justifiable and who furthermore accept the principle of freedom of religion as a fundamental right, the religious practice of animal sacrifice poses a difficult ethical challenge.

given in Kerry S. Walters and Lisa Portmess, eds., *Religious Vegetarianism: From Hesiod to the Dalai Lama* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

9. The Buddhist argument in favor of vegetarianism is given in Bodo Balsys, *Buddhism and the Vegetarian Ideal* (New Delhi: Mushiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2004) and Philip Kapleau, *To Cherish All Life: A Buddhist Case for Becoming Vegetarian* (Rochester, NY: Zen Center, 1986).

10. The Satanic subgenre of horror film has too many offerings to list. Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) stands out as a well-regarded, influential film in which the Satanic theme is linked with the motif of human sacrifice. Later films such as *The Believers* (1988), *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988), and the recent *Skeleton Key* (2005) move away from the Satanic theme and place ritual sacrifice in a Voodoo or Santeria context, with both religious traditions portrayed as sinister cults. The film *Angel Heart* (1986) combines Satanism with Voodoo as the doubly-evil religious context for sacrifice.

11. Tom Reagan, *All that Dwell therein: Animal Rights and Environmental Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Ecco, 2002).

12. Cass R. Sunstein and Martha C. Nussbaum, eds., *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Though such animal sacrifice is not done for purposes of physical survival, the assertion of the right to practice sacrifice as an aspect of a religious tradition, as a matter of *religious* survival, is a substantive argument that cannot be dismissed out of hand. Obviously, this brings animal rights and religious rights into direct conflict. In a similar way, the general world-wide prohibition against most forms of whaling has come into conflict with the rights of indigenous peoples to practice whale hunting as an aspect of cultural heritage.

### *Religious Perspectives*

Modern distaste for animal sacrifice is also rooted in the historical evolution of a number of the world's most popular religions. Some contemporary Hindus reject the idea that their Vedic forebears slaughtered cattle as ritual offerings to the Vedic gods, although the evidence is plain to see in the Rig Veda and other Vedic texts, which speak eloquently of the merits of animal sacrifice and provide detailed instructions.<sup>13</sup> The rejection of animal sacrifice in Hinduism came some hundreds of years later, with the development of the notions of *karma*, *samsara*, and *ahimsa*, ideas which became foundational principles of not only Hinduism, but also those other great Indian religions, Jainism and Buddhism. Animal sacrifice does, however, continue as a minority religious practice in India today, among Hindu worshippers of the goddess Durga, for example. Such animal sacrifice is not always welcomed by other Indians, as is clear in the following report from the Indian newspaper *The Hindu*:

GADAG, FEB. 4. A concerted campaign backed by stern measures initiated by the district administration helped prevent what would have been one of the biggest cases of animal sacrifice at the Durgadevi [Goddess Durga] fair at Bommasamudra village of Ron taluk in Gadag district today [in Karnataka state.]

Every year, devotees from over 80 villages in Gadag and the neighboring districts of Bagalkot and Koppal converge here on the full moon day of the Hindu month of Magha to sacrifice thousands of animals, including buffaloes, rams, and chickens, to the goddess.<sup>14</sup>

13. A historical analysis of ancient Indian cow sacrifice is given in D.N. Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (London: Verso, 2002). Jha's book faced so much opposition from Hindu groups within India that when the manuscript was in the final stages of preparation, his original publisher backed out of publishing it. Jha himself received death threats. In the end, no Indian publisher for Jha's controversial work could be found, leading to its publication by the British publisher Verso. See Jha's 'Preface to the Verso edition,' xi-xii.

14. "Campaign to Stall Animal Sacrifice Succeeds," *The Hindu*, <http://www>

Animal sacrifice was likewise an important part of early Judaism, until the final destruction of the great temple in Jerusalem and the process of diaspora decisively shifted the focus of religious practice toward textual devotion, though the earlier practice of animal sacrifice is still echoed in the feast of the Passover lamb.<sup>15</sup> In Christianity, animal sacrifice was superseded by one supreme sacrifice that different theological perspectives would describe as either human or divine sacrifice, or both, that is, the crucifixion of Jesus. However, the ritual variously known as the Lord's Supper or as Communion, in which those assembled eat what is either considered the real or symbolic body of Jesus, is, like the eating of the Passover lamb, a re-enactment of the original sacrificial act, which was neither bloodless nor peaceful.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, many Christian hymns speak metaphorically of the redemptive "blood of the lamb," drawing on Revelation 7:14,<sup>17</sup> as in the following two examples:

*There is Power in the Blood*

Would you be free from the burden of sin?  
 There's power in the blood, power in the blood;  
 Would you over evil a victory win?  
 There's wonderful power in the blood.

There is power, power, wonder-working power  
 In the precious blood of the Lamb.<sup>18</sup>

*Are you Washed in the Blood?*

Are you walking daily by the Savior's side?  
 Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?  
 Do you rest each moment in the Crucified?  
 Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?<sup>19</sup>

We see then that in Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity there is a

.thehindu.com/2004/02/05/stories/2004020502190300.htm (accessed 23 July 2004).

15. Theodor Herzl Gaster, *Passover: Its History and Traditions* (London and New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1958).

16. Gillian Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord's Table: Eucharist and Passover in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981). See also the discussion of the Mass in Alan Watts, *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

17. "These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:14).

18. Words and music by Lewis E. Jones, 1899, [http://members.tripod.com/~Synergy\\_2/lyrics/power.html](http://members.tripod.com/~Synergy_2/lyrics/power.html) (accessed 12 February 2006).

19. Words and Music by Elisha A. Hoffman, 1878, <http://my.homewithgod.com/heavenlymidis2/washed.html> (accessed 12 February 2006).

history of ritual sacrifice, which has over time been transformed, modified, and in some cases denied or forgotten, to bring us to our modern situation in which animal sacrifice is widely considered distasteful, disgusting, and unnecessary, with its surviving echoes in contemporary ritual practice easily ignored or rationalized. There is, however, one other major world religion, Islam, in which animal sacrifice survives in much its original form. The slaughter of many thousands of lambs, goats, camels, or other animals for the feast of Id al-Adha is one of the final activities of the annual Hajj pilgrimage that is central to the Muslim faith, and harks back to the biblical episode in which the first Patriarch Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic form) substituted sacrifice of a ram for the offering of his son Isaac.<sup>20</sup>

In the modern Afro-Caribbean religion of Santería, the performance of animal sacrifice has occasioned controversy and attempts by government authorities to ban the practice.<sup>21</sup> The case of *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah* was eventually decided in the US Supreme Court, with the proposed restrictions on the sacrificial practices of a Florida-based Santería group declared unconstitutional in June of 1993.<sup>22</sup>

### *Theoretical Perspectives*

Theoreticians of religion have created a number of explanatory models for interpreting ritual sacrifice. In this limited space, it will suffice to briefly mention some of the major theoretical constructs put forward by past scholars. The early British anthropologist Edward Tylor began modern discussion of sacrifice with the interpretation that it was essentially a gift or bribe to divine powers; in short, the concept of *do ut des*, "give-and-be-given," as known from ancient Rome.<sup>23</sup> In this conception, the purpose of sacrifice is a straightforward transaction with the divine. Subsequent theories have focused attention on how sacrificial ritual affects social relations rather than human-divine relations. The Old Testament scholar Robertson Smith is a transitional figure in this respect. He argued that the focal point of sacrifice was the consuming of the

20. Frederick Denny, *Islam and the Muslim Community* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 55.

21. As discussed in a previous number of this journal by Mary Ann Clark in her fine essay, "Santería Sacrificial Rituals: A Reconsideration of Religious Violence," *Pomegranate* 8.2 (2006): 133-45.

22. The case is thoroughly documented in David M. O'Brien, *Animal Sacrifice and Religious Freedom: Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

23. Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper, 1958 [1871]).



victim in a meal of *communion* that strengthens bonds within the community of ritual participants as well as with their gods.

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who believed in no god greater than society itself, and saw gods as projections of social authority, followed Smith in seeing sacrifice as functioning primarily to cement the social solidarity of the participants, through creating an “effervescence” of ecstatic feeling in the course of the ritual drama.<sup>24</sup> Durkheim also called attention to how sacrifice functions to delineate the boundaries of the sacred and profane orders of existence, which he saw as foundational structures of all religion and society. Through the careful stagecraft of the ritual, the polluting violence of death and slaughter is artfully channeled into a communal celebration of life and propriety.

Building on Durkheim’s model, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss explored a wider range of religious traditions and introduced some additional distinctions that have continued to influence scholarly discussion of sacrifice.<sup>25</sup> They noted that the ritual was not performed for the benefit of “society” in general, as a crude reading of Durkheim might suggest, but for particular social groups or even individuals, who were often other than the person(s) performing the sacrifice. Hubert and Mauss described ritual patterns of the *consecration* of both the victim and the *sacrifier* (recipient of the ritual benefit), a three-part sequence of killing the victim, consuming it, and then reconstituting it, to restore it to symbolic if not actual life, and distinct procedures of *ascent* and *descent*, that is, actions leading up to the peak excitement of the killing itself and then stepping down from that once more to gradually return to normal life. This concern with unpacking the different functions of various stages of ritual sacrifice ties in with parallel work by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner,<sup>26</sup> and has proven a fruitful line of inquiry.

The Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade viewed the sphere of the sacred more positively and less reductively than did Durkheim, granting it an ontological reality separate from social reality that was echoed in myth and re-enacted in sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> As Eliade observes, “Insofar as he

24. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Structures of the Religious Life*, trans. J.W. Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1965 [1915]).

25. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*, trans. W.D. Halls, with an introduction by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981 [1898]).

26. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969).

27. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1958).

repeats the archetypal sacrifice, the sacrificer, in full ceremonial action, abandons the profane world of mortals and introduces himself into the divine world of the immortals."<sup>28</sup> A similar privileging of myth over ritual was central to the work of the "myth-ritual" school of scholars such as Jane Harrison,<sup>29</sup> which looked to underlying myths as the key datum that would unlock the meaning of rituals.

Just as sacrifice is in the most obvious sense an action interposed between the society of participants and the divine presence toward which the ritual is directed, these different approaches to understanding sacrifice diverge between those which focus on social structure and dynamics and those which highlight the supposedly higher order divine or sacred meanings encoded in the ritual.

A third branch of inquiry into sacrifice is the psychoanalytical view first championed by Sigmund Freud and taken up more recently by the literary theorist René Girard.<sup>30</sup> In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud articulated a model of social origins in which primitive society was cemented into solidarity, and the foundation laid for its important institutions, including the ritual of sacrifice, by the collective murder of a monstrous, dominating father by his resentful sons. As Freud imagined this critical event,

One day the expelled brothers joined forces, slew and ate the father, and thus put an end to the father horde... The totemic feast, which is perhaps mankind's first celebration, would be the repetition and commemoration of this memorable, criminal act with which so many things began, social organization, moral restrictions and religion.<sup>31</sup>

Girard sees such a murder giving rise to the myths and rituals of religion that both commemorate and conceal the act of violence, providing a release for social tensions and rivalry through the focusing of aggression onto a substitute, scapegoat victim, mythically modeled upon the original victim. Girard's key hermeneutic tool is the suspicion that behind many components of society and religion, particularly the ritual act of sacrifice, there lurks the durable mechanism of "mimetic" desire giving rise to rivalry and conflict, resolved by deflection onto a substitute object,

28. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Bollingen Series; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971 [1949]), 36.

29. Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cleveland: Meridian Press, 1966 [1903]), and *Themis* (Cleveland: Meridian Press, 1962 [1913]).

30. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977 [1972]).

31. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1946 [1913]), 183, quoted in Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 14.

which becomes the scapegoat or ritual victim. Girard's theory is intriguing, but because he seems to propose that this substitute victim mechanism is the basis of *all* religion, it also seems to overreach.

The German classicist Walter Burkert has offered an equally ambitious theory of sacrifice as originating in the practice of hunting among Paleolithic tribes.<sup>32</sup> Like Girard, Burkert sees ritual sacrifice as providing an outlet for human aggression and potentially destructive rivalry, but he regards the situation in a much more hopeful and positive light. Where Girard sees his hypothesized foundational murder as something of a "fall from grace" for early humankind, Burkert sees the channeling of aggression away from inter-human conflict toward the hunting of animals, subsequently commemorated in ritual, as a positive adaptation that enabled early humankind to gain mastery of its environment and to in time establish human dominance over the earth. Where Girard draws on Freudian psychoanalysis, Burkert's theory is strongly inspired by the work of sociobiologists such as Konrad Lorenz.<sup>33</sup>

Burkert is well aware that the ritual of animal sacrifice long survived the original hunting cultures from which, in his view, it sprang. His argument is that because hunting was such a successful adaptation for early humankind, the emotional attitudes and social mechanisms that attended it were embedded or "hard-wired" into all manner of human behavior and social institutions, which in turn gave immense prestige to animal sacrifice as a venerable tradition, intuitively felt to be something of the greatest antiquity and significance. This helps explain why animal sacrifice remained central in many societies even after the transition from the nomadic, hunting-based lifestyle of the Paleolithic era to the settled, Neolithic lifestyle of pastoralism and agriculture, to the first urban civilizations, and continued to be observed in the cosmopolitan milieu of the Greek city-states, even at a time when Greek intellectuals were questioning the rationality of traditional Greek religion.

The final theorist whom I will note here is the historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith, who has put forward a provocative interpretation of the bear sacrifice traditionally performed by Siberian peoples of north-

32. Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans*, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982 [1972]). Burkert and Girard, as well as the religious historian Jonathan Z. Smith, debated their respective theories of sacrifice in a colloquium that gave rise to a seminal volume, edited by Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, with a fine introductory overview by Burton Mack, entitled *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

33. Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, trans. Marjorie Kerr Wilson (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966 [1963]).

eastern Asia.<sup>34</sup> Smith observes that the bear sacrifice is by no means a straightforward evocation of a bear hunt. An actual hunt is unpredictable, dangerous, messy, and chaotic, as the hunters enter the wilderness in search of a powerful animal that is as fully capable of killing its hunters as being killed by them, but the sacrificial ritual removes all danger and disorder to produce an orderly interaction between well-behaved participants, including the more or less domesticated bear cub who is more of a village pet than an unpredictable creature of the wilderness, treated like an honored guest throughout the ritual, up to the point where its life is taken. What Smith concludes is that the ritual represents an idealized version of the bear hunt, showing the hunt not as it actually happens, but as the hunter might wish it to happen. That is to say, the ritual imposes a human-friendly order on the sometimes dangerous disorder of nature, bolstering human confidence and motivation, and thus fostering adaptation and survival.

For Smith, therefore, animal sacrifice is not so much a reflection of primal drives and events, as in Girard and Burkert, as it is a rationalization and reassurance that primal chaos can indeed be kept at bay.

Having surveyed these varying theories of animal sacrifice, as well as some of the popular and religious attitudes that prevail in our time, we can now proceed to examine Modern Nordic Pagan practices of animal sacrifice, beginning with the historical background in relation to which these modern practices were developed.

#### *Animal Sacrifice in Nordic Paganism, Past and Present*

In pre-Christian, Germanic Northern Europe, animal sacrifice was a key element in the seasonal ritual gatherings known as *blót*.<sup>35</sup> The word *blót*, meaning in essence “sacrifice,” is closely related to the word *blóð*, meaning “blood.” Putting the two related meanings together, it is not difficult to gather that the *blót* involved blood-sacrifice, that is, the killing of animals.

Medieval Icelandic sources speak of various times throughout the year when the *blót* was performed. The most often-quoted source is the *Ynglingasaga* section of Snorri Sturluson’s quasi-historical text *Heimskringla*, which tells of one *blót* performed at about mid-October to mark

34. Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 53-65.

35. H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse: State University of New York Press, 1988), 37-40; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Blót í Norraenum Sið* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan Félagsvísindastofnun, 1997).

the beginning of winter, another in December or January to celebrate Yule, and a third in April to welcome the coming of summer.<sup>36</sup> Other texts provide somewhat different explanations of the timing of blóts. The practice most likely varied by region and across history. The ritual procedure described in the *Heimskringla* was to kill the animal by slicing its throat, catch the blood in a special metal bowl designated for this purpose, and then to sprinkle blood on the participants as well as on stone or wood images of the gods. This seems to be the basic ritual procedure followed by Modern Nordic Pagans who practice animal sacrifice.

In my research into Modern Nordic Paganism in the Mid-Atlantic and New England regions of the United States, the first person I came to know who was involved in the practice of blót was Mike Smith, a dedicated Ásatrú practitioner from Massachusetts whom I interviewed in 2004 for the chapter on “Ásatrú in Iceland and America” in my book *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*. The same chapter also featured a profile of Galina Krasskova, a New York City resident who was not at that time involved in animal sacrifice, but who subsequently did become active in blót. Both Smith and Krasskova began their practice of animal sacrifice under the tutelage of Ronald Branga, a Nordic Pagan with a farm in southwestern New Hampshire where both Smith and Krasskova performed their first blóts. He calls his farm Oðala Acres, the term *óðal* being the Old Norse term for “inheritance,” a fitting name for the homestead of someone looking to carry on the heritage of past times. As a site of Pagan ritual activity, Oðala Acres is joined with the larger community of New Anglia Theod, which will be further explained below. As Branga is a key figure in the revival of blót in the New England region, who was not profiled in my earlier publications, I will begin with some discussion of his personal history and perspective on the place of animal sacrifice in Nordic Paganism.

Branga, 40, first became interested in Paganism some twenty years ago while serving in the military, through a fellow soldier who was involved in a Saxon-oriented form of Wicca. Branga soon gravitated toward Nordic Paganism rather than Wicca. In about 1997 he made contact with the Massachusetts-based Ásatrú group Raven Kindred North, where he met Mike Smith, who had joined a few months earlier. Branga and Smith soon broke away from Raven Kindred North to form or join other associations, motivated in part by an interest in reviving the practice of animal sacrifice, which they saw as an essential part of the pre-Christian Germanic

36. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, trans. A.H. Smith and Erling Monsen (repr.; New York: Dover Publications, 1990 [1932]), section 8, 6.

religious heritage that was missing from most Ásatrú practice of the time. As Branga puts it,

It felt to me as though our Gods deserved the things they used to get when they were worshiped in elder days. Real treasures, things of beauty, not just token things and a horn of store-bought mead. I also felt real folk customs should be done, instead of the all too common drinking in someone's living room and hailing our Gods and ancestors. For me, it was pretty demonstrable that the rituals common in Ásatrú were not at [the] reconstructionist level I needed and I began to feel swiftly that our Gods deserve more.<sup>37</sup>

Smith went on to form his own small Ásatrú group, Athelingulf, which was renamed Úlfar aff Jera Þjóð (Wolves of the Tribe of Jera) after moving to New Hampshire. Branga joined Néoweanglia (New Anglia) Theod, a regional branch of Theodism, an Anglo-Saxon-oriented Nordic Pagan movement that draws inspiration from Anglo-Saxon folklore and texts such as *Beowulf*.<sup>38</sup> Branga was drawn to Theodism out of interest in his own English ancestral heritage, as well as his awareness that Theodish Pagans had performed several swine blóts back in the 1980s. Branga correctly anticipated that his Theodish colleagues would support him in his desire to revive traditional animal sacrifice. This became feasible after Branga and his wife bought a farm with five acres of land in southwestern New Hampshire. As he recounted in an email communication,

[M]y wife had a horse and chickens and ducks when she was younger. I grew up in an ocean side town north of Boston. We both wanted to get the kids into the rural and farming environment, if even just on a hobby-farm level. It would be good for them and us. Well, as soon as we knew we were closing on the house, we bought some turkey poults with designs to blót them that Yule, which we did...I guess I can say, having the land, the desire to do it the way our ancestors did it and seeing precedent that it had been done [in the Theodish blóts of the 1980s], combined with a very strong desire to honor our Gods properly, finally came together and we did it... These are also primary reasons for me building Ingsleigh hall, a 16 x 24-foot Blóthouse/hof I built.<sup>39</sup>

The blóthouse or hof is essentially a wooden shed decorated with Nordic Pagan folk motifs which serves as a Pagan temple. The blóthouse is situated within a grove of trees that is understood as a sacred grove. Here Branga and his wife, joined by other members of New Anglia Theod and

37. Ron Branga, personal communication, 1 June 200.

38. New Anglia Theod is currently led by Jeffrey Runokivi, who has the title of "Lord" in the organization. Information about the Theod is available at <http://www.newangliatheod.org>.

39. Ron Branga, personal communication, 1 June 2007.

other invited guests, such as Smith and Branga's parents, have been performing blót two to three times a year since 2002, primarily to celebrate a summer solstice holiday known as Litha and the winter holiday of Yule, with a third blót during the festival of Winternights, celebrated in late October to mark the beginning of the long Nordic winter season.<sup>40</sup> Branga began with poultry, then progressed to larger animals, such as goats and pigs. Smith has assisted in two blóts on Oðala Acres, beginning in 2003.<sup>41</sup> The type and number of animals sacrificed at Oðala Acres have varied according to how many people attended and needed to be fed. Branga reports between twenty to sixty people having attended the two major annual summer and winter solstice blóts over the last five years, with much smaller groups composed of just Branga, his family and one or two close friends attending the Winternights blót.

The following description of a blót is drawn from accounts provided by Branga, Krasskova, and Smith, as well as one blót observed by the author in June of 2007.<sup>42</sup> First of all, the animal selected for blót should be treated with kindness and served the best of food in the period leading up to the sacrifice. The ritual proper begins with a hallowing of the ritual area, such as by carrying a flaming torch around the perimeter of the area, or fencing it off with a rope. An invocation of the gods to be honored with the sacrifice is performed by reciting or singing verses from sacred texts in Old Norse, Anglo-Saxon, or other original languages, which may be translated into English. The animal is then brought into the ritual area and consecrated for sacrifice. One method of consecration is to hold a special ritual hammer over the animal, evoking the magical hammer of the god Thor, which was described in the Norse texts as being able to revive dead animals, cause rain to fall, and fend off the enemies of earth. The ritual participants then each go to the animal, place their hands upon it and thank it for giving its life for their benefit.<sup>43</sup> The animal may

40. Ron Branga, personal communication, 17 May 2007 .

41. My previous profile of Smith overstated the number of times Smith has performed blót, which is only twice in total up to this point, not twice a year as the article reported. The "New Hampshire farmer" mentioned in the article is in fact Branga, who has been practicing blót two to three times per year, sometimes with Smith assisting, as mentioned above. See Strmiska and Sigurvinsson, "Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America," esp. 155-59.

42. Summer Solstice (Litha) Blót, held at Oðala Acres, Troy New Hampshire, 30 June 2007. Of about thirty people who came for the gathering, roughly half attended the animal sacrifice to observe the animal's death and half did not.

43. At the Litha Blót of 30 June 2007, this interaction with the sacrificial victim, a piglet, took place *after* the animal had died, to avoid frightening the animal before its death.

also be asked to bear messages to the gods or the dead. During all of this procedure the handlers of the animal attempt to keep it as calm and relaxed as possible.

The killing is typically done by cutting the throat of the animal, though other methods are also known, such as strangling with a cord or decapitating with an axe or sword. Branga and Smith both favor a rifle shot to the forehead between the eyes, in order to minimize the animal's suffering, after which they proceed to slash the throat to allow its blood to flow forth. The consensus position of Branga's religious group, New Anglia Theod, however, is to reject the use of firearms and bullets as something that pollutes the ritual atmosphere, and to instead rely on a precisely executed cutting of the throat to bring about a swift, if not instantaneous death.<sup>44</sup> The sacrificial animal's blood is collected in a bowl, mixed with mead, and sprinkled or dabbed onto participants' foreheads or hands as a mark of their participation.<sup>45</sup>

The remaining blood is then poured over a stone or wood altar into the earth near a tree with the invocation, "From the gods to the earth to us; from us to the earth to the gods; a gift for a gift." The animal is then butchered and the meat cooked and eaten by the ritual participants, with a portion dedicated to the gods. Any pieces of the animal not consumed in the feast are burned to ashes in a fire, thrown into a body of water, or otherwise disposed of at the place of sacrifice, or nearby. This is done because the animal's body is seen as sanctified by the ritual and not to be removed from the site of the ritual. Other ritual actions may include passing around a horn full of mead or a substitute beverage for the purpose of drinking toasts to gods and ancestors, with the recitation of prayers, formal invocations, or spontaneous utterances. The mead, too, is offered to the gods and ancestors by pouring a portion onto the ground.

Smith, Branga, and other Nordic Pagans all recalled with disgust a blót sponsored by another Pagan group that they attended in which the

44. At the Litha Blót observed by the author, firearms were not used, but in discussion with New Anglia "Lord" Jeffrey Runokivi and other Theod members, it was explained that Branga is allowed his personal choice to use a rifle on other occasions. The range of opinions on this topic highlights the varying ways in which modern Nordic Pagans negotiate between recreating the past, on one hand, and adapting to the present, on the other.

45. A member of a different Nordic Pagan group commented to me that this communal contact with the animal's blood was understood to form a deep spiritual bond between the worshippers, joining them in a "web of Wyrd," a notion derived from ancient Norse texts meaning a common sense of destiny as well as communal obligation. Email communication (name withheld), 14 January 2005.



killing of the sacrificial animal was badly mishandled.<sup>46</sup> Because of the ritual leaders' lack of skill or experience, the animal's neck was laboriously hacked and sawed, rather than cut cleanly and precisely to bring a quick death. The result was a long, drawn-out death for the screaming animal and a sense of deep unease among the participants. This experience led Branga and Smith to prefer the use of a rifle to avoid gratuitous suffering for the animal.<sup>47</sup>

In explaining his ritual procedure, Branga emphasized the importance of kind and gentle treatment of the sacrificial victim, with a sense of gratitude and affection to the animal for giving up its life. In the blót that I attended, there was a palpable sense of sadness and solemnity at the animal's passing among the participants, matching the great care that had been taken with the piglet up to the moment of its death. Branga furthermore comments,

Each time it is done, I feel the same gratefulness [to the sacrificed animals] and joy combined with sadness and distaste for killing... the honor I know I give our Gods and the very real need it seems to fill for my guests and my family, makes me continue it twice a year.<sup>48</sup>

Krasskova came to Oðala Acres in January 2006 to participate in a blót in which a pig was sacrificed to Woden (the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the Norse Oðin). Krasskova had previously observed several animal sacrifice blóts performed at other locations, but this was the first one in which she took a leading role, under Branga's supervision. Though Krasskova's and Branga's relations had been cordial to this point, certain divergences of opinion began to make themselves felt. One of Krasskova's religious practices, not shared by Branga, was to enter trance states in which she claimed to be possessed by Woden (Oðin) and other Nordic deities. This practice is known within the Nordic Pagan community as *spá* or *seið*.<sup>49</sup>

46. The author received a highly detailed report from an email correspondent in Texas who wished to remain anonymous, 17 May 2007.

47. Branga expressed concern that readers of this article who become interested in blót should not attempt to perform animal sacrifice without training and supervision in the skills required, to avoid the kind of cruel miscarriage of sacrifice noted above. He suggested that for those skilled in the use of firearms, the use of a rifle would help them avoid the mishaps possible in killing an animal with a knife, axe or sword. Personal communication, 3 July 2007.

48. Branga, personal communication, 17 May 2007.

49. Also sometimes written as *seidh*. See the profile of Galina Krasskova in Strmiska and Sigurvinsson, "Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America," 160-61. For the most comprehensive treatment of such oracular and trance practices yet published, see Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid Magic*. Diana L. Paxson, a prominent practitioner of seið and a leading figure in American Ásatrú, has written a valuable

Krasskova also practiced runic divination in which she again claimed to receive messages from the Nordic deities. On the occasion of this blót, Krasskova reported Woden instructing her that the entire animal should be burned to ashes rather than the edible parts being cooked and consumed by the ritual participants, as Branga and the others had expected would be done. Branga reluctantly assented to this, but felt misgivings at this deviation from his usual ritual procedure, as well as Krasskova's assertion of authority based on supernatural communications with the god Woden/Oðin, which seemed to leave no room for any negotiation or discussion beyond Krasskova's pronouncements.<sup>50</sup>

Branga's unease over Krasskova's practices of *seið* and possession may suggest a division in the overall Nordic Pagan community between those who embrace such practices and those who distrust them and/or their practitioners. This might be described as a divide between "folkloric" Pagans whose worship of Nordic deities extends only so far as communal prayer and offerings, and "shamanic" Pagans whose worship also includes ecstatic states such as trance and possession.<sup>51</sup> A parallel situation pertains in Christianity, where the practice of "speaking in tongues" is enthusiastically championed by Pentecostal Christians as one of the central expressions and experiences of their faith, but is disdained by other Christian denominations. The key difficulty and cause of discomfort which some Nordic Pagans report with *seið* and *spá* is the lack of any clear criteria by which to evaluate the genuineness of claims of divine communication or possession. There is also worry about how unbalanced or unscrupulous individuals might use such claims to enhance their own prestige and power.

Patricia Lafayllve, a *gyðia* (female priestess), long-time practitioner of *seið* and High Steward of another Nordic Pagan organization, the Troth, offered a different point of view. She noted that traditionally shamans

article, "The Return of the Völva: Recovering the Practice of Seiðr" (1993), now available online at <http://www.seidh.org/articles/seidh.html>, 26 June 2007. The key representation of *seið* in Norse literature is the episode of the "The Little Völva" in the third chapter of *The Saga of Eirik the Red*, in which a seeress (*völva*) in Greenland goes into a trance to predict the future.

50. Interview with Ron Branga, Keene, New Hampshire, 7 June 2007. Mike Smith expressed similar sentiments in a discussion at his Hillsborough, New Hampshire home (9 June 2007), as did Jeffrey Runokivi, "Lord" and high priest of New Anglia Theod in a discussion at the Litha Blót conducted at Oðala Acres, 30 June 2007.

51. This is similar to the divide this author found in the Icelandic Ásatrú Association in the 1990s, in which some members of the Ásatrúfélagið were content with fairly staid ritual events focused on the recitation of sacred poetry, versus others who sought more exciting, even ecstatic experience. See Strmiska, "Ásatrú in Iceland," 106-32.

exercise their function in relation to a community, which acts as an informal check on the activities of the shaman by either approving or disapproving of the shaman's communications with the divine realm, based on their pragmatic judgment of the utility of the shaman's pronouncements.<sup>52</sup> This view of the reciprocal relations between shaman and community helps explain how Krasskova fell afoul of New Anglia Theod. In her use of *seið* at Oðala Acres, Krasskova seemed to expect that the other blót participants would obey her divinely inspired pronouncements without question, simply on her say-so, without Krasskova having first convinced the group of her merit as a *seið*-worker. This led some participants to suspect that Krasskova's assertive behavior had more to do with egotistically grabbing for power rather than faithfully serving Woden, as Krasskova would have it. Krasskova may have succeeded in establishing contact with the divine, but it would seem that on this occasion she was insufficiently attentive to her human community.<sup>53</sup>

Another issue to be taken into account is that as Nordic Paganism is a new religious community on the fringes of society in America, many Nordic Pagans are leery of activities that could open the way for attacks from mainstream, Christian-dominated American society. Krasskova herself concedes that *seið* is controversial within the overall community of Nordic Paganism, observing in a presentation at a Pagan studies conference,

Within Heathenry, particularly within Theodism, such devotion [the practice of possession by a deity] as well as the concept of being owned by a God is distasteful. Amongst many Heathens this ambivalence toward sacred power goes beyond distaste into outright denial of even the possibility of such direct experience.<sup>54</sup>

Krasskova's membership in New Anglia Theod became problematic due to her continuing practice of possession states, which some in the Theod found questionable, but the final breach came over a quite different matter. It occurred when New Anglia Theod learned of Krasskova's association with Raven Caldera, the head and self-styled "king" of an eclectic Pagan

52. Discussion with Lafayllve at the Litha Blót at Oðala Acres, 30 June 2007.

53. Discussion with New Anglia leader Jeffrey Runokivi and other members of New Anglia Theod and Raven Kindred North at the Litha Blót at Oðala Acres, 30 June 2007.

54. Galina Krasskova, "Animal Sacrifice and the Ritual of Blót in Modern Heathenry: An Ethnographic Exploration," p. 17. Unpublished paper presented at the *Forging Folklore: Witches, Pagans and Neo-Tribal Cultures* conference at Harvard University, 4–5 May 2007. Copy provided to the author by Krasskova.

association in central Massachusetts known as Asphodel Farm.<sup>55</sup> Caldera is a female-to-male (FTM) transsexual who has become a prominent spokesman for the transsexual and transgendered community as well as for the sexual practices of bondage, domination, and sadomasochism (BDSM), in addition to his activities as a Pagan leader and author. For New Anglia Theod members intent upon Nordic Paganism being accepted by mainstream society and protected from public scorn and persecution, Krasskova's affiliation with a sadomasochistic, transsexual Pagan leader was a cause of considerable anxiety.

The Theod's concerns were magnified still further by the discovery that Caldera had advocated the use of bondage and sadomasochism as Pagan spiritual techniques on Internet web pages easily accessible to the public. Defending Caldera on this point, Krasskova emphasized that he uses such sexual practices for the shamanic purpose of altering consciousness through the experience of bodily pain, which is indeed a well-known aspect of shamanism, though shamans typically inflict pain upon themselves, not others, as the sadistic aspect of sadomasochism would seem to imply.<sup>56</sup> Even granting Krasskova's assertion that these activities might be beneficial in certain, carefully controlled ritual contexts, a perusal of Caldera's web pages does not show a sustained effort to clearly separate his personal enjoyment of BDSM from their use as Pagan spiritual practices.<sup>57</sup>

One example is a bondage-themed, poetic tribute to the Norse mythological being Fenrir, a demonic wolf bound by the Norse gods for fear of his destructive potential. Caldera addresses the wolf in this manner: "When the Great Wolf comes; take me, bite off my hand, Limit and cripple me, Make me bleed and weep...", and then goes on to more explicitly sexual imaginings.<sup>58</sup> The provocative nature of Caldera's

55. That is, not exclusively devoted to Nordic Paganism or any other particular ethnic Pagan tradition, but freely intermixing elements from diverse spiritual traditions. Caldera explains his "kingship" in an essay, "Things I've Learned about the Sacred Kingship Path," <http://www.cauldronfarm.com/asphodel/articles/kingship.html> (accessed 10 June 2007).

56. Galina Krasskova, personal communication, 22 June 2007.

57. A 2003 essay by Caldera which bears out Krasskova's observation about the shamanic aspect of Caldera's sadomasochism, but also suggests that Caldera may be as much an exhibitionist, eager to court controversy, as a shaman or a religious leader, see <http://www.sensuoussadie.com/articles/ravencalderaordealpath.htm> (accessed 5 June 2007). Caldera proudly proclaims himself a "sick fuck," and further explains, "My sexual fantasies are all incredibly violent and grotesque, and so is my porn collection. I am a serious fucking sexual sadist, and I've got a decent masochistic streak in there as well."

58. Raven Caldera, "Bindings," from his collection of religious writings known as

publicly available, Web-posted writings had the effect of nails screeching on a chalkboard for New Anglia members, horrified at the possible negative effects of Krasskova, a Theod member, being associated with an open advocate of sadomasochism. Accordingly, in spring 2006, Krasskova was asked to either sever her ties with Caldera, or be dismissed from the Theod. She chose the latter.<sup>59</sup>

The tale of Krasskova's involvement with Caldera would hardly be worth mentioning for this article were it not for the fact that Krasskova went on to perform blót at Caldera's community in August 2006.<sup>60</sup> About a dozen people participated in the event. The blót involved the slaying of a sheep, with subsequent cooking and eating, in worship of Angurboda, a female Jötun or giantess. To Krasskova, this sacrifice was a great success. As she recalls,

It was wonderful. Besides the host and his family, I was the only one there who had ever witnessed or performed a blot before but everyone was very respectful and awed by the energy of the sacrifice. There was a palpable excitement and undercurrent of joy as well as nervousness — blot is serious business! — underlying all the preparations. It went so very well though, even I was shocked. Those gathered, who had never seen blot before, actually pointed out natural signs — omens (and very good ones) — that I myself had ignored... The offering was obviously accepted and I placed the head, hooves and heart by her shrine. I was immensely moved by the eager willingness of those gathered to come forward and join in the experience, particularly with the ritual asperging [sprinkling] of the blood. The entire ritual was very beneficial to all, I think, and just an amazing experience.<sup>61</sup>

To Branga and other New Anglia Theodsmen, this blót was offensive on several different levels. One was that the recipient of sacrifice, Angurboda, was a giantess best-known in Norse myth for mating with the morally ambiguous god Loki to become the mother of Fenrir, the monstrous wolf that ultimately kills Oðin in the final battle of Ragnarok, the equally monstrous Midgarð Serpent, which kills Thor, and Hel, the

*Jötunbok*, <http://cauldronfarm.com/jotunbok/bindings.html> (accessed 5 June 2007).

59. Ron Branga, interview, 7 June 2007. Branga emphasized that he has no personal animosity toward Caldera or Krasskova, but that he wishes to see Nordic Paganism develop as a "family-friendly" religion, and not be associated with sexual activities that might cause the religion to be perceived as more fit for "freaks" than for families. Branga, Smith and quite a few other Nordic Pagans express appreciation for Krasskova's knowledge and writings, despite the disagreements mentioned above.

60. Galina Krasskova, personal communication, 16 May 2007.

61. Krasskova, "Animal Sacrifice," 16.

female overseer of the realm of death.<sup>62</sup> As giants are generally represented as malevolent beings in Norse tradition, they are not considered proper subjects of worship by most Nordic Pagans, let alone fitting recipients of sacrifice. As Branga put it in a discussion on the Northeast Asatru Internet discussion group, he saw this as worshipping a “monster.”<sup>63</sup> It was especially painful to Branga that Krasskova had used blót techniques that he had taught her on his farm for her activities with Caldera’s community, which indirectly and without his consent linked him to a person and community with whom he had no wish to be associated.

Smith has remained on friendly terms with Branga, his mentor-in-blót, and the two continue to participate in regional Nordic Pagan events, despite their affiliation with different branches of Nordic Paganism, Branga with Anglo-Saxon-oriented Theodism, Smith with Scandinavian-oriented Ásatrú. Smith’s only blóts to this point have been performed at Oðala Acres, though Smith has long performed other rituals in his own home and elsewhere, such as the *symbol*, a toasting ceremony in which the gods are honored through words and speech, and the *for*n, a votive ritual of offering various items to the gods by burning, smashing or otherwise destroying the items so that they are unfit for human use but suitable for the gods. Having purchased a home with a sizable piece of land in a remote location in New Hampshire, Smith is now planning to raise his own animals and conduct blót, in much the same manner as Branga.<sup>64</sup> Krasskova is also looking forward to again performing animal sacrifice.

Theological controversies and personal enmities aside, all of the blóts mentioned thus far have taken place on farms. An additional example would be the animal sacrifices which are regularly performed by Jon Cyr, a Nordic Pagan sheep farmer in Maine.<sup>65</sup> This agricultural setting is significant in several ways. First, there is the simple logistical matter that animal sacrifice is a messy business that is much easier to handle in a rural location than an urban or suburban setting. As Smith put it in a 2004 discussion, “a group in New York City is less likely to sacrifice a pig than we are. Logistically they just don’t have the space to sacrifice,

62. Cf. Krasskova, *Exploring the Northern Tradition*, 105, where she includes a prayer for Angurbōða.

63. Northeast Asatru Yahoo discussion group, 17 May 2007.

64. Mike Smith, interviews, 10 June 2007.

65. Discussion at Litha Blót at Oðala Acres, 30 June 2007. I regret that due to time constraints Cyr could not be properly interviewed for this article, but he was quite eloquent in advocating for the value of animal sacrifice as a means of bringing human-kind back into a deeper relationship with the cycles of nature.

bleed out, butcher, and cremate the remains of a 200+lb animal.”<sup>66</sup>

Furthermore, as animal slaughter is a traditional part of farm life, the ritualized slaughter of sacrifice is far less likely to cause offense or controversy in a farming context. This may be one reason why Nordic Pagan animal sacrifice has not run into the community opposition or legal challenges that Santería has met with in more urban milieus. An additional logistical factor is the availability of animals in the farm context. Branga, for example, raises free-range chickens, roosters, and turkeys that are used in sacrifice. Larger animals such as pigs are purchased from other local farmers but allowed to live on Branga’s land for some days before the blot, so that they might partake of the essence and ambiance of Branga’s family and farm.<sup>67</sup> This would obviously be unworkable in a more urban setting.

The farm context also correlates with the traditional milieu of Nordic Pagan practice. The sacrifices of old were performed on the farm estates of wealthy landowners, community leaders who were also Pagan priests (*goðar*).<sup>68</sup> Branga, as the host and priest of Oðala Acres, is to some extent playing the part of the *goði* of the past, as is Smith, who has begun conducting rituals, though not yet blót, on his own farm in south-central New Hampshire, and Jon Cyr, with his sheep farm in Maine. While Krasskova also plays the role of a *gyðia* (female *goði*), without owning a farm, she cannot offer her own land as a site for ritual gatherings such as blót.

### *Bloodless Blóts*

It is important to note that Nordic Pagans such as Branga, Smith, Cyr, and Krasskova who practice animal sacrifice are a minority of the overall community of Nordic Pagans. Most Modern Nordic Pagans practice bloodless blóts in which various items are substituted for animals as objects of sacrifice. I will here provide two explanations of this kind of substitution, the first from the website of Raven Kindred North, the Nordic Pagan organization that Ron Branga and Mike Smith belonged to in 1997 before they left in part because of their desire for actual animal sacrifice rather than substituted offerings. RKN’s explanation of their

66. Mike Smith, personal communication, 25 October 2004.

67. Branga furthermore plans to raise his own pigs for sacrifice in the near future. (Personal communication, 26 June 2007.)

68. If one accepts the theory of Indo-European commonalities, a line can be drawn back even farther in time and distance to the ancient sacrificial rites of Vedic India, where wealthy landowners would pay teams of priests to sacrifice animals on their land.

bloodless practice acknowledges that animal sacrifice was indeed the original form of blót, and still entirely valid, but one which the group no longer feels bound to perform, in accord with changing lifestyles:<sup>69</sup>

In its most basic form a *blót* is a sacrifice to the Gods. We, as humans, are giving something of ourselves over to the Gods. In ancient times, it was common to hold a feast in the Gods honor, [and] in this way people gave of their crops and livestock to the Gods. In modern times, we must search for different things to give to the Gods, marking our commitment to them. The majorities of people today do not live on farms and are not as connected to the land as our ancestors were. Today, we also do not have the same relationship with animals as our ancestors did. For our ancestors, these animals were their lifeblood. Giving the animals to deity was giving of themselves.

It is, therefore, very uncommon today to see Asatruar sacrificing animals to the Gods. It is more common that sacrifices today include alcohol, usually mead that has been handmade, as the primary gift given to the Gods.<sup>70</sup>

The website continues with an eloquent description of stages of their blót ritual, which match those used by Branga et al. for the most part, but which introduce other elements as well, such as a chanting of “Odin, Vili, Ve” to commemorate the original sacrifice of Ymir by Odin and his brothers.

Bifrost, a Norwegian Ásatrú organization, takes a similar position.

The Blot is the most important celebration of the changing of seasons and nature. It is a Feast to the forces of nature and includes both communication and socialisation with these. Through ceremonies, giving gifts, and partying, the friendship with the gods and nature is strengthened. The Blot can take many shapes, from the small ones with a short timeline and simple ceremony, to a big gathering with complex rituals and demanding involvement. It is common that both single members and the groups arrange blots, usually about 3-4 times a year...

Common units in a blot is first to “lyse stedet i ve”, i.e. to invite the gods to the place where one is to perform the ceremony, then to read, sing or in another way perform something for instance from the Edda. To drink “einkjels” [is] a joint toast where a horn or a bowl with, for instance, mead is shared and passed around to all the participants, and then everyone salutes someone or something they want to honour. Last but not least, the sacrifice. The gift can be many kinds of things, from flowers, seeds, eggs,

69. Though Jon Cyr, noted above, is both a practitioner of animal sacrifice and a member of RKN.

70. Raven Kindred North, “Blót,” <http://www.ravennorth.org/html/blot.html> (accessed 17 June 2007).



incense, tobacco and beer. It is not common to sacrifice blood or animals, but there are no laws against it. The sacrifice has a symbolic meaning of showing sacrificial will towards the gods. The will to give and to gain. An important aspect of all blots is also a Gilde, a party in the honour of oneself, the gods and the forces of nature. In these ceremonies, as in all other things relating to the groups and Bifrost, the groups themselves have a liberty in how they choose to compose their blots and which elements they choose to include. As such there might be a great difference in the arrangements and performances between the groups and also the different blots.<sup>71</sup>

A third perspective, balancing both the animal offering and bloodless styles of blót, was provided via email correspondence, by another American Nordic Pagan, Dave Curtis:

Although actually raising and slaughtering an animal is performed by us from time to time, it is not the killing of the animal which is the sacrifice, but the consuming of the animal at the feast, and the small portion which is set out in nature afterwards for the gods and spirits. No one who is lore-based in their understanding of the faith (that I am aware of) is against this practice within the general Asatru community. We also perform this same ritual sacrifice of a portion of what we brew containing alcohol.

There are those who do not consume alcohol or meat within Asatru, depending on their preference, and who still sacrifice vegetable and juice offerings. While this is an undocumented aberration away from the standard historical ritual offerings described in the Sagas and other references, most people do not take serious issue with it. The deities will either accept a juice and vegetable offering or not, and of course the people offering such sustenance as their form of offering are as serious and devoted about their worship as any.<sup>72</sup>

Neither RKN nor Bifrost take a firm or absolute position against the sacrifice of animals in blót, but neither do they feel that a bloodless blót is in any way inferior, as Curtis also states. This is another example of the flexibility of modern Nordic Paganism, in which different groups and members find different ways to accommodate the ways of the past to the conditions of the present.

### *Spiritual and Ethnic Meanings*

Although only a small proportion of Nordic Pagans actually practice animal sacrifice, with the majority preferring bloodless, nonviolent rites,

71. Bifrost, "The Asatrufellowship Bifrost," <http://www.bifrost.no/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=2&Itemid=25> (accessed 6 March 2007).

72. Dave Curtis, email correspondence, 8 November 2004.

the blóts performed by Branga, Smith, Krasskova, and Cyr, and the dozens of other individuals who have participated in the blóts which these three organized, demonstrate a continuing, and growing, tradition of Nordic Pagan animal sacrifice in North America from 2002 to the present. The next step in this discussion will be to examine the meanings which the ritual participants ascribe to blót.

In my earlier researches into Ásatrú, I have come to identify two different strands of meaning in Nordic Paganism, a “spiritual” and an “ethnic” strand, which I also find in evidence here. In my view, the spiritual thread involves a sense of relationship to greater-than-human beings such as gods, goddess and land-spirits, as well as a more generalized sense of overall cosmic unity conceived in Nordic Pagan mythological terms. The ethnic strand of meaning concerns a sense of relationship with Nordic cultural and/or ancestral heritage, which takes different forms depending on individual circumstances and perspectives. Many Nordic Pagans with ancestors from one or another area of the Nordic region<sup>73</sup> see their Paganism as an homage to their ancestors and their past life-world, while those with no direct ancestral links to Nordic forebears value the cultural heritage of the Nordic lands and peoples as the wellspring of the spirituality and culture that they have chosen to affiliate themselves with.<sup>74</sup> Insofar as modern-day blót is founded upon the commemoration of past ritual practices of Nordic peoples, the ethnic and spiritual dimensions of blót are obviously intermingled, but nonetheless amenable to separate analysis.

Let us begin with the question of who is worshipped in blót, and then consider what is thought to be achieved or obtained through the sacrifice. Branga’s blóts are usually dedicated to Ing Frea or Ingvi Frey, the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the Norse god Frey, who is seen as the patron god of Oðala Acres and New Anglia Theod. However, in the polytheistic tradition of Nordic Paganism, other gods of the pantheon are also understood to receive honor from the blót. At the June 2007 Litha Blót observed by

73. In this discussion, terminology is again highly problematic. The more precise term would be Germanic Northern Europe, embracing all those lands dominated by peoples with Germanic linguistic heritage languages and related cultural heritage; primarily Scandinavia, Britain, Germany, Iceland, Belgium, and the Netherlands. There are also, of course, non-Germanic peoples with long histories in Northern Europe, such as Slavs, Celts, Balts, and Finns, which cautions against simply equating all of Northern Europe with Germanic culture and tradition.

74. The ethnic and spiritual strands of Nordic Paganism are interwoven in many ways, as in rites of ancestor worship, wherein one’s ancestors, whether of Scandinavian, Germanic, Anglo-Saxon origins, or other ethnic roots, come to be honored in the style of Nordic Pagan worship.

the author, the main worship was directed to Frey, but several participants separately offered worship to the goddess Freya. Smith and Krasskova likewise worship a variety of Nordic deities, with Krasskova furthermore venerating the giantess Angurboða.

Is this a *do ut des* kind of transaction, in which participants expect to receive specific forms of aid and reward in response to their offerings? The answer would seem to be both yes and no. The ritual invocation noted earlier, “From the gods to the earth to us...a gift for a gift,” would certainly seem to express that expectation. However, in a discussion of this issue, Branga held back from endorsing such a straightforward or simplistic interpretation of the ritual transaction. He emphasized rather that the main point of the blót was to show love and honor to the gods; in return, the worshippers would hope to receive protection and support from the gods, but only in the most general way. That is to say, the main point of the ritual was to establish or re-establish a respectful relationship of mutual support and honor, not to present the gods with a shopping list of requests.<sup>75</sup>

Branga furthermore expressed his own belief that it was the spirits of ancestors and local divine beings, the *landvaettir* or land-spirits of Norse tradition, who were more likely to provide concrete forms of assistance than the highest-ranked beings like Oðin, Frey, and Thor. In this matter, Branga’s views seem to correspond with the understanding of divine hierarchy in Hinduism, where lesser, locally based deities in the service of the great, pan-Indian gods like Shiva or Vishnu are thought more likely to help individual worshippers with their problems than the great gods themselves. As Sukumari Bhattacharji observes in the conclusion of *The Indian Theogony*,

Thus while on the one hand we have a high trinity [Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva] with obvious metaphysical associations, with cosmic functions of the first magnitude, and the truly “high” appeal to the imagination and intellect, on the other hand we have those innumerable “low gods” which dominate the popular imagination, and the vast majority of the people to whom gods are chiefly functional and worshipped for the sake of expediency.<sup>76</sup>

Applying similar logic to the Nordic gods, Branga observed, “Oðin has other things to do. He is preparing for Ragnarok.”<sup>77</sup> It’s understandable

75. Ron Branga, interview, 7 June 2007.

76. Sukumari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology from the Vedas to the Puranas* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Publications, 1988), 361.

77. In Norse mythology, Ragnarok is the cataclysmic battle in which the gods are

that he might not have time to think about me.”

In Branga’s statements about the meaning of the blót, we can see both the spiritual and the ethnic dimensions of Paganism coming into play. As important as it is to honor the gods – the spiritual dimension – it is equally important to honor them in a very particular way, recreating the same kind of ritual procedure practiced by Anglo-Saxon worshippers of the past – the ethnic dimension, which for Branga resonates with his own English ancestry. In my past profile of Smith, he reported a similar motivation to carry on the ways of his Swedish forebears.<sup>78</sup>

The fact that both Branga, with his Anglo-Saxon ethnic focus, and Smith with his Swedish one, can participate side by side in the selfsame ritual events demonstrates how the ethnic basis of Nordic Paganism is both broad and flexible. This is also in keeping with historical accuracy. The Pagan peoples of Germanic Northern Europe did not exist in self-enclosed ethnic bubbles, but were constantly moving and mixing with each other and with other peoples as well, most famously in the Viking era.<sup>79</sup> The same pantheon of gods and the same religious practices can be recognized across Germanic Northern Europe, despite variations, and this allows for an easy interchangeability<sup>80</sup> among Modern Nordic Pagans of different ethnic orientations, including those whose devotion to Norse-Germanic spiritual heritage is elective, not ancestral.<sup>81</sup>

As regards the spiritual dimension of sacrifice, Krasskova expresses

slain and the world is destroyed, then recreated. The fullest version of the battle is given in the Eddic poem *Voluspá* (The Prophecy of the Völva). Some Nordic Pagans, such as Mike Smith, see this prophecy as a warning about the possible consequences of humankind’s destructive tendencies, rather than a prediction of inevitable doom.

78. The intermixing of ethnic and spiritual motivations, indeed their inseparability, is pointedly expressed in a numinous dream which led Smith to embrace Ásatrú as his spiritual path. The god Odin asked Smith what he had done to honor his ancestors, and chided him for ignoring them. See Strmiska and Sigurvinsson, “Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America,” 155-56, for a fuller account.

79. Danes invaded England and Normandy, Norwegians colonized Iceland and Ireland, and Swedes traded and settled in western Russia and Ukraine. A still earlier Germanic invasion of England brought the Angles and Saxons and resulted in the English language. The cultural artifacts left to us by the Pagan peoples of Germanic Northern Europe demonstrate substantial interaction and intermingling, both with other Germanic-language peoples and other peoples as well, as well as substantial continuity and commonality. See Dubois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*.

80. The Norse god Óðin was known by the Anglo-Saxon Pagans as Woden, for example.

81. This issue of Nordic Pagans without Nordic or Germanic ancestry, who embrace the heritage out of personal interest, is discussed in Strmiska and Sigurvinsson, “Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America,” 134-37.

similar ideas to those of Branga and Smith, except for her worship of the giantess Angurboða. Discussing her feelings about the blót to Woden that she performed at Oðala Acres, Krasskova stated,

As a woman and priest very deeply dedicated to Woden, it was a joy to give Him this sacrifice. I believe that within the traditional blót, the quintessential nature of the Heathen relationship to the Gods is distilled: it is reciprocal. Gifts given out of love show our thanks for blessings received from our Elder Kin (i.e. the Gods). We give that which nourishes us and are nourished in return. It is a celebration of our connection both in life and in death with the Gods.<sup>82</sup>

In her primer on Modern Nordic Paganism, Krasskova relates the reciprocity aspect of blót to traditional Germanic attitudes of social propriety, noting that gift-giving was highly valued as a means of creating and maintaining social bonds.<sup>83</sup> Blót extends the gift-giving network to the gods, in the hope that they will provide blessings in exchange for the animals offered them.

Another meaning of blót, which pertains to both the ethnic and spiritual dimensions, is a strong desire, expressed by all the blót practitioners consulted for this research, to step back from modern humankind's overly sanitized and mechanized relationship to the production and consumption of food, and to restore, if only temporarily, the pre-industrial way of life of our ancestors, in which the meat that would be consumed came by hunting in the wild or the slaughter of one's own livestock.<sup>84</sup> As noted earlier, all the blót rituals described in this article occurred on farms. In this way, the Modern Nordic Pagan practice of blót is of a piece with other cultural movements that seek to restore harmony with nature, with the exception that sacrificing Pagans see animal slaughter as part of the natural order, and indeed of the divine order, for in Norse mythology, the creation of the universe comes about through an original, primal sacrifice of the cosmic being Ymir, as noted at the beginning of the article.

The Nordic Pagans interviewed in this article also expressed the view that the direct participation in death involved in blót was for them an intensely sobering and moving spiritual experience, juxtaposing the animals' loss of life with the appeal to the gods as the source of life, which they felt amounted to a poignant demonstration of death and

82. Galina Krasskova, personal communication, 16 May 2007.

83. Strmiska and Sigurvinsson, "Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America," 148-49.

84. Jon Cyr was quite eloquent on this point in discussion at the Litha Blót at Oðala Acres, 30 June 2007.

renewal. Branga and Smith expressed disgust about a blót they had observed, performed by a different Pagan group, in which the animal was dispatched with great brutality, and then its head paraded around atop a spear, like a trophy.<sup>85</sup> They felt that this was a horribly mishandled ritual that could even bring harm on the recipients, as they imagined it would be terribly displeasing to the gods.

### *Theories of Sacrifice and Modern Nordic Pagans*

Of the various theoretical models of sacrifice noted earlier, some seem highly pertinent to Modern Nordic Pagans' revival of animal sacrifice, others far less so. Edward Tylor's view of basic reciprocity is, as we have seen, fully endorsed by our sacrificers. Robertson Smith's idea of a meal of communion between worshippers and their gods also corresponds very well to how Branga, Smith, and Krasskova all conceive of blót. Robertson Smith's idea of the ritual involving the sacrifice of a special, "totemic" animal is not borne out, however, as our three sacrificers do not view specific animals as being required for worship to specific gods,<sup>86</sup> and the broader community of Nordic Pagans accepts the validity of bloodless offerings, and may even prefer them.

The Durkheimian view of sacrifice as functioning to re-affirm social bonds between a community of believers and articulate a sacred order separate from the profane world of daily life also applies quite readily. The small bands of worshippers who assemble on isolated farms for animal sacrifice are well aware of forming a special community apart from the general society, and their ritual procedures augment the sense of reaching toward divinity that is beyond the normal order of things. The phases of blót ritual also demonstrate the process of building up to a moment of high drama and spiritual intensity and then stepping down from that peak, as variously noted by Hubert, Mauss and Turner in their studies of ritual process.

85. I have also heard tell of this blót from another informant who attended the event and reached a similar negative verdict on the inappropriate handling of the animal victim. Name withheld, personal communication, 16 May 2007.

86. David Curtis, a Nordic Pagan cited earlier, provided a list of particular animals described in Old Norse literature and Germanic folklore as being sacrificed to particular gods. "Horse meat is associated with Odin (Woden [En], Wotan [De]), goat meat with Thorr (Thunor [En], Donar [De]) etc. Other deities such as Freyja have animals associated with them which we do not eat (for instance Freyja's animal is the cat)...Freyja has a brother Freyr, whose associated animal is the boar." Personal communication, 8 November 2004. The Modern Nordic Pagan sacrificers contacted in this research are not, however, following such a strict taxonomy of sacrificial victims.

The mythocentric view of ritual espoused by Mircea Eliade and the myth-ritual school of Jane Harrison and others do not match very well with the practices examined here. Our sacrificers do not model their action on any particular myth, not even the creation myth with its dismembering of the primal being Ymir noted at the outset, though the members of Raven Kindred North do make explicit reference to this mythical sacrifice. Myths explain the natures, functions and personalities of the gods who are honored in blót, but it is mainly later texts of historical or semi-historical nature that provide the nitty-gritty information about sacrificial procedure from which our Nordic Pagans reconstruct their blóts, though even quasi-historical texts like the Icelandic sagas and the *Heimskringla* leave major gaps, which Modern Nordic Pagans fill with their own creative adaptations.

René Girard's theory of sacrificial ritual revolving around the commemoration and concealment of a conflictual drama of primal murder, with the animal offering taking the place of a human victim, also does not seem to apply with much resonance to the practices here documented, though the dismemberment of Ymir by three brother gods in the Norse creation myth would seem tailor-made for a Girardian analysis. Our Pagan sacrificers approach the task of sacrifice with calmness and solemnity, and it is difficult to find any traces of intense rivalry or bitter conflict in their fairly peaceful collaborations.

Burkert's vision of animal sacrifice as a privileged vestige of prehistoric hunting culture seems much more to the point. Just as Burkert sees the violence of hunting as providing a crucial stimulus to humankind's early cultural development, with animal sacrifice providing a way of re-experiencing the primal energies of that original breakthrough, our Nordic Pagan sacrificers see the violence of blót as a catalyst for the recovery of the Pagan spirituality and Nordic cultural heritage of the past.<sup>87</sup> For our Nordic Pagan sacrificers, the sacredness of the past, of the spiritual traditions of the past, justifies the violence of the blót.

However, when we consider that the blót is a fairly placid procedure, with a tame animal treated with kindness to ensure its tranquility up to the moment of its death, we can also see the relevance of Jonathan Z. Smith's notion of animal sacrifice as a stylized, sacralized version of hunting: a hunt in which nothing can go wrong, which provides partici-

87. There are, in fact, Modern Nordic Pagans in the United States who go beyond the relatively tame process of blót sacrifice to hunt animals in a ritualized manner. See the profile of Mitch Zebrowski and the discussion of the Brotherhood of the Sacred Hunt in Strmiska and Sigurvinsson, "Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America," 152-55.

pants with fresh encouragement to face the uncertainties of actual reality. For Modern Nordic Pagans, performing the blót bolsters their sense of dedication to revitalizing the ethnic and spiritual heritage of the Nordic Pagans of the past, while living in a Christian majority society that is generally hostile to such endeavors.

### *Retrospective Religion*

Insofar as animal sacrifice is distasteful to the majority population of America and other similarly industrialized countries, the embrace of animal sacrifice in Modern Nordic Paganism might seem to be a quite radical undertaking. I would argue that what is truly radical is not the blót-killing of animals *per se*, but the larger context of that controversial action, that is, the serious and sustained dedication to exploring, imagining, and recreating past Pagan religious traditions of Germanic Northern Europe. Of course, this is not wholly different from what all religions do in seeking to recapture inspirations from the past, whether we look at Christians desirous of ethical guidance wondering “what would Jesus do?,” Muslims studying the *hadith* to see how the Prophet Muhammad and his companions behaved, or Buddhists who take the life of Siddhartha Gautama as their model for progress on the Buddhist path.

What distinguishes Modern Nordic Paganism, as well as other forms of Reconstructionist Paganism, is the self-conscious understanding on the part of its practitioners that they are not simply continuing an existing religion, well-represented and easily accessible in society; they are reviving a form of religion that has not been freely practiced, but rather prohibited and repressed, and for all intents and purposes dead for many centuries. This revival marks Modern Nordic Paganism as a distinctly postmodern religion<sup>88</sup> in which the truth and authority of the tradition cannot simply be taken for granted and followed semi-consciously or unconsciously, as with a firmly entrenched, majority religion that enjoys a large degree of hegemony in its social context. Modern Nordic Pagans choose to reject the dominant religious paradigms of their societies and to instead consciously affiliate themselves with a

88. The author apologizes for the infelicitous clash of terminology in declaring a “modern” religion to be “postmodern.” Insofar as Modern Paganism has its roots in nineteenth-century romanticism, in response to the upheavals of industrialization and colonialism, it truly is modern, but as the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are the period in which this religious movement is gathering strength, amidst an atmosphere in which the collapse of traditional authority structures has created an open playing field for new religious possibilities, it is also riding the waves of the postmodern cultural moment.



religious tradition that they know has been crushed, fragmented, and nearly erased by the forces of history. Their decision to dedicate themselves to reviving this ghostly, marginal, vestigial religion of a distant and not wholly accessible past may be viewed as an act of spiritual resistance against social forces that they find oppressive, particularly the still largely hegemonic power of Christianity in Western society, but also various aspects of modernization that they find problematic, such as alienation from basic realities such as land, nature, and the inevitability of death.

The blót stands out as an especially striking expression of this spirit of opposition. The bloody sacrifice of a real animal is a bracing, fully embodied encounter with real life and real death, rejecting the manifold substitutions, distractions, and evasions that are all but inevitable in our modern industrialized world where “virtual,” digital reality sometimes seems to crowd out actual, physical reality. The setting of the blót on farmsteads likewise rejects the dominant urban and suburban lifestyle in favor of an older, rawer, and more rustic way of life that is closer to nature and more dependent upon it, thus bolstering the Pagan sense of reliance on divine powers that are closely linked to the forces of nature. This is in turn a rejection of the fundamental meta-narrative of modernity, the belief in inevitable and unending scientific and social progress. The question is raised, the gauntlet thrown down, that not all progress may have been to our actual benefit; perhaps there are things of the past that were forgotten and rejected that now need to be remembered and revived.

While it seems unlikely that all latter-day Nordic Pagans will forsake their urban and suburban lives and relocate to remote, rural areas, to live on farms, raise chickens, goats, and pigs, and practice animal sacrifice blót, there is every reason to expect that the blót, and its rural setting, will continue to have a special, prestigious meaning in the thinking of Nordic Pagans, giving powerful, physical expression to the spiritual values of this simultaneously old-and-new religious tradition and thus facilitating its continuing reconstruction, revitalization, and adaptation.

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