

# Investigating the Afterlife Concepts of the Norse Heathen: A Reconstuctionist's Approach

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### Abstract

This paper reviews the modern heathen movement's commonly accepted beliefs regarding the heathen concept of Afterlife and compares them to what is known about the ancient Germanic sense of Afterlife. The discussion is a continuation of this author's proposal that the standards of research among modern heathens be at least consistent with standards currently acceptable to researchers in other fields of study. As with previous papers by this author, this document has been subjected to peer review, and has been adjusted to reflect their comments.

The intent is not to undermine the progress at reconstructionism reported by various groups of modern heathens but to enhance it since we have attempted to not only draw directly from heathen sources via the most current research, but have also suggested methods and techniques with which one should be able to shift one's frame of reference from that of the commonly accepted modern era to that which would have been completely acceptable to most of the various Germanic peoples living during the Viking Era.

Any survey conducted in the year 2005 regarding belief in life after death is not only certain to reveal a large percentage of the population maintaining such a belief, but will also reveal a large variation in the numbers and types of destinations for the soul after death. Common beliefs in western industrialized nations include the following examples taken from the author's personal experience in discussions over the years: belief in the Christian version of Heaven which includes a personal audience with either Jesus, Jehovah, or both; belief in various forms of punishment after death from Dante's vision of Hell, to a Purgatory until atonement for transgressions are paid for, to simply being denied rest and comfort; an ancestral home where one passes into a shadowy existence to be with friends and relatives, a world much like this one but filled only with souls; a slumber which exists out of space and time to await another incarnation, a cycle continuing until until all the 'lessons of life have been learned'; absorption into the Universal River of Life which is considered to be God. The variations are endless depending on one's religious or spiritual leanings which may also vary over the course of time so that one may change belief systems perhaps several times within a span of a few decades. Americans seem particularly prone to changing religions, but the trend is also becoming very common in Europe.

So-called 'alternative religions' are fairly common in the US. Some are variations on the dominant Christian theme, but many others are imitations of a large number of pagan, indigenous religions around the world, particularly those religions of the North and South American Indian tribes, African, and southeast Asia. Most of these imitations are in reality combinations of pieces of several pagan religions creatively heald together with 'new age glue' which is essentially philosophy which allows for the blending of two completely different belief systems into a single. The end results of some of these mixtures is at times harmonious and strangely beautiful like an heirloom crazy quilt from the American South, and at other times is irritating like a New York traffic jam on a hot August day, but they are almost always interesting in of the fact that rarely

resemble their parent worldviews in any way. Each of these hybrid-systems has its own vision of what life after death entails adding to the seemingly endless variety found on American soil. One thing can be said for certain: "There is no collective or cultural view of an Afterlife, at least in the USA."

Modern heathenry was started with a different purpose than to be another 'alternative religion.' Rather than seeking out new options for spirituality by exploring a variety of religions, and culling out compatible pieces from anywhere and bringing them together under a single name, modern heathenry, or Ásatrú as it was called early on by adherents from the largest group operating at the time, The Ásatrú Free Assembly, was to be the revival of the heathen religion of the Germanic Peoples through a two-pronged process of historical reconstruction based closely on the best of literary and anthropological research on the one hand and through systematic practice on the other hand. Although the AFA and its approach was the first on the North American continent, it was followed closely by the similar but independent developments of Theodism in the US, the Ásatrúarmenn in Iceland under the farmer/poet/goði, Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson, the beginnings of the Ódinic Rite in England. This approach of historical reconstruction was supported early on by members from the Berkeley based Society for Creative Anachronism.

The reconstructive approach to heathenry was not an isolated phenomenon either. During the same period of time other groups were attempting to reclaim their cultural heritage. The American Indian Movement had started several camps based on traditional cultural ideals; the reconstruction of the traditional Celtic worldview was well under way by several independent groups; black Americans were looking to rediscover their traditional roots and worldview. This was the same period of time which saw the birth of Mother Earth News, the Whole Earth movements, Foxfire Books, etc. It was a period of time when the loosely organized 'anything goes' philosophy of hippiedom showed definite signs of failure and individuals were pulling together communities based on the tested workable ideals of their ancestries. Not only was the approach to many of these movements a historical reconstruction of traditions and traditional values, it was the reconstruction of the younger generation in the aftermath of the prior decade. People wanted their lives to be much less turbulent and unpredictable and sought out the more peaceful, harmonious life of a by-gone era.

Over the years, however, reconstructionism and its proponents known at the present by the somewhat derogatory term 'recons,' is gradually being replaced by the seekers and proponents of the alternative religion approach which requires 'an updated conduit to the spiritual consistent with the 21st century.' To this end, young seekers have once again picked the banner used by the early American Wiccans of the 1960s "All paths are a viable approach to the spiritual life" or the common byline of "all paths lead through the forest." An author calling himself Sannion has produced a website called Sannion's Sanctuary and addresses this backlash in an essay called 'Defending Reconstructionism'

**[http://www.winterscapes.com/sannion/defending\\_recon.htm](http://www.winterscapes.com/sannion/defending_recon.htm)**

His introduction states

"Over the last couple months a curious trend has begun manifesting itself within Pagandom: the Fluffy backlash against Reconstructionism. At first it was just a few stray comments in the chat rooms and on the various lists and boards. Nothing special, really. Just the usual venting of "Recons are elitist bookworms," which is actually a pretty accurate description of us. I mean, back in the 1970s Asatru (one of the first Recon religions) proudly proclaimed itself the religion with homework, and someone who prefers their books to come from Harvard or Cornell University Press instead of the likes of Lewellyn or HarperCollins is bound to engender a reputation for literary elitism. However, this anti-Recon trend is growing. There are now several websites (for instance Why I Don't like The CRP Path! and De Dannan Magick and Lore) and even an anti-Recon banner which people can place on their sites. What was once a low murmur on the lists and boards has now grown into a slightly asthmatic wheeze, that could, possibly become a thunderous and indignant roar, but probably won't. Even so, I have undertaken to answer their charges, since I'm waiting on my copy of Gilbert Murray's Five Stages of Greek Religion to arrive by mail, and have nothing better to do in the meantime."

He continues on to list out 5 major categories of complaints by the new generation of pagans.

1. "All Recons do is study: they don't actually live the religions they claim to follow.
2. Reconstructionism is too restrictive and doesn't allow for personal expression.
3. Recons are mean.
4. Recons are too focused on the past
5. Recons are just making it up."

This author has also noted some of the distaste while interacting with email groups and bulletin boards on the internet with an increase over the past 15 years and can vouch for the anger expressed by some of the newer generation.

In two previous papers, we have sought to separate out evidence based historical reconstructions from blatant borrowings from either alternative religious/ 'new age' arenas or non-Germanic sources. The papers were relatively well received and remain available on the internet in portable document format. We cannot state, however, that the two have not resulted in irritation by those who believe religions require periodic updating but for the most part the response has been favorable. Up to this point, however, we have primarily discussed specific traditions such as calendars, ritual formats, etc.; the current review will look at the 'heart' of current religious belief: the Afterlife. We expect that

this may touch a few sore spots amongst the newer generation of heathens, i.e. those introduced to Germanic heathenry within the past 15 years, and ask that the reader suspend judgment at least temporarily and try to read with an open mind.

We also expect that some problematic areas may have to do with difficulty shifting from the prevailing worldview to the older Germanic worldview. This was covered in "Uncovering the Effects of Cultural Background on the Reconstruction of Ancient Worldviews" by Bil Linzie, published privately at <http://www.angelfire.com/nm/seidhman> and mirrored at <http://www.northvegr.org>. and although we recommend reading it before reading this article, we will attempt to utilize a similar approach in this paper so as to maximize understanding while minimizing irritation.

## 1 The Current State of the Germanic Afterlife

As of 2005, there appears to be 3 general approaches to an Afterlife among the ancient Germanic Peoples. This triad has been around since the early 1990s and has repeatedly shown up in journal articles published by the various heathen organizations, on web pages on the internet and in various fora both on the internet and at heathen gathering often called 'Moots' or 'Þings' (based respectively on the Anglo-Saxon and Norse words for "official gathering or meeting"). The 3 current destinations after death are

1. within the hall of one's patron god or goddess,
2. in Hel, the ancient Germanic land of the dead, or
3. within a cycle of reincarnation, often expressed as being within one's family line.

Touching any of these modern beliefs with any counter arguments based on current accepted research stands usually results in long drawn out arguments which often deteriorate into name calling sessions. Rudimentary analysis of any of these discussions show not only poor support on the part of the participants on both sides of the issue but also clearly show the passion with which adherents imbue their personal belief systems. In this paper we will describe the current concepts of the Afterlife in an attempt to determine from where they may stem, lay out what is known from research and what the accepted concepts are, and finally we will try to 'bridge the gap' of understanding between these modern forms and there older counterparts.

### 1.1 Dying into the Halls of One's Patron

This is a new belief which appeared in modern heathenry between the years of 1990 and 1995 and very quickly became accepted. Acceptance came with such speed that many having become heathen after that time have assumed

that the belief has been a standard part of heathenry since the beginning of organized heathenry in 1973. This is not the case, however. Early articles in the Ásatrú Free Assembly's (AFA's) Runestone and in the AFA's goði training course several concepts of Afterlife were mentioned which included, "into the grave," "Hel," "Valhalla," and the "Halls of Rán" but the term 'patron' was not part of the AFA specialized heathen vocabulary, and secondly, other than Óðinn, Hel, and Rán no other gods (if we may consider the latter two to be gods or god-like).

The term 'patron' as well as the short lived 'matron' did not become part of the standard vocabulary of heathenry until the mid-1990s. Neither term shows up in writings by AFA members or in Edred Thorsson's writings up to that point. The term 'patron' first appeared in email groups in the early 1990 and its entry into the heathen vocabulary seems to correlate with the earliest appearance of the 'profession' (used specifically by modern heathens to mean 'the formal dedication of oneself to the Germanic pantheon, the gods'). 'Profession' seems to have been imported into American heathenry from the Odinic Rite based in the UK, but the source of the use of the word, 'patron,' in heathenry is not known. However, its popularity in email posts increased dramatically during the span of time when Harry Harrison's *The Hammer and the Cross* trilogy was popular among heathens who enjoy the sci-fi/ fantasy genre of literature. This trilogy was discussed among heathens on email lists almost daily between 1993 and 1996 (when the final volume was published). The hero of the trilogy, Shep, loosely based on the Anglo-Saxon hero, Scyld Scefing, spent a number of his early adult years looking for signs which would indicate which god had chosen him and who would act, in effect, as the patron of the hero, protecting and guiding him as his fate was acted out. The correlation between the appearance and popularity of the term and the publishing of the trilogy is strong and cannot be blithely ignored, but, to date, the author has been unable to find anyone who will admit to having been influenced by the trilogy.

The term 'matron' appeared about two years after the first appearances of 'patron,' but it has never enjoyed the same popularity. The term seems to have come from Wicca. Although modern heathenry and Wicca have been viewed by some as being 'cousin' religions and have co-existed side-by-side since 1973, American wiccans, between 1992-1998, began exerting influence some of the modern heathen organizations such as the Ring of Troth and the American Vinland Association; some members of the RoT's High Rede and officer positions were not only practicing members of the wiccan priesthood but many were also consistent contributors to the organization's official journal, *Iðunna*. Most notable were the steersmen, Diana Paxson and Prudence Priest who were both high priestesses with covens of their own in the state of California. The influence of Wicca was somewhat less among the so-called 'folkish heathens' since they have had a tendency to be somewhat more conservative but they were not completely immune. It is surmised, again by dating the approximate appearance of the term, that 'matron' was popularized by new-comers to modern heathenry through the 'cousin' religion of Wicca and that it was meant to emphasize the 'goddess-principle' and the feminine (both popular topics by wiccan authors of

the time) both in imitation of meaning and sound of the word 'patron.' The term does not appear to have been accepted as readily as 'patron' which now is often utilized as a generalized term for both the masculine and feminine protective deities.

The concept of 'patron' came into modern heathenry relatively quickly and is supported through generalization of two concepts found throughout sagaic literature: general fulltrúi and the *fulltrúi* of the *blótsmaðr*. General *fulltrúi* most likely originally involved the dedication of oneself to a single god, presumedly that of the local cult-center. Place-name studies combined with archeological evidence suggest that certain areas were dedicated to a specific god. Although the word is often translated as 'patron' the sense of the is 'that in which one can trust.' Thomas DuBois in his investigation of 'faith' cites Viga-Glúms Saga as being the primary source for a description of a personal relationship to a particular god and indeed those modern heathens claiming a personal relationship to a particular, in the sense of 'patron,' generally cite this text as a main defense for their belief and practice. DuBois' choice of this particular saga was careful, however. In discussing his choices of source material, he describes Viga-Glúms Saga in the following manner:

"Details of paganism acquire in [this work]—as in others of the thirteenth century—particular function within a Christian philosophical and literary tradition. While purporting to focus on the era of conversions, these texts actually help us to understand the complex relations of paganism and Christianity in the generations which followed. . . . The mid-thirteenth century Viga-Glúms Saga presents the life and times of the Icelandic chieftain Glúmr Eyjólfsson, an irascible leader and poet who lived in an era roughly simultaneous to that of Óláfr Tryggvason. . . . At the same time, Viga-Glúms Saga reflects an author of deep Christian outlook and learning. He uses produces a text that uses paganism as the thematic basis for a portrayal of a proud and vengeful society, one which can escape its failings only with the final acceptance Christianity. . . . Throughout [the] opening portion [of the saga], no explicit mention of religious adherence is noted but the author hints at religious factors in a manner presumedly clear to a thirteenth century audience."

In other words, heathenry had been translated and reinterpreted for the limited understanding of a Christian audience, and one of Christianity's main selling points that one can enjoy specialized, personalized treatment from a god through prayer, devotion, and through some sort of process which essentially results in one giving up possession of his own soul.

## 1.2 Reincarnation and the Modern heathen

Reincarnation is a common belief among modern heathens. Two flavors of reincarnation seem to be especially popular:



1. The eternal cycle—souls cycle in and out of a 'pool of souls.' As one person dies the soul drops back into and is absorbed by either the family or the universal collective for recycling back to Midgard.
2. The spiral to perfection—the same soul is brought to earth in a series of incarnations in order that the the individual 'learns' certain lessons during each incarnation so that eventually when *all* the lessons are learned the individual is raised up to godhood in one way or another.

Initially, we attempted to find some correlation between the alternative religion, Wicca, and the concept of reincarnation, but this has proven somewhat difficult. It is known that reincarnation being accepted as a 'style of Afterlife' has been slowly incorporated into modern heathenry and to some degree has had a snowballing growth pattern so that by 1990, the belief had become a dominant discussion on newsgroups and email lists. In discussing this matter with modern heathens, it has been very difficult to find any real and direct *Wicca-Ásatrú connection*.

1. It is known that several books and articles between the years 1989-2004 discuss reincarnation as being a form of Afterlife.
2. During this same period of time, there was a large growth in the acceptance of reincarnation as being part of the heathen worldview.
3. During the past decade, many of the newcomers to modern heathenry had *passed through a period as Wiccan* and, indeed, the top people in the RoT (Ring of Troth) were from the wiccan priesthood and continue to practice as wiccan which may have helped with the generalized acceptance of reincarnation as modern heathen.

However, *correlation does not mean causation*. There seems to be a large enough number of modern heathens who never had anything to do with wicca or any other alternative or new age religion but who also accept reincarnation as Afterlife, and it appears to be too simple to say that these folks were simply caught up in the 'reincarnation fad.'

Jordsvín (aka Patrick Buck), a popular internet figure and writer on heathen topics, maintains

"Nor do we neglect the Goddesses, who are equal in power and holiness to the Gods: Frigga, wife of Odin, seen under such guises as Allmother (feminine counterpart of Odin), the all-knowing but silent Goddess, and many other aspects; Freya, Goddess of fertility, love, magic and war; Idunna, Goddess of renewal (Eostre/Ostara, an Anglo-Saxon and German Goddess who provided the name for "Easter" may be the same Goddess); *Hela, who rules over the place between death and rebirth (most of us Heathens believe in some form of rebirth or reincarnation) [my italics]*; Nerthus, the Mother Earth Goddess mentioned in Tacitus' book Germania (98 C.E.), and many

others. This should lay to rest erroneous notions, popularly held in the larger Pagan community, that Asatru is "patriarchal" or a "testosterone rush." We also revere the spirits of nature (landvaet-tir) and various guardian spirits, such as the Disir and Alfar (Elves). Our Gods are friendly, practical, dependable and approachable. They basically ask only that we honor them and in doing so live our lives in such a way that it helps uphold cosmic harmony, preserve life in Midgard, the world of which we are apart, and help life and the Universe continue to evolve. Thus, Asatru is in a very real sense a nature or Earth religion. We are friends and co-workers of our Gods, whom we sometimes address as "Elder Kin." We are not their slaves, nor do we grovel before them. <sup>1</sup>

It should be noted that even though Jordsvín, himself, claims no relationship to the new age practice of wicca, his writing style and tone would indicate that he has a certain degree of *simpático* with new heathens coming from that arena.<sup>2</sup> Jordsvín's claim that "*most of us Heathens believe in some form of rebirth or reincarnation*" may, indeed, be correct. Most modern heathens who entered heathenry 1990 CE or later seem to at least accept the possibility.

Rather than pin the insertion of reincarnation into heathenry onto wicca, which does not appear to be proveable in any case, we believe the best place to look for the origin is most likely to be found in multiple places. The first scholarly discussion about reincarnation in ancient heathenry was probably Edred Thorsson's "Is Sigurðr Sigmundur 'aptrborinn'?"<sup>3</sup> Prior to this, very little was heard among modern heathens regarding reincarnation which, at the time, was regarded as an importation from wicca and had been generally frowned upon as a topic of conversation. In 1989, Thorsson had published *A Book of Troth*<sup>4</sup> and had devoted Chapter 18 to the topic *Rebirth* (the heading of the chapter). His conclusions were that

"at this point it must be stressed that in ancient times it was not believed that the personal consciousness, with memories intact, was reincarnated—only certain innate transpersonal powers and characteristics as well as certain obligations and weaknesses were. Also, it was not the free-form, arbitrary parlor-room version of 'reincarnation' where souls go flying off to distant parts of the globe to be reborn as Chinese or Polynesians."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>By Jordsvín, copyrighted and published at <http://realmagick.com/articles/17/2217.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Wicca concerns itself with heavily goddesses, being popular among feminists, and encourages a personal relationship with their primary deity, a composite *moon-earth goddess*, and the development of a quiet, peaceful, beautiful relationship with the 'Universal Being' which they deem *matronly*.

<sup>3</sup>Although the author cannot be certain at this point, and perhaps Stephen McNallan or Stephen Flowers could verify this, the author believes that this particular paper which appeared in the Ring Of Troth's journal *Idunna*, vol 4, no. 1 [1992] was a reworking of an earlier paper which appeared in the Ásatrú Free Assembly's *Runestone* either in the late 1970s or early 1980s.

<sup>4</sup>Thorsson, Edred *A Book of Troth*, 1989 [Llewellyn Publications; St. Paul, Minn.].

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.* p. 96.

His conclusion to the piece published 3 yrs. later in the RoT's *Iðunna* echos exactly the same sense of rebirth. In this essay/ article he discusses the 'arguments' often used to support an ancient Germanic belief in reincarnation, i.e. that of Sigurðr, Víðarr and Váli, Þórðr, Kolbeinn Túmason and also though not mentioned specifically 'the Helgi argument' where it is stated in English translations of the Elder Edda that Helgi was 'reborn' (the original words utilized were either *endrborinn* or *aptrborinn*).

"Fundamentally, the phrase of the Norse *Sigurðr saga*\* describes a process of *aptrburðr*\* in which the innate powers of Sigmundr are 'reborn' in his post-humous son.<sup>6</sup> This is evident in the relevant texts where we find that Sigurðr is able to ingest the venomous blood of Fáfnir after we have learned that *only* Sigmundr, and none of his sons, could perform this feat without harm. Thematically, similar myths (Víðarr and Váli) and saga figures (Þórðr, Kolbeinn Túmason, etc.) provide important analogs to this process. A wide range of cultural evidence, e.g. the Norse belief in rebirth<sup>7</sup> and/ or transference of entities (*hamingjur*, *fylgjur*, etc.) which carry certain powers from generation to generation, naming practices connected with this belief, and the importance of rites of passage in fulfilling this transference also support this view."<sup>8</sup>

In 2004, Thorsson republished an updated version of *The Book of Troth* privately but no words of the chapter cited were changed. Over the course of 16 years, Edred Thorsson stills maintains the same position held since the early 1980s and his writings cannot be held accountable for the belief in reincarnation as it is currently accepted by Jordsvín's reckoning. Looking through the RoT's *Our Troth*<sup>9</sup> such a belief is not emphasized but is discussed in the same manner as Thorsson's article; however, H. R. Ellis-Davidson, a popular British interpreter of Norse Mythology writes at length about the Norse concept of soul, and its movement after death. In the conclusion to her *Road to Hel*, Ellis-Davidson mentions that that there seems to be two broad categories of an Afterlife among the Norse that of dying into the realm of the gods, which as we have shown above, now seems to have been rather late developing and may have been more a poetic metaphor than actual practice, or into a generalized land of the dead. She, like others, has remarked on the ability of a soul to move in a way which seems independent of the body such as in dreaming, or conscious 'faring-forth' as described in Chapter 10 of the Ynglinga Saga (see Section 2.0.3 below) but beyond this has not made any hard and fast conclusion that the soul is separate

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<sup>6</sup>Thorsson remarks that 'Sigurðr saga' refers to the collection of Norse and German materials which relate to Sigurðr and that the word 'aptrburðr' exists in ON as an adverb created from a past participle only. In this sense 'aptrborinn' is related to and cognate with the ModG 'nachgeboren' which translates into modern English as 'post-humously.'

<sup>7</sup>Thorsson obviously is talking not about 'reincarnation' but rather 'rebirth of entities.'

<sup>8</sup>Thorsson, *Iðunna*, Vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 9-10.

<sup>9</sup>Gundarsson, Kveldulfr Hagan, editor, *Our Troth*, 1993 [published privately by the Ring of Troth]. Most of the 711 page book can be found online at <http://www.thetroth.org/>.

from the body and seems to deny that true transmigration of the soul is related to ancient heathen belief. To see the development of reincarnation, we must look elsewhere.

In 2004, Swain Wodening, who has been associated with modern heathenry since the late 1980s, published *Hammer of the Gods: Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Paganism in Modern Times*. Wodening informs us in the Forward that the “book was not, and is not intended to be an academic work. While it is based in the lore of the ancient Germanic religion, as that religion is a living one, much is taken from [his] own personal experiences as well as the lore.”<sup>10</sup> In his his section on ‘Rebirth,’ there exists a possible explanation for the reincarnation phenomenon which cannot be attributed to Wodening, himself, since this author had encountered the argument over a period of 10 years on various email lists.

“There is some evidence that the ancient Norse believed in reincarnation of sorts. There is no evidence that the Anglo-Saxon tribes shared this belief, however *the lack of evidence does not mean that they did not*. Indeed it would be odd if they did not share this belief with the Norse.”

He then discusses the the same two forms cited from Thorsson’s research. Not to remove any of Wodening’s documentation from context, we wish to focus on only the italicized phrase above.

The clause “*the lack of evidence does not mean that they did not*” in logic is called a ‘false premise,’ i.e. it means “there is no information available” and, therefore, logically cannot be used as an argument to prove the existence of anything. In the context Wodening utilized above, it could be construed that he is giving a stamp of ‘OK’ onto the idea that a modern AS belief in reincarnation is acceptable in spite of the fact there is no evidence for it. There is no evidence for any form of ‘reincarnation’ in any branch of the heathen Germanic worldview in literary record or in archeological record. Beyond the post-humous transference of of certain powers, taboos, obligations as mentioned above as indicated by the ancient and modern forms of the original words from the texts used to support such an idea, i.e. *aptrborinn/ endrborinn* (ModG *nachgeboren*), the whole concept of ‘rebirth’ is non-existent in any Germanic text and is probably little more than a very poor translation (of a word) for a richly complex concept that is distinctly Germanic heathen.

It is our opinion that although the phrase, “*the lack of evidence does not mean that they did not,*” is a common excuse used by the non-scientific to justify actions, it probably should be dropped from all research being done by modern heathens. As a premise to generate argument or proof it is disallowed in any university level paper because it undermines the credibility of the entire paper. It is such a common excuse to justify personal desires that its destructive qualities upon arguments is often overlooked. Wodening’s argument ‘sounds’ completely logical because a large number of folks obviously want to believe in reincarnation,

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<sup>10</sup>Wodening, Swain (aka Berry Canote) *Hammer of the Gods: Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Paganism in Modern Times*, 2003 [Pub. by Anglesexisce Ealdriht; Little Elm, TX], p. 3.

but when the argument is presented in a slightly modified fashion the ill-logic is revealed.

There is no evidence that the Anglo-Saxon tribes shared this belief in UFOs and martians, however *the lack of evidence does not mean that they did not believe in UFOs or martians*. Indeed it would be odd if they did not share this belief with the others.

Using the same logic, i.e. the 'false premise,' the above sounds completely ridiculous. The logical or illogical structure is this:

1. There is no evidence that Mary killed John's dog.
2. There is nothing to show that she *did not* kill John's dog.
3. Therefore, it is OK for *some* people to accept that she killed John's dog (so long as they wish to believe the accusation *in spite of the lack of evidence*).

Absolutely, nothing has been proved or even suggested as possible proof other than the fact that *one cannot prove a negative or the non-existence of something utilizing the lack of evidence*. One cannot for example, 'prove the use of electric mixers by the ancient heathen Norse' by saying that "there is no evidence that they did not" nor 'prove' a belief in 'reincarnation' by the ancient heathen Norse by saying "there is no evidence to the contrary."

This should not be construed as denigration of Wodening's research which is very good in this author's opinion. It should also be remembered that his entire book was written as an intended to be an extended 'appeal to the masses' which in argumentative essays is generally considered to be a false premise and in itself cannot be used to prove anything either. Wodening wrote a 'popular' book and we feel that it can be left at that. We believe that Wodening was merely echoing *those arguments commonly used in email lists, newsgroups, etc.*

That 'rebirth' or 'reincarnation' in heathenry is *directly* the result of the conspiratorial efforts of wiccans is probably weak. That the original impetus came from the expansion and spread of new age concepts such as reincarnation through the 1970s and 1980s seems more likely and many of these concepts represented a good portion of the common modern worldview as being part of 'alternative religion.' Around that time, there was a large population moving over to heathenry from wicca, and with the bond between alternative religion/reincarnation already in place, the acceptance of reincarnation as part of heathenry was almost inevitable in spite of the fact that the historical precidence is missing. This general acceptance coupled with the false premise that *"the lack of evidence does not mean that the ancient Norse did not believe in reincarnation,"* which this author had experienced as a primary argument for the existence of reincarnation since 1993-94 in various internet fora, seems to indicate that although wicca may not have been in conspiracy to undermine the historical basis of heathenry, it was in fact probably the one of the originators by its spread in popularity through the 1960s through the 1980s. The promotion efforts, however, seem to have come from heathens themselves by their

(regardless of their spiritual background) buying into the poorly constructed arguments and passing them on as fact rather than questioning the validity of the argument.

## 2 Historical Views

### 2.1 Difficulties Researching the Past

Now, we will present what *is* known about the Germanic worldview. There is a counter-argument against the reconstruction of the Germanic which commonly appears on email list and bulletin boards; the argument runs thus:

“It is completely impossible to know exactly what was accepted by the ancient Germanic peoples as part of their worldview. There are no living examples and the ancient heathens left no real records of their own. Everything that we know about that period of time has been *translated* and *interpreted* for us by the Christians who picked and chose what would be preserved, how it would be preserved, and in many cases, as part of their own propaganda machine to further their own cause. Anyone believing that they are re-creating the worldview of the ancient heathen is mistaken.”

There are some errors in the above arguments, however. First, heathens *did* preserve much of their worldview, albeit at times unconsciously, in a very careful fashion. The archaeological record is as good as any written document for the preservation of facts. So important and so well preserved is the archeological record that it is used to verify written records. The main differences between approaching heathenry from the written records and the archaeological record is that the primary written records pertaining to heathenry, i.e. the sagas and poetry, do not have to necessarily represent the truth and come *pre-interpreted*. The New Methods for research of the Viking era call for a cooperative effort between a large number of fields:

1. “interdisciplinary co-operation, extending outside university departments if possible towards collaborative enquiry with the whole of society;
2. vaster and vaster accumulations of evidence ‘preferably in machine readable form,’ using Automated Data Processing;
3. international co-operation on all levels; and
4. more rigorous application of more standardized standards of research, publication and training.”<sup>11</sup>

Some of the research fields which Christiansen lists as being currently involved in Viking era research are

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<sup>11</sup>Christiansen, Eric *The Norsemen of the Viking Age*, 2002, [Blackwell Publishers; Oxford, UK], p.323.

- Paleoclimatology
- Paleoarchaeology
- Paleobiology
- Paleobotany
- Paleoentomology
- Landscape archaeology
- Various dating procedures such as tephrochronology, accelerator mass spectrometry, as well as older carbon -14 dating, DNA sampling as well as blood-typing, and computerized correspondence analysis.
- older fields of study like linguistics, philology, runology, straight archaeology, marine archaeology as well as the oldest literary studies of sagas, poetry, etc.<sup>12</sup>

Up to ca. 2000 CE much of the reconstruction of the modern heathen 'religion' has relied upon the reading of the sagas and eddaic poetry and imitating the actions found therein, but this is just the tip problematic iceberg.

Ásatrú in the USA started to organize itself under Stephen McNallan in 1973. The original thought by most at the time was that "if we reconstruct the heathen religion, we will regain our noble spiritual heritage much in the same manner as those of American Indian or African rootstock." It was a noble effort which by luck and the perseverance of the adherents to the Ása-faith has now lasted more than 30 years. Not everything has been a failure by a long shot. Groups and organizations have come and gone including the original Ásatrú Free Assembly, and some groups continue to meet annually for the modern re-creation of the ancient Norse blót. New information regarding the modern version of heathenry has been written down and much of it is available on the internet either for free or at a nominal cost barely covering the printing of the material: the concerted effort continues.

Along with new material which is rarely if ever held up to research standards has come general misconceptions which affects how the heathen worldview is applied in the 21st century. In this paper, we are discussing the Germanic heathen sense of an Afterlife, but there are misconceptions at a far more fundamental level than the specific area of the Afterlife. The idea that "if we reconstruct the heathen religion, we will regain our noble spiritual heritage" is a major misconception which affects the reconstruction efforts even before research begins.

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<sup>12</sup>The days of simply studying the sagas and eddaic poetry have been long gone. For a detailed explanation of what is happening currently (since around 1960), the reader is referred to Eric Christiansen's work, Appendix A, cited above. The focus now is no longer, as in the days of Gerald Gardner, piecing together bits of literary evidence to 'create' an alternative religion, but rather in recreating the ancient heathen worldview based on as much historical fact as possible. Simple studies of the eddaic material are no longer acceptable among modern heathens and will be questioned in any forum either by historians of the particular era or by heathens themselves who have taken a vested interest in reconstructionism.

The word 'religion' and the underlying concepts are foreign to the European north. During the Viking Era, religion could not be separated out from any other tradition of the small community. The practice of law, government, religious observance, birth, death, house-building, land-taking, communal sense of ethics, the practice of medicine, redistribution of wealth, adoption and relief for the disadvantaged, the relationships of social/ economic classes between each other were all bound so tightly together that prior to the coming of Christianity none could be separated from the rest. To speak of Germanic 'religion' then separately from the rest, one must necessarily utilize the same mental constructs brought up from the south by Christian missionaries. In other words, to reconstruct the *Germanic religion* and put it into practice, is in itself practicing the methods of the monks and bishops who first brought the idea to the north from Greece via Rome.<sup>13</sup>

There are other basic assumptions which cause problems as well. Some of these assumptions are not in the modern heathen's approach to research but actually stem back so far as to underlie the very reasons why the individual became *heathen* in the first place.

1. Although it is true that there are now children and a few grandchildren who were born into heathen families, the fact remains that close to 100% of all heathens have self-converted to heathenry, and to do so certain frames of mind were present as impetus; some of these are as follows:
  - (a) A general dissatisfaction, and a feeling of being spiritually unfulfilled under their default religion, usually Christianity.
  - (b) Dissatisfaction with how their default religion has interacted with the rest of the world spiritually, socially, politically, and ecologically.
  - (c) Feelings of incompleteness in the areas of tradition, culture, and personal family history.
  - (d) In the case of new-age alternative religions having been the default, a sense of 'fakeness,' 'living a lie,' or of artificiality.
  - (e) In the case of another ethnic religion (Red-Road, Yoruba, Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism), there are the above in addition to the feeling that one is embracing the wrong ethnic culture.
  
2. Because one already has a basic worldview, certain so-called 'universalisms' are usually part and parcel to the default worldview/ religion. In general these are
  - (a) there is, in fact, such a thing as 'religion' for *every* culture;

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<sup>13</sup>James Russell in his *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, 1994, [Oxford University Press; New York, NY and Oxford, UK] covers this topic nicely over the course of several chapters. For an interesting overview of how tightly bound together were all aspects of the Germanic culture and how they necessarily varied from region to region the reader is referred to Peter Foote and David M. Wilson's *The Viking Achievement*, 1970, [Sidgwick & Jackson; Great Civilizations Series; London, UK]



- (b) there is a soul or spirit which
    - i. is separable and distinct from the physical body,
    - ii. is on an evolutionary path to perfection,
    - iii. will be rewarded or punished after death based on overall performance while 'living' even if the process of reward/ punishment is furthering or not furthering one's evolution;
  - (c) there are spiritual beings which are there to serve man by helping him towards some form of enlightenment;
  - (d) there are ceremonies, when done correctly, which will 'pull the individual further down the path of perfection;'
  - (e) there are gods, who although they are at or have reached a certain level, are willing to have a personal relationship with the individual, in order to guide and assist him towards the 'reward' after death.
3. Because these are 'universalisms,' one feels justified in using them as *pre-conceptions* prior to research the 'new religion,' and *vindicated* when 'evidence' has been found.

Utilizing only the 3 points and 13 subpoints above, when #3 has finally been met one feels fully converted to the heathen 'religion,' but, in reality, one has been duped by one's own logic. Because he has fallen for the above 'universalisms,' he has successfully generated a new, and possibly unique, *syncretism* of the dominant worldview with Norse heathen overtones, colorings, and detail—he cannot possibly be lead to Norse heathenry in this fashion. The errors are not many but the flaws are fundamental rendering any results inconsequential.

A primary rule in logical research is that *data collection must be fair and representative of the population being sampled*. It sounds simple: one goes to a barley field, collects 10% randomly, and throws it all into a large tub to investigate the sampling for various consistencies and inconsistencies. However, when a modern heathen approaches the corpus of evidence from the Viking era, there is a *preconceived agenda*; hypotheses are formulated prior to *sampling* and the researcher. These pre-conceived notions, these 'universalisms,' lead one *not* to a random sampling which is representative of the population being studied but rather to *justifications for preconceptions*. To this end, 'justifications' are often anecdotes removed from their original contexts; poor translations of texts often allow one to mold the meaning to suit one's preconceptions; one is able to 'select' a sample rather than grabbing a random one representative of the entire population. To bypass this problem of justification/ vindication, in general, a researcher will design a sampling procedure which, by plan, is to avoid prejudice.

Once a sample is collected and sifted for patterns, there may be enough significant data to formulate a hypothesis. The heathen attempting to walk into this area of research, just by his presence in heathenry itself, implies *pre-formulated* hypotheses: these are the 'universalisms' outlined above. The 'universalisms' are not general laws or axioms; they are patterns based on personal experience

limited to a single worldview. They are, in fact, hypotheses, and, in research, a fundamental error is to generate the hypothesis *before* random sampling and analysis of the data collected because as above the sampling procedure will sway either in favor of retaining or rejecting the hypothesis.

Of course, there are errors committed in interpretation as well. Some of these were mentioned above in Section #1. These errors will be revisited below.

## 2.2 The Heathen view of 'Soul'

Early attempts to convert heathens seem to have initially 'sparked the Viking Age.'<sup>14</sup> These pre-Viking Age communities demonstrated a mindset or a worldview which seems at times to have stood in direct contrast to Christianity and at other times was simply *different*. In the present day, the common heathen mindset regarding the ownership of 'soul' is simply 'different' than what Christians are teaching as doctrine at the beginning of the third millennium of the common era.

Rudolf Simek and others have pointed out that much of modern heathenry has utilized the Elder Edda for its most basic foundation. Furthermore, this set of poems dating mainly from after the time of Conversion has been used as the standard for interpreting material from the the corpus of sagas as well as archeological evidence. The problem with this approach lies in the fact that the eddaic poetry was composed more as political commentary than poetry to preserve history helping to spread Christianity while at the same time serving to undermine the strength of heathenry through poetic rhetoric. For example, the *Völuspá*, a poem which outlines Norse cosmology from the creation of Middle-Earth through the end-times is comprised of approximately 65 stanzas. Most researchers agree that in all probability the first 27 stanzas represent heathen thought prior to the Conversion. At stanza 28, however, the *seeress* begins to provide the listener, in this case, Óðinn, with her views for the future which she received while "sitting out."<sup>15</sup> What follows is a monologue which combines obvious Christian references with classical poetic images with the end result being the almost total annihilation of the northern Germanic pantheon along with their creations. Those who survive are stripped of power and are placed in a position of subordination to the "great godhead" who will sit in Judgment, settle all strife and rule over the unified world always. The classical poetic and the Christian overtones cannot be overlooked for it is these which provide the modern researcher insight into the composer's actual intent. The dating of the poem coincides with a period of time when political pressure to convert to Christianity was coming out of Norway to the point where Icelanders were blocked from entering seaports unless baptised. Politically, the move was towards Christianity and the *Völuspá* reflects this. Much of modern heathenry, then, is based Viking Age Christian religio-political propaganda. Few modern

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<sup>14</sup>The attack on Lindisfarne the late 700s is often viewed by historians being the event which officially marks the beginning of the Viking Age.

<sup>15</sup>A term commonly used to mean "a Norse form of a sooceror's seánce."

heathen groups have made any attempt to place the poetry into historical perspective, and, as a consequence, the soul-lore of modern heathenry has been based largely on how Christians at the time of the Conversion saw heathens and their worldview rather than on historical evidence.

Early Christian doctrine taught that everything including the human soul emanated from God and that true salvation was to be achieved through 1) conscious acknowledgement of the fact that God owned the soul by promising to give the soul back to God through a series of Sacraments, and 2) acting in a manner which indicated that God was the Supreme owner by imitating the selfless acts first demonstrated by the son of God, Jesus, who came to earth to teach man how to behave appropriately according to this doctrine. It was very improbable that such a doctrine made any kind of sense to the average heathen of the time, though.

“Detailed investigations since the beginning of the 20th century have led to the insight that it is extremely unlikely, at least for the late heathen period,<sup>16</sup> that the north Germanic peoples had a dualistic belief, i.e. a distinct division between the decomposing body of the dead person and the further existence of his soul.<sup>17</sup> The extant sources suggest that the concept rather was that of the ‘living corpse’ which lived on the gravemound. Although the saga literature (written 200-500 years after Christianization) is otherwise extremely unreliable for heathen beliefs, these sources do show unanimity, particularly with regard to these concepts, so widely divergent from Christian thought. Admittedly, they may be strongly influenced by the folklore of Medieval Iceland. Nevertheless, we may assume that the concept does indeed reflect heathen beliefs.”<sup>18 19</sup>

The heathen first hearing about the doctrine of dualism must have thought the Christian leaders/ teachers to be very confused perhaps even mad. For the heathen, as evidenced in both literature and burial practice as well as philology, the soul was the animating force of the body and could not therefore be sepa-

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<sup>16</sup>Most of the evidence available regarding belief in an Afterlife stems from the late heathen period, primarily from literary sources but also from the archeological record as well as the study of linguistics.

<sup>17</sup>Note the intentional sifting of the data from the entire body of sagaic literature as the population sampled.

<sup>18</sup>Simek, Rudolf, trans. by Angela Hall, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 1993 [D. S. Brewer; Cambridge, UK], p. 57

<sup>19</sup> *A couple of things are important to note about the above quoted paragraph. First, the researchers utilized the entire body of sagaic literature as the sample of their population, i.e. beliefs regarding an afterlife. Secondly, there is no attempt to hide the fact that the sagas themselves may have been affected by Medieval Icelandic thought; the fact is incorporated into the analysis. In other words, the researchers by their sampling design were required to address these features as well. Lastly, by addressing these features as opposed to selectively ignoring them, they are able to finally conclude that in spite of them, the sampled population most likely represents heathen-thought to a great degree. Note the difference in not only conclusion but also in tone between Simek’s summary of 20th century research and Jordsvín’s conclusions as laid out in Section #1.2.*

rated from the body. The dead were interred in almost all cases,<sup>20</sup> usually with grave goods. Although cremation was a fairly common practice off and on (its practice seems to have varied according to the dominant local cult), the bones and ashes were still buried in the earth, preferably the family gravemound. The origins of cremation among the northern Germanic peoples are a mystery and theories as to origin of the practice are many and all are purely speculative. In the later Viking Age, burning was a common heathen method for immobilizing a revenant, i.e. a dead man whose 'soul' was still powerful enough that the dead man was leaving the grave, usually at night, and was molesting the community. Cremation, then could have been viewed as a preventative measure—the soul remained with the immobile bones and ashes. Cremation was also very common among warriors and their cult practices and may have been initially viewed as an efficient way to compress a corpse so that it could be easily transported to the familial gravemound. In any case, every attempt was made to inter the body/ soul in the family grave.

Souls roaming without their bodies was a common concept was not unknown. The phenomenon shows up in dreams during sleep, and in the practice of *seið* as described in the *Ynglinga Saga*.

“Óthin could shift his appearance. When he did so, his body would lie there as if he were asleep or dead; but he, himself, in an instant, in the shape of a bird or animal, a fish or a serpent, went to distant countries on his or other men’s errands.”<sup>21</sup>

The above would *seem* to contradict the results reported by Simek; however, since the soul is never truly separated from the body of *Óthin*, it does not represent a contradiction but rather confirms the apparent heathen idea that *a soul’s true home is the body of the individual*. In fact, there numerous instances of apparitions (usually in animal form, but sometimes human especially in later folklore) which are never really separated from the bodies of either the living or the dead. Although these tales represent quaint distractions from the idea that the soul was intimately and inextricably connected to the body, a belief in the concept of dualism as taught during this modern era is not necessary to explain them, nor does there appear to be any inconsistency with Simek, Schreuer, Neckel, and Klare’s findings.<sup>22</sup>

Although such soul concepts may seem rather strange to the average Westerner in the year 2005, the fact is that a body/ soul complex is very common in the world where indigenous peoples retain their aboriginal worldviews. The concept of non-dualism ('the body *is* the soul') is very tenacious and does not seem

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<sup>20</sup>The exception to the rule was when the body could not be recovered as in the case of drowning. At this point body and soul belonged to Rán, a goddess of giant extraction, who ruled over the sea-dead.

<sup>21</sup>Hollander, Lee *Heimskringla: The History of the Kings of Norway*, 1964 [University of Austin Press; Austin, TX] for the American-Scandinavian Foundation, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup>Rudolf Simek mentions these three researchers who are listed in his bibliography. The reader is referred to *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* for information regarding sources.

to have disappeared easily on the one hand, and, on the other, where Christianity has moved into an area dominated by an indigenous worldview resulting in a syncretistic belief system such as among South and North American or African tribes, the non-dualistic concept, i.e. that of the soul inextricably bound to the corpse, seems to have continued on rather comfortably, side-by-side with the afterlife concepts of the new religion. This also appears to have been the case in northern Europe continuing on even into the German/ Scandinavian settled areas of the rural USA until well into this past century.

Research has provided us with fairly concrete evidence that the the Germanic heathen of the Viking Age did not hold to a belief in dualism, a concept which filtered into the north rather slowly and which has taken almost an entire millennium to take hold especially in the rural areas. To be able to discuss the Germanic heathen's concepts of life after death, the meaning of death, and exactly how the Germanic heathen *saw* the interplay between life and death fitting into their overall view of the universe, it is advantageous to drop the concept of dualism. Using the foreign concept to explain life after death is, in essence, using Christianity or New Age spiritual philosophy as the standard for explanation. In other words, explaining how heathenry appears through the eyes of the Christian. Such has already been done since the time of the saga writers and offers the modern reconstructionist absolutely no insight to the Germanic heathen's worldview.

### 2.3 The Heathen Concept of 'Patron-Gods'

The Christian doctrine of 'giving one's soul back to God,' so that one can receive special personalized favors must have appeared ludicrous or as a perversion to those holding to the concept that the soul resides with the body. Prior to the coming of Christianity, to force the soul out of the gravemound would have only been done in extreme cases where the *draugr* was haunting or harrassing the community. There are numerous examples of this not only in sagas like the Eyrbyggja Saga and Gisli's Saga but also in later folklore. The process of ridding the community of a 'soul' meant that the 'soul,' i.e. the *animated corpse*, was raising havoc in the community and that it was a matter of necessity. For the Germanic heathen, retaining the souls of ancestors in the familial gravemound was seen as building the family's foundation of 'luck providers,' especially if those interred had been lucky in life. Emptying the gravemound of souls would have been deemed a disservice, at best, and a death sentence at the worst. Here, then is the heathen's logic:

1. The process of giving one's soul to the God of the Christians for special favors or personal salvation received during life is, in a sense, the same process that is described in the sagaic literature as an exorcism, a death after death, where the body is removed, decapitated, and burned with the ashes scattered on water, i.e. outside the earth of the family mound: the soul, i.e. the ancestor, is no longer available to the family/ community as a natural resource for luck, wisdom and prosperity. If the view of exorcism

during the heathen period was to rid the community of a 'ghost'<sup>23</sup>, a minor extension of logic leads us to the idea that voluntarily separating one's soul and giving it away even to the God of the Christian dooms one not only to remain separated from the soul's true home, i.e. *the family grave/ the corpse* but to place it into 'slavery' as well.

2. From the heathen's point of view, special favors were granted to communities by gods and powerful men such as dead kings. This was ultimately the purpose of the communal ritual sacrifice. In the early Germanic worldview, an individual's role was to support and defend the honor and integrity of both family and community. Selfish acts such as stealing or hoarding were considered to be despicable acts.

The Germanic heathens were a clannish people in the same manner as their cousins, the Celts, Slavs and Balts, and purely selfish acts were not tolerated well. From this mindset, gaining a personal relationship with a god so that one could obtain special favors in life and personal salvation after death had to have also been viewed as selfish disregard for the sanctity of family and community.

Vilhelm Grönbech in *Kultur und Religion der Germanen* spends much time defining and describing this worldview in such a way that one is struck by how far modern Anglo-American worldview has moved itself away from its heathen Germanic predecessor.

"If ever this straightforward simplicity, that sought its rallying point in things of common human interest, were justified in any case, it would be in regard to the Germanic peoples. "We find here a community based upon general unity, mutual self-sacrifice and self-denial, and the social spirit. A society, in which every individual, from birth to death, was bound by consideration for his neighbour. The individuals in this community show in all their doings that they are inspired by one passion: the welfare and honour of their kin; and none of the temptations of the world can move them even for a moment to glance aside. They say themselves, that this passion is love. What more natural then, than that we, who from our own lives know love and its power, should begin with what we have in common with these people we are considering? Given this agreement on the essential point, all that appears strange must surely become simple and comprehensible." <sup>24</sup>

And later when talking of the 'venerated dead,'

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<sup>23</sup>The *draugr* is often translated into modern English as a ghost lending to further confusion. Technically the correct English translation would be *revenant*, 'an animated corpse.' The misunderstanding is understandable, however, since the concept of dualism has long been generally accepted as a 'universalism.'

<sup>24</sup>Grönbech, Vilhelm, trans. by William Worster and Vilhelm Grönbech, *The Culture of the Teutons*, Vol. I, p. 24-25. Reprinted by Ballantrae-reprint through <http://www.ballantrae-reprint.com>.

“And that which was the free man’s mark of nobility, his ‘gladness,’ went with his luck into the higher existence (*i.e.* ‘into the family gravemound’ B. L). One might hear the dead man singing from his harrow or his ship about his wealth and his renown, in verses such as that known to have been sung by the barrow-dweller Asmund of Langaholt. This distinguished man had been buried in his ship, and the family had given with thoughtful care had given him a faithful thrall to share the grave. but this company proving by no means to his taste, he begged to have the grizzler taken out. And then he was heard with the proud boastfulness of life: ‘Now, I alone man the ship; room better suits the battle-wont than crowding of base company. I steer my ship and this will long be in the minds of men.’”<sup>25</sup>

And in speaking of the ‘luck’ which flowed from the familial gravemound Grönbech says that

“a man, then, died as his power of life enabled him. The great man of luck slid with a little bump across the reef, and sailed on. Inferiors, poor folk, might find themselves stranded [in life], to sink and to disappear. He who had a great store of soul could, according to human calculations, live forever; the poor in soul peril of using up his stock in this world.”<sup>26</sup>

Luck, in the fashion of a fluid, was expected to flow out from the grave back to the living descendents so long as the dead were venerated. The system is simple and straight forward but is, also very difficult to comprehend in the year 2005 CE after many centuries of education in the foreign concepts of dualism and reward/ punishment for the soul after death. The Germanic heathen’s view of life and death was simplicity in itself.

According to what is known about social organization in the Scandinavian communities as well as the northern half of Germany, Scotland with its associated island communities, and the Faroes during the Viking era, the individual was viewed, with notable exceptions for those who stood out as heroes, as being but a part of a family-complex and this complex was viewed as being the smallest single, indivisible unit of an entire community. This can be best illustrated by the legal codes of the time which held that if an individual committed a crime, the family was held ultimately responsible and was subject to community judgment. On the other hand, if an individual committed a crime against another family member, unless the commission of the crime affected the entire community, it was held to be a family problem. In the case of the murder of another family member, for example, *wergild*,<sup>27</sup> could not be legally enforced by the community; there was, consequently, no way to restore honor or frith.

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* Vol 1, p. 317

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 321.

<sup>27</sup> *Wergild* was a payment of a fine related to the *worth* of the individual to the community. Some legal codes, such as the Anglo-Saxon were very specific to handle the payment for individual body parts lost in a dual, for example, from a single finger all the way up to the loss of life. Every individual had some *worth* to a community to some degree and within the

Returning back to the topic at hand, regarding the concept of a spiritual patron, although generally considered to be imprecise data to a large degree, it is known particularly from place-name studies that different cults dominated in specific areas at specific times. It is also known, particularly from sagaic literature, that certain families were devoted to specific gods. This family then functioned as the official intercessor for the entire community and at regular intervals (probably depending on the economic basis of the community as well as by community agreement) the family sacrificed to the specific god.

The role of each person was fairly well delineated within the community. The individual conducting the sacrifice was called the *blótsmaðr*. According to Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson's research regarding the history of his native Iceland, the *goði* was the official elected by the district to oversee the sacrifice and make sure that it met all specifications. Normally, an individual was attached to a specific, usually local, cult headed up by a family whose specialty was to sacrifice according to community-wide accepted terms and who, at least in Iceland, was then overseen by an elected official. Families attended the blót who then consequently received the blessing of the particular god. Individual beliefs were relatively insignificant.

The concept of a 'personal patron' only shows up in *Viga-Glúms Saga*<sup>28</sup> and since the saga itself seems to have been written late and primarily for a Christian audience, the idea of a *personal patron* must be viewed with suspicion. The concept of a 'personal patron' certainly does not appear to be consistent with the heathen worldview of the Viking Age and because of this, could, and probably should, be regarded as a Christian interpretation of that particular aspect of the heathen worldview. Social protocol was that those with the fewest social ties were those of the thrall class—in more modern terms, a class of landless, uneducated people whose family has not distinguished itself; those with the finest social ties, were families who had distinguished themselves above peers, understandably these would be 'leaders' in any field of expertise important to the community. The two closest then to the community patron would have been the equivalent of the local king, who held the 'luck of the entire community in his hand, and the family of the *blótsman*.

One of the most common examples from the sagaic literature is that of Thorolf Mostur-Beard who was a dedicated *blótsman* Thor. However, the use of Thorolf in this manner of argument shows little regard or understanding for who and what Thorolf was to his community.

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heathen worldview depending upon the tribe and clan such a value could be determined by general agreement at the time of the official hearing of the case or could be predetermined as among the Anglo-Saxons of heathen Britain. One of the worst punishments enforced by the community for the commission of a crime was *outlawry* which essentially nullified the *worth* of an individual by absolving itself from enforcing the payment of *wergild* which basically meant that the criminal could be killed by anyone without fear of legal reprisal! Protecting individual and, therefore, family honor remained a traditional primary concern until only recently.

<sup>28</sup>Essentially, all other examples which exist are those of 'familial/ community patrons,' i.e. the patron of the local *blótsman*. Even the discussion which takes place in *Viga-Glúms Saga* can be interpreted with either concept.



## 2.4 The Heathen Concept Death into the Gravemound

While Simek in *Religion und Mythologie der Germanen* lists only four after death destinations

1. the gravemound,
2. Hel,
3. Valhalla, and
4. with Rán,

Eric Christiansen in his *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* lists 'seven lives beyond death, or at least beyond the tomb:

1. living with with the Gods,
2. Valhalla,
3. Hel,
4. under the sea,
5. an earthly land of the dead,
6. with the poor, over the stream, and
7. reincarnation.

Neither historian seems convinced, however, that anything but the gravemound has any real practical application in heathenry from the Bronze up to well into the Viking Age and there is suggestion that among early Christians, the gravemound was considered to be the resting place of the soul/ corpse combination, there to lie in state until after the final battle of John's *Revelations*, when Jeho-

vah would allow the souls to be released into heaven.<sup>29</sup> Bo Gräsland<sup>30</sup> suggests that during the first millennium there existed only two primary beliefs: that in the soul being bound to the corpse in the grave, and that which was influenced by Christianity, Islam, but also the shamanistic beliefs of the Finns-Balts-Sami. The former seems to have been held by the northern Germanic heathen until the late Viking Age in the Scandinavian north. It should be noted the Finno-Baltic border-zones of Scandinavia were also highly affected by the shamanistic practices of their neighbors.<sup>31</sup> The large amount of variation in funerary practice in conjunction with the shifts in the practice over time would certainly suggest the the northern Germanic heathen heathen was open to variations regarding getting the corpse safely into the ground but beyond that there is little indication that their Afterlife concepts were also so affected. There is a fair degree of consistency from the time of the Bronze Age up to the point of Conversion in terms of how the grave was outfitted for the dead. Among those harboring a shamanistic worldview, where the soul was either free to wander the wilderness or was transferred to a point near home as a type of guardian, the body was left to be disposed of out in nature and grave goods found in these graves is very sparse. Christiansen lines the diversity issue out:

“After death lay another future to provide for. Some spent their all on it; according to Wulfstan, in the OE Orosius, there were Balts among whom the dead man’s possessions went entirely on drinking and games at the wake over a month or two; any left over were divided into prizes to be won by strangers in a horse race and the clothes and the weapons were created with the body, which had been ‘ripening’ meanwhile. This was not the way among the Norse, where

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<sup>29</sup>It is interesting to note that this early Christian concept is reflected in the *Völuspá* when the dead will be released from a common grave, i.e. Hel, and from a common heathen version of Hell, i.e. the *Ná strond (the shore of corpses)*. Several studies of this particular poem have shown many correlations with *Revelations*. Logically, the ‘correlations’ make perfectly good sense since Ólaf Tryggvasson had successfully imposed economic sanctions against heathen Iceland by blocking Norwegian ports to the trade ships of wealthy landowners essentially forcing their conversion to Christianity. Although it is estimated that 50%-80% of the population was still heathen at the time of the Conversion (officially in 1000 CE), the wealthy landowners, i.e. those in powerful positions, had become Christianized in a relatively short period of time, and these were also those who were able to commission poetry. *Völuspá* gives all appearance of a Christian poem which was written using native heathen elements, and resolves itself by visualizing the demise of the entire realm of heathenry. The last stanza *A down cometh to the doom of the world the great godhead which governs all.*

*Comes the darksome dragon flying  
Nidðögg, upward from the Níða Fells;  
he bears in his pinions as the plains he o’erflies,  
naked corpses: now he will sink* (from Hollander, p.13.)

implies that the Christian God will win out in the end and that the Æsir will now be under the new master.

<sup>30</sup>Grasland, Bo ‘Pre-historic Soul Beliefs’ 1994 in PPR, p.18-19.

<sup>31</sup>See Thomas DuBois’ *The Religions of the Viking Age* for a lengthy discussion of the effects that border zones had upon the northern Germanic heathen’s worldview especially in regards to health, medicine, oracles, and funerary practices.

sometimes rich deposits of worldly wealth were included both with the buried and the the burnt over this whole period, in patterns which vary greatly between graves, dates and districts. The rites of burial within Scandinavia were not recorded by Wulfstan or anyone else, and can only be reconstructed in part by archaeologists; but if their remains reflect concepts of death and life after death, it seems that there are many different opinions on the subject. This diversity appears in the later written sources, and inspired a memorable book by Hilda Ellis Davidson nearly sixty years ago; since *The Road to Hel* was 'A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse literature' there is no need to go into those sources here. Archaeology has confirmed the impression that rites varies, but their meaning in terms of life after death need not have reflected the variations closely; some may have been seen as better ways of getting to the same goal as the others."<sup>32</sup>

Rudolph Simek goes a little bit further in trying to define the actual process of moving from heathen concepts to what he calls the the 'religion of the late Viking Age.'

"The oldest conception of the Land of the Dead was most certainly the extension and continuation of in the grave, in particular, within the gravemound itself, and the representation as described above [in the text] is above all closely related to the legends of the dead kings under the mountain who lie in wait for their reawakening. In medieval Icelandic literature, scenes are depicted where the dead are feasting together in their gravemounds (*Gisla saga* 11, *Eyrbyggja saga* 11, *Njáls saga* 14). Whether the the tales of giants living and feasting within the mountain also belongs to this rather common folk-motif has been debated in which the diverse set of mountain and hill dwellers of the low mythology (elves, guardian spirits, and dwarves in all their various forms and from all spiritual worldviews relates back to this veneration of ancestors. Here also belongs the isolated incidences of offerings laid out for the dead. True that *Þorvalds Þáttr víðförla* is a relatively young text, but it shows well in which manner the relationship between the living and the dead could be perceived even well into Iceland's medieval period."<sup>33</sup>

Simek goes on to describe that which can be found sprinkled throughout Snorri's *Heimskringla* as well, i.e. how people reach an agreement with the buried dead that in exchange for offerings the dead in turn lend their luck and care to the farms of those leaving the offerings. The manner is very different than the typical approach of the Christian to their God in that this heathen form of spirituality differed very little from any other kind of business deal.

<sup>32</sup>Christiansen, Eric *The Norsemen in the Viking Age*, p.290.

<sup>33</sup>Simek, Rudolf *Religion und Mythologie der Germanen*, 2004, p. 207. Translated by the author.

The underlying logic of such offerings described in Simek,<sup>34</sup> Grönbech,<sup>35</sup> and Pentikäinen<sup>36</sup> is relatively simple:

Like any other business deal between families or between family members, the head of the household wishing to make the deal approaches the gravemound offers the deal and defines the conditions. Depending upon the conditions of the deal, either the 'payment,' i.e. the offering, or the 'job results' could come first. So long as each party holds up its end of the bargain, the deal is maintained.

In the case of the dead being a non-family member (such as a king, jarl, or dead neighbor), the deal remains conditional and may be broken off by either party; the case of the dead being a family member is somewhat more complex because the frith of the family must be maintained.

There is literary evidence that social protocol does not change while addressing the dead since the social rank at the time of death also has not declined.

Spirituality for the heathen was inextricable from the overall worldview, and as a consequence we have no evidence that 'any ceremony' in the sense of a Catholic Mass was performed while making the offerings, but significant evidence exists that social formalities regarding the ranks of the parties involved in the deal were strictly observed.

Such private offerings to ancestors and venerated leaders are well documented from the earliest descriptions of the Germanic heathen of all branches until well into the medieval period. The practice seems to have disappeared from the lives of those living in cities during the medieval period much more quickly than from those living in the more rural areas. This is understandable, however, when one considers that cities tend to foster a homogenized, mixed culture whereas the rural areas tend to remain conservatively monocultured.

This section starts out, though, discussing various realms of the dead and they must not be neglected for they make up much of what is commonly accepted by the general population regarding the Viking Age. Most children in the USA above the age of 10 yrs. have at least been exposed to the idea that 'heaven for the Norse viking' was Valhalla. On the other hand, few adults in spite of their educational level realize what the process of conversion entails in spite of the fact that most of the American Indian tribes between the Mississippi River and the western slopes of the North American Rockies are still undergoing conversion as well as the indigenous cultures of Canada, Central and South Americas. Additionally, most white middle and upper class adults of the USA

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<sup>34</sup>Simek, *Religion und Mythologie der Germanen*.

<sup>35</sup>Grönbech, *Kulture und Religion der Germanen*

<sup>36</sup>Pentikäinen, Juha 'The Dead without Status' in *Nordic Folklore*, 1989, edited by R. Kvideland & H. Sehmsdorf [University of Indiana Press; Indianapolis, IN], pp. 128-134.

have a very poor understanding of worldview and the persistence of one's native worldview even after being exposed to various other cultures/ worldviews.<sup>37</sup>

Depending on the group being asked, some will say that the Conversion was quick and brutal ("In 999 CE, Iceland was heathen, and in 1000 CE, it was Christian" or "St. Ólaf baptized over 5000 people in the river on one day before killing many of them at spear point!") or that it was fairly quick but pockets of pagans held on to the 'Old Religion' practicing in secret hidden from the prying eyes of the Inquisition and the civil courts. From what is known of the the Conversion in the north the process was very slow, lasting well over 700 yrs.<sup>38</sup> There was some brutality, of course, particularly with the Conversion of Norway, but for the most part religious conversion really represented changes in how regions were politically managed, i.e. new laws which reflected the Christian worldview were passed, and how one perceived the worldview, i.e. birth/ death, the meaning and purpose of life, the definition of society and social relationship etc. Most of the actual Conversion was slow, and for the most part, peaceful.

The process of conversion from one worldview to another in the case of northern Europe lasted over 35 generations and involved removing bits of the old heathen worldview by replacing it with another similar function or event. This process creates what is known as a *syncretism*, a hybrid religion combining seamlessly the old and the new. We know this to be part of the overall process because there are, in fact, many syncretisms alive and well within the borders of the USA. These would include Voudoun, Santería, Condomblé, Lacumba, the Native American Church, Rastafarianism many of the indigenous religions of the American Indian Reservations and Pueblos. There are literally hundreds of syncretisms all around the world some of them combining Christianity with the indigenous, some with Islam and the indigenous and others with Buddhism and the indigenous. For most of the 700 years of conversion in northern Europe, the indigenous Germanic religion existed as a syncretism, and this includes the period of time when the oldest skaldic and eddaic were recorded. The apparent 'Christian flavor' in many of the poems and sagas are really a by-product of syncretism. Simek presents this information in his *Religion und Mythologie der*

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<sup>37</sup>The last two papers by this author, *Germanic Spirituality* and *The Effects of Cultural Background on the Reconstruction of Ancient Worldviews*, dealt heavily with the fact that those from a monoculture or a homogenized mixed culture such as that found in the USA find it very difficult to 1) define the parameters of their own worldview, and 2) fail to see that understanding of another is done initially by interpreting or translating the foreign worldview through their own. The process of investigating the underlying logic of a foreign worldview is long and requires many mental manipulations which will often result in an individual's feeling that somehow he is *betraying* his own native culture. The bottom line is that many cannot overcome or suppress the feelings of betrayal and so are left with an unclear understanding of the internal workings of the foreign culture. It is as though they 'know the notes on the violin, but they must rely on written music to play even the simplest of fiddle tunes.'

The articles are available for free download at  
<http://www.angelfire.com/nm/seidhman/index.html>  
<http://www.northvegr.org>

<sup>38</sup>A modern comparison would be from the start of the 1300s to the year 2005 with the final Conversion happening this year! As speakers of English, that is from Chaucer's earliest writings to the sitcom *Will & Grace*.

*Germanen:*

“In general it is apparent that in the late heathen period there was no single concept of life after death. The diversely defined Realms of the Dead are the product of a culture which was attempting to integrate very different and independent concepts [of an Afterlife] from a variety of sources in a type of syncretism in which not only Christian but also perhaps Baltic, Slavic, and Celtic elements all flowed together. Because of existential area of human pursuit, in the long run, it may have been possible for Christianity to offer a much clearer, integrated and more hopeful answer to the heathens of the northern countries.<sup>39</sup>

In spite of all the variations in Afterlife concepts, there is a common thread which appears to run from the earliest events which can be classified as belonging to a distinct Germanic culture through the 20th century at least in many rural areas of continental Europe on through to the Americas which is that the dead were viewed by Germanic heathens and Christians alike to live in the grave. The heathen *draugr* of the medieval Norse sagaic literature changes very little over centuries of folk-tales and, perhaps by coincidence, dovetails nicely with the Christian idea that the soul remains with the body until Armageddon when it will be raised up to the Christian Heaven to be judged by Jehovah and his son, Jesus.<sup>40</sup> It was ideas such as this concept of the Afterlife which most likely served as a bridge over the gap between heathenry and the new religion of Christianity which allowed for the development of dual-religionism, or syncretism. Of all the elements of heathenry which survived the Conversion of northern Europe, death into the gravemound seems to have been most tenacious, and because it was acceptable to many Christians of the period, it was completely impossible to eradicate.

On the other hand, it is the concept which resembles our modern concepts of an Afterlife in the least. Even Christians of the late Viking Age and early medieval period who were able at least to comprehend death into the gravemound envisioned 'something beyond the grave,' a placement resulting from some judgment of one's deeds which would subsequently result in some kind of residence for the rest of eternity. This need, then, was most likely provided by Christians themselves. Archaeological finds provide no indication whatsoever that heathens prepared the body for anything but life in the gravemound or perhaps a more communal version such as is described as Hel or Helheim. Heathens feeling the need, then, provided themselves with several other Afterlife concepts which begin to appear in the last 100 years before the Conversion to Christianity.

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<sup>39</sup>Simek, p.212. Translation by the author.

<sup>40</sup>There is an apparent rift of belief in Afterlife concepts among Christians: some believe that the soul departs from the corpse immediately upon death to be held in judgement while others believe that judgement is withheld until Judgment Day. Among even early Christians the rift was apparent. For our purposes here, however, the concept which underlies folk literature of the Christian era remains the most important.

## 2.5 Other Heathen Afterlife Concepts

As much as it is clear that death into the gravemound is a common link from far back at early stages still identifiable as Germanic heathenry all the way up to the current era, it is also clear that during the late heathen era, a point in history when the heathen worldview was maximally confronted with that of Christianity, heathen spiritual concepts became very complex. It is in the 10th century skaldic poetry, in particular the *Eiríksmál*, that we get our first glimpse of Valhalla. Over the next 250 years, Valhalla would continue to develop at the hands of Christian writers and composers utilizing heathen elements until we are presented with Snorri's final version in the *Gylfaginning*. Neopagans and other romantics have written much regarding Snorri's 'true' rationale for writing his trilogy, but romanticism aside, Snorri was a Christian and was most likely trained in the art of writing by Christian clerics being born, raised and educated almost 250 years after the official Conversion of Iceland. Judging by the number of texts about heathenry written in medieval Iceland, the period which also gave birth to Snorri, there was a renewed interest in the heathen past, but there is no indication from the texts of this period that there was any attempt to revitalize heathenry. Like the poets Byron, Wordsworth and Tennyson, the medieval Icelandic writers and composers were applying heathen elements in the way of romanticists as a metaphor of the Christian worldview. What Snorri preserved then was not the elements of ancient heathenry but rather the elements of syncretism mixed with the elements of a medieval romantic era. Snorri's concept of Valhalla was built on top of a concept which was started in the 10th century.

“The poetic image of the warrior's paradise given in *Grímnismál* derives, although not in all details, without a doubt from folk-belief,<sup>41</sup> but nonetheless several elements can be found already in 9th and 10th century skaldic poetry: in Þórbjörn Hornklofi's *Hrafnmál* (the shield-covered hall), in Eyvindr's *Hákonarmál* and in the *Eiríksmál*. . .

The origin of the concept is by no means older than the name: in the beginning there was the battlefield strewn with corpses, from which the demons of death (valkyries) led the fallen heroes to a god of the dead; the description of this place, whether as a place in a mountain, or else a heavenly drinking hall, only came secondarily.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>It is important to note here the phrase '*poetic imagery*' as used by Simek does not imply a belief in Valhalla as an after death destination, but the application of the metaphor to 'death on the battlefield' in folk belief. Such metaphors remain common to this day among subgroups of a common culture such as 'Fiddler's Green' among folk musicians, 'Davey Jones' Locker' among Navy men, and 'that Big Bike Rally in the Sky' among motorcycle enthusiasts.

<sup>42</sup>Here Simek allows us to understand the development of the poetic image, the metaphor. Poets, in their description of the battle before, during, and after, had produced an indigenous heathen euphemism which implied not only death on the field of battle, but also that the bones were picked over by the most common carrion bird in the summers of the north, the raven, already long associated Óðinn/ Woden/ Wodan, the god capable of swaying victory either way.

Snorri, the cleric-warrior, then, had plenty of material to build his concept of Valhalla from.

The Conversion of the Germanic north was essentially complete by the time of the the Saga writers. Regardless of what romanticists wish to believe, the bulk of Conversion, i.e. more than 85% of the population was most likely converted within a single generation. Pressures such as threats of or , in some cases, very real applications of economic sanctions, violence coming from outside a given community, life in close proximity to Christians—in some cases 'outsiders' but in many cases 'insiders' many of whom had been Christianized for several generations already, broader access to money and human resources to continue expansion through colonization into the North Atlantic archipelagoes and Greenland provided constant pressure on the heathen to convert. Between 980 CE and 1050 CE there were 'power grabs' by Christian kings throughout the entire Scandinavian region most of whom were trying to centralize power by bringing all the individual local regions under a single united banner, the banner of the the Church. Previously such united power moves and efforts to centralize power were not practical because under heathenry the individual localities remained cult centers, autonomous, and loyal, primarily to local leaders who were themselves bound tightly to the community cult—many of these being little more than overgrown extended families.

Many Romanticists would like to believe that there was a conspiracy of sorts by Christians, but the truth seems to be that the Conversion of the Germanic north seems to have been as much fueled from inside forces as it was from outside forces, fed both by the Church and other recent converts. The process is called a 'push-pull process' and can be described in this manner:

“Anthony, 1997,<sup>44</sup> discusses theories of prehistoric migration in detail. In order for significant movements of people to take place there are four pre-conditions: a 'push' factor, or reason to move; a 'pull' factor, or a belief that the reason to move does not apply elsewhere; information flows, in order to select a destination where the 'pull' factor applies; transportation costs, which must not outweigh the 'pull' factor. In the Anglo-Saxon case, where Old English appears to have replaced the previous British language(s), he notes 'In the absence of states, it is not likely that a small group of immigrants could bring about a substantial language shift merely by attacking, defeating and enslaving the indigenes (witness the Normans in England and the Celts in Galatia). Those who shift to a new language must see a clear advantage in doing so, and must have enough contact with the speakers of the target language so that they

<sup>43</sup>Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p. 347.

<sup>44</sup>Anthony, D. *Prehistoric Migration as Social Process*, 1997 [Chapman & Hamerow; London, UK]



can learn that language.”<sup>45</sup>

A standard part of *romanticism*—the modern variety is believing or using as a premise, the idea of 'good guy' vs. 'bad guy.' In migration, although migration tales typically side one way or another, there is no 'good guy'; according to Anthony, et al. it is a two-way street, a deal, a game of 'give and take.' Heathen England was not *conquered* by Christians—heathen England *accepted* Christianity to a point where Christian opinion outweighed the heathen. Christian aggression played a role, most certainly, but heathens very likely believed they could hold out against the changing worldview being shoved at them (this has often been belief of the 'to be converted' and has been most documented among members of the various tribes of the USA, Central America, South America and African), and had there not been some kind of 'pay-off' for the newly converted, there would not have been a Christian Conversion of Iceland in 1000 CE or Norway in 1014 CE.

This process has been played out 1000s of times over the past millennium and the mechanisms are fairly well known. 'Conversion,' for romantics (which includes many neo-pagans in this day and age) is held to have been done at spear-point, through threats of violence, real violence, hangings, burnings at the stake—a noble culture being slowly conquered by an invading force. The fact is that most 'conversion efforts' probably more resembled the throwing of an open bag of Fritos into the middle of a prairie dog town and allowing the inhabitants to bring discord upon themselves than any of the tales of the 'nobly conquered who practiced their religion in secret caves and glens at night' concocted by romantics.<sup>46</sup> Christianity comes out as the uniting force or philosophy, the controllers of the calm after the storm. The worldview of the region is forever changed and always comes out the same:

1. Christianity replaces the fundamental root of the worldview.
2. Because the Christian worldview is not borne of a region, i.e. is not bound to the land, it can pick up and absorb local 'flavorings' with little loss.

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<sup>45</sup>Pollington, Stephen *The Mead-Hall: Feasting in Anglo-Saxon England*, 2003, [Anglo-Saxon Books; Norfolk, UK], p. 68.

<sup>46</sup>Such 'secret practices' have been suggested over the 150 years. The tales sound this way:

*On moonlit nights the loyal would gather in the dark groves deep in the middle of forests to practice their craft away from the prying eyes of the rest of the community.*

Had this been fact, however, the 'secret' would have been out centuries ago. In rural communities, travel, hunting and some gathering of mushrooms was not uncommonly done at night during the light of the moon away from the winds of afternoon, out of the heat of the day, and/ or during leisure hours since work on the farm was reserved for the day. Before the time of electric street lamp of the city streets, the moors, hilltops, and forests were not devoid of prying eyes on *moonlit* nights. Urban dwellers were more likely to have stayed inside city limits at night, but those living in rural areas found calm, moonlit nights pleasant for a variety of activities. The night of the full moon was exceptionally popular. That the night would have also been used for 'the witches sabbath' is highly improbable.

As a consequence, one can still read folklore which resembles the heathen past, that of dwarves and elves, and the Wild Hunt, but these are now laid onto top of the Christian of the Christian worldview. The previously heathen elements now serve to explain, clarify and support the Christian worldview which has now replaced the local heathen philosophy as the very foundation of how the world is perceived. One need only to look at Native American belief, Voudoun, Santería, or the ayahuasca cults of South America to see Catholicism flavored with heathen elements.

In this same manner, we see the development, then, of Valhalla into the warrior's paradise, a process which is *not* reflected in the the archaeological record.<sup>47</sup> Valhalla appears to be poetic product of the Age of Syncretism, the period of time when local Christian leaders were deciding which indigenous flavorings were acceptable and which were not. The gods of Asgarð were acceptable so long as they fell under the True God:

*A down cometh to the doom of the world  
the great godhead which governs all.*

*Comes the darksome dragon flying  
Nidðögg, upward from the Níða Fells;  
he bears in his pinions as the plains he o'erflies,  
naked corpses: now he will sink (from Hollander, p.13.)*

Ragnarök viewed in this manner truly becomes “The Fates of the Gods”<sup>48</sup> at the point when Christianity is replacing the older underlying worldview. The oldest poem in the collection now known as the *Elder Edda* is by linguistic evidence dated to the late 10th century with later interpolations added by copyists over the next four centuries.<sup>49</sup> On the one hand, through *creative reading* one can mentally ‘recreate’ a religious worldview which never really existed, at least

<sup>47</sup>There are runestones dating from the 800s, primarily, which depict the the newly dead being greeted by feminine figure bearing a drinking horn. These are often interpreted by modern heathens as ‘the dead being greeted by a Valkyrie bearing the meadhorn of Valhalla.’ There are problems with such an interpretation, however. First, the runestone is generally above a body which is obviously interred. Secondly, there is nothing about the runestone to indicate that the afterlife destination is Valhalla rather than the ‘family hall.’ At least one of the runestones depicts Óðinn riding upon Sleipnir but given Óðinn’s long standing as the god of the dead, there is no compelling reason to assume that the dead is entering Valhalla as opposed to simply being greeted to a generalized ‘realm of the dead.’ Without any other information pertaining to Valhalla as a destination for the fallen warrior contemporaneous to the runestone and without similar beliefs recorded among neighboring Germanic peoples, we must forgo over-interpretation.

<sup>48</sup>*Ragnarök* is often translated as “The Twilight of the Gods” but a breakdown of the construction of the ON word implies the plural ‘fates’ (*rök*) of the ‘leaders’ (*ragnar*).

<sup>49</sup>Hollander makes note of what are suspected to be interpolations as does Simek. It should be noted that not all interpolations, i.e. ‘additions,’ are agreed upon by all scholars. The reader is referred to Hollander’s translation (Univ. of Austin Press) and Simek’s *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (D. S Brewer, 1993) for discussions. Romantics will often gloss over or completely ignore these interpolations mainly because their purpose for reading the poetry is not to reconstruct and understand history and the social processes in play at the time but to ‘recreate’ or fabricate a new alternative religion for the 21st century.

according to the archaeological record, and in conjunction with social processes concurrent to the composition of the *Völuspá*-Valhalla, then, becomes a glorious concept of a noble culture comparable to the Christian concept of Heaven; on the other, one can take into consideration all that was happening at the time and treat this oldest of the Old Norse mythological poems as the product of the time of conversion. One can completely ignore the parallels between Paul's *Revelations* and the *Völuspá* and surmise that they are but coincidence, or one can deny coincidence and look at the skill and complexity with which the composer sought to broaden his audience base by appealing to both Christians and heathens. The romantics lean towards the former, the reconstructionists to the latter.

Two other destinations listed by Simek in his list above is that of Hel and Rán. Hel, as a destination after death appears to be old heathen and is mentioned in both Anglo-Saxon and Gothic writings. Hel as a goddess, daughter of Loki, is not mentioned until immediately prior to the the Age of Conversion and is surmised by Turville-Petre<sup>50</sup>, Simek,<sup>51</sup> Christiansen,<sup>52</sup> et al. to be little more than a poetic anthropomorphization of the place. The origin of the concept appears to have been Germanic but the concept is so similar to other Indo-European concepts of an Otherworld that Christiansen suspects with good rationale that later descriptions are not of purely native genesis.

“A goddess called Hel appears in Egill’s verse, but above ground; much later, in *Völuspá* (st. 43), she has a high hall underground and ‘a sooty cock’ to waken the dead. In Balder’s Dreams she has a watchdog, with a blood-stained chest, who barks at Óðinn; but by that time the concept had been much overlaid by the Christian *inferus*, or *Hades* or *Orcus*, and continued to be embellished with macabre details and geography appropriate to a place of punishment:<sup>53</sup> rivers of ice and fire, perilous bridges, impaled bodies, snake-houses, foul smells. All that is too close to Irish and Anglo-Saxon versions to be purely of native growth. . . .<sup>54</sup>

Like Valhalla, Hel seems to have been greatly affected by the development of poetry over time, and by intercultural experiences of the poets.

That Hel is an old concept among the Norse is not doubted, even though later detailed descriptions of the place must be drawn into question. Hel, as a word, is related to the IG root *\*kel-* which carries the sense of ‘covered,’ ‘hidden,’ ‘underground.’<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Turville-Petre, E. O. G. *Myth and Religion of the North*.

<sup>51</sup>Simek, Rudolf *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*.

Simek, Rudolf *Religion und Mythologie der Germanen*.

<sup>52</sup>Christiansen, Eric *The Norsemen in the Viking Age*.

<sup>53</sup>Here Christiansen cites both Simek, 1993, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, and Dronke’s notes on the *Vafþrúdnismál*.

<sup>54</sup>Christiansen, *Norsemen in the Viking Age*, pp. 295-96.

<sup>55</sup>Pollington, Stephen *The Mead Hall: Feasting in Anglo-Saxon England*, 2004 [Anglo Saxon Books; Norfolk, UK], p. 68.

“The Germanic origins of the English hall appear to lie in the Iron Age where it was customary for each settlement to have a large structure, presumed to have been used as a communal meeting (*Volkshalle*) among the dwellings of a single, dominant family in the settlement. The role of the most successful, leading farmer gradually merged with that of political leader, and the hall became the private stage for public acts carried out by this chieftain. The leader then began to act for the other members of the group, and could take decisions on its behalf and provide leadership.”<sup>56</sup>

“The word *heall* ‘hall’ is based on the same root *\*kel-* as *helm* and *hel* ‘Hell’; the idea is of covering and concealment. The Latin word *cella* ‘cell, room’ is based on this root also.”<sup>57</sup>

Valhalla has already been discussed above, and the ‘hall’ plays a central role in the overall development of Valhalla through the early medieval period in Iceland. In addition to this, researchers have long noted that the Germanic sense of the Afterlife, particularly that which takes place in the gravemound, is a shadowy representation or extension of life above ground. The concept of ‘hall’ as a central meeting place for the community becomes mirrored by *Hel* being the central meeting place of the community of the dead. Given the Germanic tendency to conceive of life below ground as being a reflection of life above, it may very well be that as family estates grew and pulled together as communities/ villages for improved economic stability and increased defensibility, the conception of the Afterlife grew at a similar pace to encompass the sense of community/ hall. In other words from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, the Afterlife expanded from the family gravemound to a communal *Hel*. Viewed this way, Valhalla then becomes ‘the *Hel* of the slain.’<sup>58</sup>

‘The nets of Rán,’ i.e. the drowned whose corpse has not been recovered, as an Afterlife concept appears to be no older than the concept of *Hel*. One consistency noted by archaeologists and supported well in the later literature was the importance of the body being placed into the ground. There is a certain feeling of finality and also of security that comes with knowing that a body has been properly placed in its ancestral resting place. The fear of ‘the dead walking’ was fairly pervasive throughout the entire realm of Germanic heathenry not only because of the malicious mischievousness often caused by the *draugr*, “the animated corpse commonly translated as ‘ghost,’” but the family was also not able to venerate the walking dead in exchange for luck and protection for the home.

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<sup>56</sup>Pollington, p. 68

<sup>57</sup>Pollington, p. 68. The idea is attributed to F. Herschend in *The Idea of Good in Late Iron Age Society*, 1998 [Uppsala, SW].

<sup>58</sup>Given the development of *Valhalla* as an Afterlife as discussed above, the comparison of the concept with ‘Fiddler’s Green—six miles south of Hell’ taken from early American folklore seems both reasonable and fitting as a poetic metaphor for a group of people who view themselves as being ‘special.’ As with those fiddler players who viewed themselves destined for ‘Fiddler’s Green’ (usually spoken of with a sarcastic and proud smile), the concept of *Valhalla* appears to have affected neither the general heathen worldview in regards to spiritual beliefs in an Afterlife nor in regards to burial custom.

Matters are often confusing regarding a drowning where the corpse has not been recovered even in modern times. Families wait. The 'unknowingness' results in families' waiting, searching, and occasionally organizing community wide search parties. Additionally, because of the unpredictability of currents, the corpse can show up hundreds of miles from where the drowning occurred, and may take months to find. Egill Skallagrímsón's son was caught in the nets of Rán, but his body was eventually recovered and placed safely into the ground. Given the increases in long distance sailing throughout the Viking Era, losing a relative to the nets of Rán must have been a common fear, and this was exacerbated by the idea that bodies needed to be properly interred to keep them from walking and to keep the luck flowing back into the family farmstead.

As the number of the battle-dead lost on foreign soil increased later in the Viking Age, a fear similar to that of losing a relative to the nets of Rán must have also occurred. There are many records of these battle-dead being cremated on the field after the battle. This may have been the impetus for battle-poetry which was so common to the Germanic societies of both the northern and western branches. As with the idea behind proper interment, witnessing and reporting of a good death on the field of battle may have served to allay the unease of 'not knowing.' Cremation which survived among many of the warrior bands long after it was abandoned by families and communities may have, at least partially, been a way for a warrior band 'to compress' the bodies in a socially acceptable way so that they could be more easily brought back home. Additionally, the idea of dying in battle on foreign soil without the comfort of being returned to the family gravemound may have spurred the late heathen development of *Valhalla*, 'the *Hel* of the slain,' allowing the dead a burial 'with a purpose,' i.e. that of feasting among the substitute family—the *comitatus*, in Valhalla so that the need to 'walk' after death was lessened.

One other late developing concept indigenous to the Germanic heathens of Scandinavia was that of *Niflhel*, 'the Strand of Corpses.' This concept and its description all show distinct signs of Christian influence, but this influence was picked up by either Germanic heathens or more probably early Germanic Christians and was developed in accordance to Germanic social structure of Iceland. A person in an Icelandic properly found guilty of a crime against the community in which he lived could be subject to an official 'shunning' by the community. The price of his *wergild* could be removed so that his death at the hands of another would result in no fine and would not be judged as a crime. The concept of *Niflhel* while clearly an imitation of the tortures of Hell espoused by early Christians reflects the Icelandic socio-legal structure well enough to have dovetailed into the pre-existing beliefs in gravemound-*Hel*. The newly dead would be denied entrance into the folds of the familial or community dead and would be forced to suffer banishment to the 'wilderness' of the Afterlife, *Niflheim* or *Niflhel* (literally, 'mist-home' or 'misty-hel') in direct opposition to the 'comforts' of *Hel* or the gravemound most often depicted in folktales as being

endless feasting (in the gravemound 'which was raised up on four red pillars').<sup>59</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that *Niflhel* was generated out of the original heathen worldview but most properly belongs to the Era of Syncretism.

## 2.6 The Heathen View of Reincarnation

Initially, we would have said that the concept of 'reincarnation' was a modern addition brought by neo-pagans, and, indeed, the modern interpretation of reincarnation (often modified to 'reincarnation within the family line' as offered by Jordsvín above) *is* often held by those coming from 'neo-pagan/ alternative religionist' arena. However, that is not the end of the topic: these positions, true to the nature of the modern heathen, come with arguments based firmly in the lore of the Norse. A letter by a modern heathen to us in response to 'a rant' against reincarnation reveals the lore-based questions:

Saturday \*/\*/2003 1:59:23pm Name: A. G. E-Mail: \*@\*.net Home-page Title:\* Referred By: Just Surfed In Location: Comments: Reincarnation in the Lore:

"Hogni was the name of a king whose daughter was Sigrun. She became a valkyrie and rode through the air and over the sea. SHE WAS SVAVA BORN AGAIN." Poetic Eddas, Helgakvitha 2 in Holmlander, Bellows, and in Thorpe translates as "regenerated" instead of "born again". With what limited lore we have just this one mention in the Lore is good enough for me to know that our ancestors believed in a form of Reincarnation. Its pretty cut and dry, short, sweet, and to the point.

I love your rants however.

A. G. Lore Speaker \* \* Kindred, \*<sup>60</sup>

In our response, we pointed out that the Helgi Tales were but one instance of individuals being 'born again.' We also brought up the famous passage where Ólaf, in St. Ólaf's Saga, was asked by an assistant 'if he had been buried in Ólaf's Mound.'<sup>61</sup> His response was that he had never lived before. Both sets of examples are commonly used as arguments for an earlier heathen concept of 'reincarnation.'

It is important, first, to sort out the actual topics:

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<sup>59</sup>This image consistently shows up in later northern Germanic folklore. The reader is referred to collections of these, in particular *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legends* edited by Kvidelund and Sehmsdorf *Scandinavian Folktales* edited and translated by Jaqueline Simpson *The Fairy Mythology* by Thomas Keightley.

<sup>60</sup>Out of fairness, the names, dates and locations have been removed from the letter although the letter itself was copied. The point being that the arguments presented herein are common, and the need for a specific named author is therefore unnecessary. The letter has been reproduced in accordance to the fairness of use clause in the copyright act.

<sup>61</sup>An earlier king who had also been named Ólaf.

1. The point which people are attempting to support is, of course, reincarnation as it is commonly viewed in modern, western culture, that is the metempsychosis of the personality, the ego, from one lifetime to the next. The idea generally involves the individual retaining some memories of a past life which may be remembered either over time or with some help such as through hypnosis or some crisis event which brings the past memories to the fore. The overall concept borrowed from the occidental is related to a concept that the individual will continue to reincarnate until a state of perfection is reached.
2. One set of supports for the idea that reincarnation was part of the heathen worldview at one time is the Helgi, Svava and/ or Sigurðr set. This set supports the idea of '*aftrborinn*,' qualities, characteristics, or duties passed on from generation to generation.
3. The Óláf set, not mentioned in the letter above, are related to the early Christian idea that high born people such as saints or saintly men/ women could be reborn completely as in the modern concept.

The modern set, i.e. #1 above, has already been discussed, but set #2 which is most generally used to support a modern heathen idea that reincarnation was accepted by the ancient heathen needs further clarification. '*Aftrborinn*' or '*endrborinn*' is not necessarily complicated although it might be somewhat of a curiosity even today. The idea has never been lost or diluted down although the phrasing is different. In its simplest form, it is traits or characteristics passed down through a family. Requoting Flowers, then:

“Fundamentally, the phrase of the Norse *Sigurðr saga*\* describes a process of *aptrburðr*\* in which the innate powers of Sigmundr are 'reborn' in his post-humous son. This is evident in the relevant texts where we find that Sigurðr is able to ingest the venomous blood of Fáfnir after we have learned that *only* Sigmundr, and none of his sons, could perform this feat without harm. Thematically, similar myths (Víðarr and Váli) and saga figures (Þórðr, Kolbeinn Túmason, etc.) provide important analogs to this process. A wide range of cultural evidence, e.g. the Norse belief in rebirth and/ or transference of entities (*hamingjur*, *fylgjur*, etc.) which carry certain powers from generation to generation, naming practices connected with this belief, and the importance of rites of passage in fulfilling this transference also support this view.”<sup>62</sup>

Sigurðr was born with the same ability as his father to suffer no ill effects from the worm's venom. If we look at a common modern reversal of this such as an inability to properly digest milk or an allergy to eggs, for example, we see nothing unusual. In this modern times, we phrase it thusly: "*John inherited the allergy from his father.*" There is absolutely nothing mysterious about this; in fact, it is quite normal. By extension, we also have the common phrases:

<sup>62</sup>Thorsson, *Iðunna*, Vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 9-10.

1. *He has his mother's smile.*
2. *She has her mother's sense of humor.*
3. *He has his grandfather's laugh.*
4. *She has her aunt's dislike for the cold, etc.*

A curiosity even in these modern times, but certainly nothing unusual, and we don't even treat the phenomenon as anything mysterious or spiritual for the most part. It may, however, be a good enough reason to name a child after his 'giver.' This can be regarded as a form of reincarnation, but such a process is unnecessary to explain the event.<sup>63</sup> That *is* the point: *reincarnation* is not a necessary explanation.

It should also be remembered that Iceland was a feuding society, and in a feud, as it is commonly understood even in 20th century America, one family *never* gives in to the other; it is a matter of honor. The families (rather than the individuals) are sworn enemies and, as in the famous feud of the Hatfield's and the McCoy's, families are expected to continue the fight until the exact reason can no longer be remembered. In the heroic poem, *Helgi Hundingsbana*, we encounter a similar situation where the feud is *inherited* by the young Helgi to continue the fight against the Hundings. Viewed in this way, translating the word '*aptrborinn*' as *inherited* or *passed on to*, the concept becomes no more mysterious than allergies that are handed down from generation to generation. In these examples, we can see that we have not lost anything spiritual or some mystery of the ancients, but rather that we in this modern age accept the curiosities much in the same manner that the ancients did as a matter of fact. There is simply no need to resort to a concept as complex as reincarnation. A swift application of Occam's Razor suggests that the idea that something can be passed from one generation to the next. '*Aptriborinn*' or '*endrborinn*' continues to be poorly translated as 'reborn' or 'rebirth' when the more appropriate understanding of the word is the properly formed adverbial descriptor 'inherited.'<sup>64</sup>

There is an interesting interlude in the earliest of eddic poems, the *Völuspá*, involving a female character known as Gullveig.

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<sup>63</sup>My own son, Jack, was named after my own grandfather, at first because he was born 99 years and 9 days after his great grandfather. He looked neither like my wife or myself. Later on, my mother coincidentally discovered a photograph of my grandfather taken when he was around 5 years of age which 'looked' just like my son. In our family, a fairly traditional German-American farming family, this does not imply *reincarnation* but that he was specially 'blessed' by my grandfather from the grave.

<sup>64</sup>Elsewhere this author has pointed out that '*aptrborinn*' is a direct cognate to the modern German '*nachgeboren*' which literally translates to 'after-birth' and means *posthumously* in modern English. It is a gift provided by an ancestor upon the birth of another in the next generation.



There was, however, a true form of reincarnation understood by those living during the conversion era, however, but this does not come from Germanic heathenry, but rather from Christianity.

“The tales of Olaf, the elf of Geirstað, a long dead king who hands on regalia (through a 3rd party) to the future St. Olave has been interpreted by Heinrichs as a repudiation of pagan ideas of reincarnation; the old Olaf asks that his corpse be beheaded in the grave-mound, presumedly to free his soul and let it enter the newborn Olave, who dismisses the idea as a popular misconception when he grows up. It is not clear what lies behind this ; a Christian apologist, ca. 1200, editing a story about a saint so that he can both be a reborn king and a witness to the truth that such a rebirth is impossible? A strong, local tradition legitimizing Olave’s rule in a way that distinguishes him from other kings, rather than invoking a commonly-held belief? A revelation about how kingship was once viewed in Norway? In any case, the anecdote as it survives is post-conversion by a long way.”<sup>65</sup>

In the saga, of course, the pre-sainted Óláf writes the whole thing off as nothing but old folk-tales. Where things become interesting is in discovering exactly *whose* folk-tales they were:

“It is a fact that some Christian sects and writers accepted reincarnation as an enhancement to the teachings of Christ. Origen, one of the heralded Fathers of the Church and described by Saint Gregory as "the Prince of Christian learning in the third century," wrote: "Every soul comes into this world strengthened by the victories and weakened by the defeats of its previous life."

So if reincarnation was an idea in currency with early Christians, why have all traces of it disappeared from the Christian religion we know today?

By the early fourth century, strong Christian factions were vying with each other for influence and power, while at the same time the Roman Empire was beginning to fall apart. In A.D. 325, in a move to renew the unity of the empire, the absolute dictator Emperor Constantine convened the leaders of the feuding Christian factions at the Council of Nicaea. He offered to throw his imperial power behind the Christians if they would settle their differences and agree on a single creed. Decisions made at this first council set the foundation for the Roman Catholic Church. (Soon after, the books of the Bible were fixed too.) For the sake of unity, all beliefs that conflicted with the new creed were banished; in the process the factions and writings that supported reincarnation were thrown out.

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<sup>65</sup>Christiansen, p. 297.

Then, with the applause and support of the Christian leaders, Constantine moved to eliminate competing religions, and to make his personal grip on the Empire even more absolute. The result of the marriage between church and imperial state was a new Church made in the image of the autocratic Roman Empire. This is why, according to some historians, the Church exalts unquestioned central authority, imposes a singular dogmatic creed on its followers, and works so hard to stamp out divergent ideas. This is important, because reincarnation fell outside the official creed.

Apparently some Christians continued to believe in reincarnation even after the Council of Nicaea, because in A.D. 553 the Church found the need to single out reincarnation and condemn it explicitly. At the Second Council of Constantinople the concept of reincarnation, bundled together with other ideas under the term "pre-existence of the soul", was decreed to be a crime worthy of excommunication and damnation ("anathema"):

If anyone assert the fabulous pre-existence of souls, and shall assert the monstrous restoration which follows from it: let him be anathema."<sup>66</sup>

The folk-tales were an error on the side of the Christian writing the text. There is absolutely nothing to indicate that the folk-tale stemmed from Germanic heathenry, and, in fact, there is enough circumstantial evidence, as pointed out in the quote by Christiansen above, that Christians were still attempting with marginal success to purge their religion of certain beliefs believed by the members of the Nicean Council to be inconsistent with the Bible's teachings. There certainly is enough evidence in the Bible that certain personages could and would be born again including Jesus himself, but as Christiansen states "there is no evidence whatever of such a belief in the viking age."<sup>67</sup>

## 2.7 Summary of the Germanic Afterlife

The most striking evidence of the Germanic heathen's sense of an Afterlife is also the least surprising since it directly reflects the Afterlife concepts of the pre-Hellenistic Greeks, Jews, Balts, Slavs, and Celts to a large degree: life after death is essentially a continuation of life in the grave. Life within the grave could be tedious, boring, tiring, cold, social *and* lonely. The comforts of home were to be provided by the family with the collection of grave goods left with the body or the ashes/ bones of cremation and through the periodic offerings left for the venerated dead in exchange the one skill the dead were known to possess in abundance: protection. The dead could protect the home and familial lands from invasion by ill-luck, ill-health and by men ill-disposed towards the family.

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<sup>66</sup>Quoted from <http://www.childpastlives.org/dogma.htm> . Copyright 1997 held Carol and Steve Bowman.

<sup>67</sup>Christiansen, p.297.

Having one's dead in the ground offered the odal-lands protection from above by the living and from below by the dead.

Ceremonial offerings, *minne*-feasts or *minne*-ales, in some regions, at least in Sweden, were offered to the dead at prescribed intervals after death: at 30 days, 60 days, and either 90 days or 6 months (depending on the regional variations) and then yearly after that.<sup>68</sup> Veneration of the dead as an important and primary part of the heathen Germanic worldview and among various other cultures living in the northern temperate zone contemporary to the Norse.

The gravemound remained the standard concept of a heathen Afterlife in spite of the apparent confusing array of destinations after death described by modern authors (as opposed to researchers). There appears to be little or no evidence that the *soul* was ever conceptually viewed as being separable from the body, i.e. *dualistic*, but could be sent on special errands from its home in the body always to return to its corpse after the task was accomplished. Although this extending of the soul out into the world shows up most commonly in later folklore, there are indications in a few sagas that at least some during the heathen period accepted the idea of what is now called *astral projection*. There is speculation that the concept may have been brought into through contact with shamanistic tribes such as the Samí, possibly the early Finnish, and some of the tribes along the Volga. This borderzone influence has been discussed by Uno Holmberg<sup>69</sup> in the earlier part of the last century and lately by Thomas Dubois.<sup>70</sup>

*Hel* appears to have been a communal extension of the gravemound concept and *Valhalla*, a poetic variation which may in reality have had few believers (if any). Archaeological studies of graves near battlefields show that buried dead were outfitted in exactly the same manner as burials near community sites. Were there an actual difference in Afterlife concepts between village dwellers and warrior bands, one would expect differences in burials. The important point consistently reinforced in later Norse literature and medieval folklore that it was important to get the dead comfortably into the grave and hopefully *keep them there*. Those who died away from home presented a special problem because the family was deprived of one of its own which would serve to protect the family

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<sup>68</sup>Memorial feasts in Swedish speaking Finland, Swedish Samland, and Sweden proper are well discussed in Uno Holmberg's *Finno-Ugric Mythology* (Published as part of the *Mythology of All Races* series edited by John McCullough. This author (a native to the region) chose to explain the various different tribal variations of *Finno-Ugric* mythology by comparison to the Swedish customs which still existed through the 18th century as well as the more classical Norse mythology. Unlike other authors during the same period of time, Holmberg chose not to *interpret* the collections of beliefs according to the Frazerian romantic sun-god/ mother earth cycle of 'fire festivals' but rather let the descriptions of customs stand on their own while simply pointing out similarities and differences seen in neighboring regions. This book is still available at many university and school libraries, the entire series still stands as an excellent reference for the study of any of the world's mythologies and was the most complete at the time although it should be noted that some of the material is outdated.

<sup>69</sup>Holmberg, Uno *Finno-Ugric Mythology*, 1928, part of the *Mythology of All Races* series ed. by John McCullough.

<sup>70</sup>DuBois, Thomas A. *Nordic Religions of the Viking Age*, 1999 (University of Pennsylvania Press; Philadelphia, Penn.)

lands and because the family could not be sure that the dead was properly interred. A Norse limbo for the drowned was envisioned, 'the nets of Rán,' and conceptually *Valhalla* may have served similarly to allay some of those fears as well.

Although reincarnation is often discussed in modern times as being closely bound to earlier heathen beliefs any evidence for metempsychosis available comes directly from early Christians. There is absolutely no archaeological evidence of such a belief. The idea of 'passing on certain qualities' from one generation to the next, however, did exist and was in fact quite common. Unfortunately, modern translators insist on using the terms 'reincarnation' or 'born again' when it would be more apropos to use 'post-humously inherited' or 'passed X on.' Similar beliefs are seen in neighboring regions as well.

The gravemound or minor variations of the concept seems to have been the only verifiable Afterlife destination.

### 3 The Gravemound and the Modern Heathen

A problem for most moderns with acceptance of the ancient Germanic heathens' attitudes toward dying and death is that the ancient does not match very well with what is *customary* in the modern era and that the factual ancient concepts *don't match well with the modern perception of what ancients believed*. The problem, then, is at minimum twofold. On the one hand there is a pervasive desire for *eternal life*, and *eternity* is now not only defined by the dominant religion, Christianity, but also by the scientific fields of mathematics and physics: it is taught in the schools, popular science and pseudo-scientific magazines, TV shows, new age philosophy and, now, alternative religious philosophy. The problem on the other hand is the *Golden Age Myth*, the idea that at some point in the memorable past things were wonderful and beautiful and that technology and science lived in perfectly balanced harmony with spirituality and philosophy.

The facts as we can best know them reveal the Golden Age Myth for what it is: a myth.

#### 3.1 The Worldview Problem

Worldview presents a specific problem which is not easily overcome. The primary reason that it is not easily overcome is that, in general, it is not seen. Worldview underlies all that which an individual knows. Raymonde Carroll in his book "Cultural Misunderstandings: the French American experience" outlines the problem fairly clearly.

"Indeed, my culture is the logic by which I give order to the world. And I have been learning this logic little by little, since the moment I was born, from the gestures, the words, and the care of those who surrounded me; from their days, from the tone of their voices; from the noises, the colors, the smells, the body contact; from the way I

was raised, awarded, punished, held, touched, washed, did; from the stories I was told, from the books I read, from the songs I sang; in the street, at, at play; from the relationships I witnessed between others, from the judgments I heard, from the aesthetics embodied everywhere, in all things right down to my sleep and the dreams I learned to dream and recount. I learned to breathe this logic and to forget that I learned. I find it natural. Whether I produce meaning or apprehended, it underlies all my inner actions. This does not mean that I must agree with all those who share my culture: I do not necessarily agree with those who speak the same language as I do. But as different as their discourse may be from mine, it is for me familiar territory, it is recognizable. The same is true, in a certain sense, of my culture

"Part of this logic is tacit, invisible, and this is the most important part. It consists in the premises from which we constantly draw our conclusions. We are not conscious of these premises because they are, for us, verities. They are everything which 'goes without saying' for us and which is therefore transparent."  
Page three

Worldview then operates completely below the radar. In general, people are completely incapable of noticing it in operation or by its effects.

Worldview, although it appears to be, is not "hardwired." The vectors through which it is taught are myriad. From the time that we are born, through our schooling, and through our adulthood, we are inundated by that which defines our current, modern worldview. It is taught behavior that is culturally bound and it is most certainly not "hardwired" (i.e., neurological) in nature even though it feels to most of us as if it is.

Not only, however, does a worldview defined how events in the real world are cataloged, in other words, 'how they are perceived,' but worldview also 'defines' what is perceived as possible and impossible. The concept of dualism is an example. Dualism states that an individual is born with at least two components: a physical body which is subject to aging, and an 'eternal' soul which is ageless. Although not every culture in the world subscribes to the philosophy of dualism, Western culture most certainly does. Our training begins early with Saturday morning cartoons: Sylvester the Cat dies by being hit by a semi truck, and his 'soul' immediately sprouts wings and flies up to heaven where he immediately dons a robe and plays music harp in hand. There is little that we observe through the media which is not continually teaching the philosophy of dualism: the news, sitcoms, commercials, the radio, newspapers, popular books (from the romances all the way up to college textbooks) and our day-to-day interactions with our fellow community members. Dualism, then, moves from 'philosophy' or theory to 'indisputable fact.'

For us, then, to encounter a culture which does not accept dualism as a primary philosophy feels 'wrong' or 'impossible.' When this author first encountered the 'soul beliefs' of the Cochiti People of New Mexico, the author was astounded and thrown temporarily into a state of confusion. The author was a

student at the University of New Mexico at the time and was working with a native of the Cochiti Pueblo. One day, we were cataloging a book the subject of which seem to irritate my partner much. I asked her what was wrong and the following is her paraphrased explanation.

"I'm really angry that the State of New Mexico would choose to flood this particular part of Cochiti Pueblo. It is the place, exactly the place, the valley to where the souls of my people go when they die. Now, all the souls of my people, my parents, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents will all be underwater. This is like a slap in the face, and the State of New Mexico is responsible."

I was somewhat shocked and I asked "You mean the souls of your people go to a valley?" (One must understand that I was still under the illusion that "going to heaven" was a universal belief amongst all people – I was still young at the time.)

"My people when they are buried are taken to this valley. Their bodies are laid out and their souls will live in this valley and wander it for the rest of all time."

Mary Francis was the girl's name. She was attractive, young (in her early twenties), and very pleasant to work with. Oddly enough, she laid one of the biggest bombs on me that I would experience in my entire life. At first, I thought she meant that the bodies were taken to the valley like a native graveyard, but when I mentioned how insensitive the government can be, she quietly explained that my view was naïve just like all the rest of the white people's.

"You can't really understand it because you're one of the white people, but this valley is where the ghosts of my ancestors *live*—the place where souls go after death. Just like white people go to Heaven or Hell after they die, my people go to the valley of the dead and, now, thanks to the State of New Mexico, they are under water."

I was astounded and didn't have much to say for quite a while. I was somewhat hurt, I suppose, that she had lumped me into a group of 'naïve white people'; I felt excluded that she had a secret that she wasn't telling me. I felt confused and even somewhat guilty that I belonged to the group of people who had done this to *her* people. My mind, course, generated a dozen reasons why she had done this to me, had made me feel this uncomfortable. What I didn't understand at the time, though, is that when one worldview collides with another, there *is* a feeling of discomfort, and this feeling is little more than a response to what is commonly called "culture shock." I also didn't know that because of it, my grip on my own worldview was loosened for a moment at that point. <sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>It would be several years before I would remember that the people of my own home town, German-Americans, also held to the belief that the souls of *our* dead also lived in

"Culture shock" is a common enough term among anthropologists. It is the point at which an individual is able to revise his own worldview. In essence, it is two worldviews coming together, clashing, and eventually coming to some type of resolution. The outcome is manifold. Worldview A confronting worldview B can result in A winning out, B winning out, or A and B somehow melding together into something new which is neither A nor B. Secondly, the results are not necessarily immediate. In my particular case it took several years to come to some type of resolution.

The point of this discussion revolving around worldview, and that of the two papers that I had written previously, is that the individual is generally completely unaware of the stranglehold which worldview holds. The general assumption as described above is that worldview manipulates one's perception according to cultural rules, but at this point it is also necessary to bring up the idea that worldview also determines possibility and need. The example above plainly demonstrates the problems associated with one possibility confronting another, but it is also important to note that 'need' was also seriously affected. For my training as a human being to function properly as a worldview it is, or was, necessary for souls to separate from the body and travel to 'Heaven,' 'Hell,' 'Purgatory,' or some type of limbo to await rebirth. I simply did not have it in my vocabulary that a soul 'could not' be separated from the body. It had never occurred to me.

All my training since childhood (watching cartoons, the news, listening to the radio, listening to preachers, reading New Age books, reading the newspaper, singing songs with the radio, etc.) did not train me to deal with or find acceptable the idea that, culturally, some people can and do believe that the soul simply does not separate from the body. The reason that it took me several years to digest this idea after I first heard it from Mary Francis is that deep inside me, ingrained into me through years of repetition, had developed the *need* for the philosophy of 'dualism.' The 'need' developed because if it did not then numerous parts of my worldview will no longer function as they should. Worldview, then, does not necessarily generate 'need' in the sense that 'hunger' is a 'need' but rather in the sense of necessity, or an integral part, to allow the worldview to function as a whole.

Without dualism, the modern worldview does not function properly.

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the graveyard—the memories had been clouded by my repeated exposure to more modern concepts of an Afterlife. This is not the same as saying that the non-dualistic belief held by many German-Americans of that period of time were carrying on a 'heathen tradition,' but rather a Christian tradition that the soul would be held to the corpse until Judgment Day when all would rise up for judgment to be dispersed then to either Heaven or Hell.

### 3.2 Christianity's Early Role, Christianity's Gift<sup>72</sup>

Modern heathenry, or modern paganism in general, is probably not the true source of the change in worldview when it comes to concepts of the Afterlife. There were much earlier influences occurring during the heathen era of Scandinavia. These have been a personal fascination of the author for the past two decades which we choose to lump together as "borderzones" and "borderzone philosophy." These influential zones would have been the romano-turk to the southeast of the Germanic realm, romano-christian to the south, celtic to the southwest and west, Sami to the north, and baltic to the east.

Borderzones have always been places of cultural exchange, and have been studied to a large degree. They have existed through history and continue to exist today in any area where two or more cultures come together within a single geographical area. Borderzones are not always places of peace and harmony: harsh clashes, prejudice, discrimination, economic unfairness and imbalance are common as well as are harmonious blends. In modern times, in industrialized countries, borderzones exist as "ethnic neighborhoods."<sup>73</sup> Cultural lines of opposition and lines of transmission can be documented with accuracy, and have been. but these are often also ignored when writing history. 'History,' traditionally, is a field of study which has been fraught with the political agendas of the historian, and, in a sense, is a field of study which has more in common with writers of fiction than with writers of scientific fact. The fact is that borderzones are of places of culture clash/ meld and individual cultural boundaries are blurred.

Figure #1 shows not only the lines of sharing between worldviews during Anglo-Saxon England but also the lines of opposition.<sup>74</sup> Documentation of the Conversion of Britain as well as the entire Germanic North of Europe between 450 CE - 1000 CE shows that, contrary to the common modern myth, heathen Europeans were not necessarily butchered into converting to Christianity but were, for the most part, slowly reacculturated, and that this reacculturation process, much like which has occurred in the American southwest among the pueblo peoples, resulted in a pervasive common popular religion/ worldview

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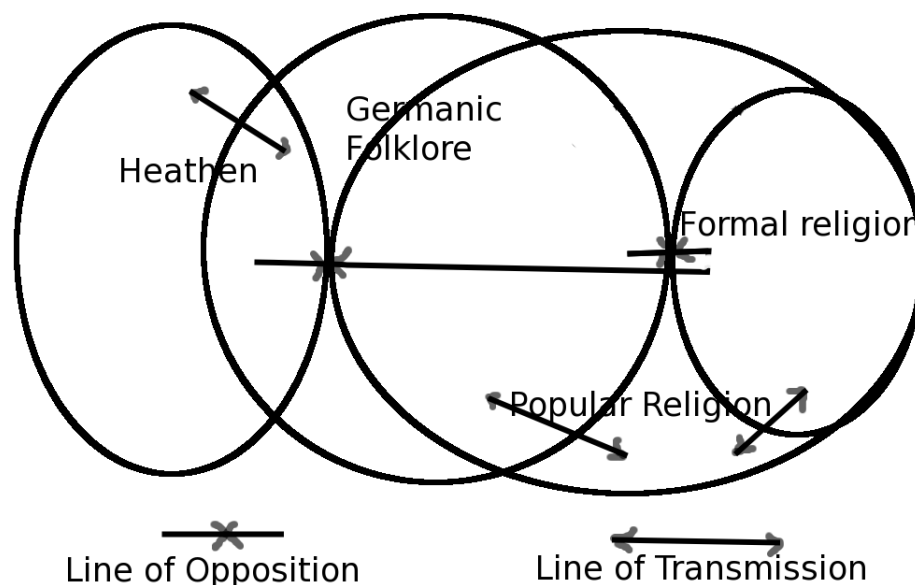
<sup>72</sup>'Gift' interestingly means 'poison' in ModGer. It is no coincidence; both 'poison' and 'a gift' are *something that is given to someone*. On the one hand, it's a thing of beauty, on the other, a thing of death. Among us German-Americans, '*Brautegift*' ('dowery' *ist doch lächerlich*) is a joke because the bride is 'the downfall' of the bachelor! Hence, the heading.

<sup>73</sup>'Ethnic neighborhoods' are, at times, viewed as the *places* to go on a Friday evening for 'ethnic cuisine' and to hear 'ethnic music' by those who consider themselves to be *cosmopolitan*. On the other hand, at least in the United States, 'ethnic neighborhood' is a politically correct way of describing what has been called 'the bad side of town' or 'the other side of the tracks.' Culture clashes in the recent past of the United States have escalated into violence, rioting, looting, murder and cause for vengeance. The 'gangs of New York' (of the 1800s), the violence of American Indian Reservations (during the 1970s), the violent side of the Civil Rights Movement in the American South during the 1960s, the Ku Klux Klan, and the anti-semitism of the neo-nazi organizations are all by-products of 'borderzones.'

<sup>74</sup>The diagram was recreated from Karen Louise Jolly's *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (1996; The University of North Carolina Press; p. 33).



Figure 1: Cultural relationships during Anglo-Saxon times



which was at the same time found to be acceptable or at least tolerable by both traditional heathens and formal Christian religionists. It is the product of this 'slow moving blend'<sup>75</sup> during the beginnings of the historical period which produced the the incredibly beautiful, yet mysterious, collections of AS poetry, the body of Norse Sagas, and the Eddas.

Written literature was a gift brought to the north by the southern scribes of the church, but the literary descriptions of the worldview presented in those texts are representative of the mixture common to what Jolly defines as the 'popular religion,' i.e. that which was common to the greater community. In this common worldview, this blend, one finds elves and dwarves existing alongside angels, saints interacting with heathen demi-gods, and Þór locked in an 'all-or-nothing' contest of strength and wit with Jesus over the Atlantic between Norway and

<sup>75</sup>The 'blending' lasted from the first contact with Christianity in the Germanic north (ca. 450 CE) until well into the medieval period. Some authors, including this author, claim that acculturation was never actually completed until either the late 1800s or early 1900s because of the effects of germanicization as documented by various authors including James C. Russel in his *The Germanicization of Early Medieval Christianity* and Karen Louise Jolly's *Popular Religion Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context*. The myth of the 'event of Conversion' which has been popular among the Wiccan and New Age crowds for the past four decades has been completely exposed by historian Ronald Hutton in his *Triumph of the Moon* and several articles that he wrote for the magazine *Pomegranate*. The modern myth of 'the takeover of Europe by the Christian Church' appears to have been little more than a gross inflation of the facts by various authors during the 1800s who used the inflated 'facts' to promote the image of the 'noble savage,' common to the times.

Iceland. Jewelry molds for both the Christian crucifix and the heathen's Þór's Hammer which judging by the late appearance in the archaeological record could have been a lucrative jeweler's attempt at an early 'knock-off copy' of a prehistoric fad. Utilizing a 'borderzone approach' to Germanic history, the often debated issue of 'how *heathen* actually is the body of Norse literature' becomes a moot point since the very fact that the literature is written on parchment demonstrates a mixing of cultural or worldview values to some degree. Without benefit of the archaeological record, teasing out the heathen parts of the *Völuspá* from those which are blatantly Christian are about as effective as attempting to reverse engineer a common lilac bush to its basic (and still unknown) ancestors. From a literary standpoint, the entire corpus of Germanic literature represents the 'hybrid era,' the borderzone between the heathen (pre-450 CE) and the completely Christian Era (post-Industrial Age, according to many of us who lean conservatively).

Understanding the idea of concept exchange in a borderzone region is important to reconstructionism. Borderzones, as stated above, have always existed and will continue to exist so long as cultures exist. While one of Jolly's theses reiterated throughout her entire book is that we, as researchers, can only surmise lines transmission between the heathen and Christian worlds of Anglo-Saxon England based on literary and archaeological evidence, the mechanics of borderzones are well-known in modern anthropology.

“These same processes of acculturation at the domestic leve, although virtually impossible to document, undoubtedly ocured after the baptism of Guthrum in East Anglia and throughout the Danelaw during the reconquest of the tenth century. The Viking settlers displaced the exisytng landholders and brought with them their own customs and laws; yet these newcomers also made new relationships with the English Christian population, as their new owners, as neighbors, and as inölaws. While we may question the depth of Guthrum's conviction at the moment of baptism, there is no denying the evidence of Scandinavian Chrisitanization over the next century at the grassroots level of popular culture, as seen, for example, in the rise of Danish churchmen in the tenth centuryand the popularity in the Danelaw of the cult of St. Edmund, martyred by Danes themselves. Most of all, the growth of Christianity following the Danish settlement is visible in the spread of local, lay-owned churches, both inside and outside the Danelaw.”<sup>76</sup>

It is also interesting that even though it is possible to study 'living' borderzones between heathen and Christian in real time, for example among the Pueblo Peoples of New Mexico, determining exactly which part of a specific tradition is native and which is imported becomes as elusive as studying a single electron among physicists.<sup>77</sup> The problem is that the *tradition* is interpreted by each

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<sup>76</sup>Jolly, p. 45 .

<sup>77</sup>It is a known principle in quantum physics that one either observe the effects of an

practitioner on a personal level. One practitioner may accept one part of a foreign system as being compatible with his worldview, such as the existence of a Christian god among the *kachinas* of his clan, but not Jesus, while another may accept both the god and Jesus *plus* the existence of the Christian Heaven as an alternate afterlife. Another may simply utilize elements of Christianity in poetic reference in a manner similar to modern poets who utilize Greek or Roman mythological analogies. The *tradition* is the by-product of a community, however, encompassing the cumulative personal interpretations and because the entire collection of personal interpretations is constantly in a state of flux so is the tradition itself.

The model which Jolly presents is very similar to what is still observed currently among the Pueblo Peoples. She restricts her discussion to the processes and events of Conversion among the Anglo-Saxon tribes, but because the mechanics of a borderzone remain the same, one can expect the Conversion to have been similar among the Scandinavian peoples upon which most modern heathenry is based although, as a matter of course, the details of the interplay between *conversion processes* and *conversion events* will generate a completely different story than among the Anglo-Saxons or the Pueblo Peoples. Important to our discussion is the lines of transmission versus the lines of opposition in the above Figure #1. There is absolutely no evidence that any of the so-called “heathen literature” was actually produced by heathens. In fact, there is evidence against it especially when one realizes that all writing was done by those trained by churchmen and training in literacy did not come without strong interaction with the world of the Christian. Additionally, there is no direct line to heathenry. Heathen tradition overlaps into the world of the Christian only through folkloric practices which were found acceptable at a pragmatic level or a social level to both the heathen and the Christian. Presumably, these practices would include medical practices, traditions pertaining to home and land, and social practices such as ritualized drinking at special events among the Germanic peoples, for example. Where such practices overlap into worldview, such as the cause of a particular disease, one makes note that Christianized explanations dominate. Thus, one will note the Christian origin of elves early on in A-S literature, and the dualistic thinking injected into the existing corpus of Norse mythological poetry in spite of the apparent conflict with what is known about heathen Germanic burial customs.<sup>78</sup>

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electron's movement but know nothing of the electron itself or that one can observe the electron but know nothing of its movement/ position, but not both. For an explanation in lay language of the interesting phenomena of quantum physics the reader is referred to either *The Tao of Physics* (Fritjof Capra, 4th Edition (Shambhala Publications, Inc.; Boston, Mass.), 1999 (reprint)) or *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* by Gary Zukav (William Morrow & Company;; New York, NY), 1979. The caveat is that quantum mechanics/ physics has essentially nothing to do with reconstructionism and those who utilize these fields of study to 'prove' or 'rationalize' heathen practices, specifically magically practices are floundering hopelessly and stupidly in the tar pits of pseudoscience.

<sup>78</sup>One of the finest overviews of heathen burial custom is Rudolf Simek's *Religion und Mythologie der Germanen* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft; Darmstadt, Germany: 2003), which has unfortunately not yet been translated into English. Covered is the period from the Bronze Age up to the Conversion including gravemounds, sacrifice, women/ men, various

### 3.3 Where the *Modern* Kicks In

It is not only Christian versus heathen which must be a consideration for those attempting to engage seriously in the reconstruction of ancient worldviews. In Section 1 above, we touched on many *innovations* offered by modern heathens to bring, as can be read on many email lists, 'the ancient religions *up-to-date*.' The arguments generally accompanying the statement are usually variations of the following:

1. The ancients knew nothing of democracy and the fundamental need for equality across the board regardless of race, gender, creed, political affiliation, or sexual persuasion. Slavery and human sacrifice, for example, is impossible in this day and age.
2. Ancient [*insert cultural preference here*] people were not as technologically advanced as industrialized nations today and, therefore, were not able to explain conceptual fields such as psychology, medicine, physics, and parapsychology as precisely as we are able to. New vocabulary needs to be developed to encompass the advances made in the past 1000 years.
3. Daily life as well as warfare did not exist as they do now. The activities which offered the ancients the opportunities to act in a fashion to allow entry into the Óðin's Hall of the Slain no longer exist; modifications are necessary.
4. The gods are psychological constructs, archetypical symbols, which can be manipulated to one's advantage.

The above points show how far the modern worldview has moved since the Germanic Heathen Era and has in essence become a culturally different one, to be sure, but they also demonstrate the natural tendency of humans to avoid abandoning one worldview for another. This *avoidance* is not necessarily conscious, however. In fact, the mere suggestion on a modern mailing list that such an avoidance exists brings an immediate reaction in the form of denials (often rather harshly worded) from, usually, well over 50% that they are engaging in such. Oddly, the primary way that a firmly embedded worldview will display its built-in protection is *through* such denials, and the only real way to exchange one worldview for another is to consciously raise one's worldview to the level of consciousness usually through a series of exercises designed to bring it into small controlled culture clashes.

The second argument quickly follows: "Oh, you say that because I deny a difficult time changing worldviews is I *unconsciously* am refusing to change! Prove to me that I am refusing to change! I'm a heathen in mind and soul—just a modern one! Of course, because I live in the modern world! How could I be otherwise?" And, this second argument is based in truth. The evidence has

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forms of burial mound, cremation-burial versus interment burial proper, and the differences which are observed between heathen and Christian burial.

been available for thousands of years, however, that changing one's religion is a simple affair, but changing one's cultural worldview is extremely difficult if not impossible to do completely and is the basis of Simek's conclusion that

“...even the most religious of modern heathens have described [little of their modern beliefs and practice] which has to do which actual Germanic heathen religion and success at revitalizing the ancient worldview have been modest at best. The rekindling of the Viking Age religion of Thor, Óðín, and Freya is not to be found among modern heathens.”<sup>79</sup>

Presenting this statement generally provokes angry denials from modern heathens rather than discussion along with the above points as to why the ancient religion needs updating rather than a serious examination of the differences between the two worldviews, the ancient and the modern. The preference seems to be examine, interpret, discuss and redefine the ancient *through* the modern. The resistance to exchanging one worldview for another is strong and built-in.

Americans, for example, are notoriously bad at a fitting in anywhere else in the world (except, perhaps, as an occupying force), are the butt of jokes among locals, and are considered arrogant and narrow minded on the one hand, while on the other are one of the largest groups of people who will quickly 'pretend' that they are the adopted sons and daughters of a foreign culture.<sup>80</sup><sup>81</sup> The modern American worldview is strongly constructed and is built to resist change with blatant denial and other defensive systems.

The reconstructionist, then, is confronted with a given set of problems immediately upon his decision to reconstruct. The first and possibly the most difficult is “How can one reconstruct a worldview for which he has no neurological/ mental constructs?” Secondly, in changing worldview, one is required to change one's 'point of view.' This is not quite as easy as simple changing one's 'religion,' i.e. the vocabulary used to discuss one's personal belief system, because that kind of change is really no change at all but merely using different words to describe the same thing.

*At five years of age I saw a negro for the first time, a woman with chocolate brown skin. I asked her what happened to her skin, and she*

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<sup>79</sup>Simek, Rudolf, *Die Mythologie und Religion der Germanen*, 2003 (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft; Darmstadt, Germany), p. 17, translated by the author.

<sup>80</sup>Two books that I would highly recommend regarding altering or changing one's worldview are *Beyond Culture* by Edward T. Hall (Bantam/ Doubleday/ Dell Publishing Group, Inc.; New York, NY: 1981) and *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience* by Raymonde Carroll (trans. by Carol Volk and publ. by The University of Chicago Press; Chicago, Ill.: 1987). The best method for experiencing that which is described, however, is to learn a second language (German, for example) then go to a rural part of that country and try to pass yourself off as a local.

<sup>81</sup>This is the underlying thesis of the last two articles by this author: *Germanic Spirituality* and *Uncovering the Effects of Cultural Background on the Reconstruction of Ancient Worldviews* (both available for download at <http://www.angelfire.com/nm/seidhman> and <http://www.northvegr.org>).

*smiled and replied that it was the 'color of her skin.' I quickly absorbed the information, sharp as I was, and concluded, in my mind, that she was a caucasian with a birth defect. Later, watching TV (which was the old round screen, black-and-white, circa late 1950s), I saw a clown on a magic show and concluded that he was also a caucasian with a birth defect. The thought of all these birth defects in the world scared me and clowns became a frightening thing until my older sister cleared up the matter. It took her several months, though, to show me that clowns weren't really deformed caucasian people. It didn't occur to me until the age of 20 or so, that a black child seeing a caucasian ('me,' for example) would think that we were really negroes with ruined skin color, noses, and lips—we must be terribly frightful-looking to a child accustomed to earth-toned skin color and pleasantly rounded facial features!*

The above interlude is not a joke but is taken directly from the repertoire of the author's personal experience. The above is also analogy for how strong the modern worldview is. Moderns have difficulty imagining a world without dualism, for example. We view it as 'defective' but the word we prefer is *primitive*. We imagine a world where *all* humans are dualistic, built of body and spirit, with the earthly *body* being transient and temporary and the *soul* being immortal because that is all we know. We view the idea of the soul having a proper 'home' after death and is to be either rewarded or punished for performance because we can only envision a Heaven (read here 'Hall of [name of a god]), Hell (*Nas-trönd* or *Hel*), Purgatory (read here the 'endless cycle of incarnations), or Limbo (read here 'being absorbed into the Godhead), but see 'wandering the world' or 'living with the corpse' as being a defective and primitive view of life after death. A nice stepping stone, of course, is to 'think in terms of reincarnation,' but any short discussion with reincarnationists reveals that even the concept of reincarnation has taken on tones of reward and punishment (Heaven vs. Hell) and separation of the body/ soul complex. We find it difficult to think otherwise because our modern point-of-view (POV) doesn't easily allow for it just as the author's POV didn't allow for the idea that caucasians might actually be viewed as defective. We cannot make sense of Mary Francis' description of life after death until it is first translated into terms which we *can* understand—her terminology is viewed by the modern, middle-class American's mind as being defective. What she *means* (her worldview) is not what we understand for we can only *understand* our own worldview.

The struggle against the modern worldview is obvious and it *is* a struggle. The email lists which have been visited by this author in preparation for this paper reveal the struggles in the form of simple denial, irritation, the clamoring for ideologies such as provided by Wicca or neo-shamanism to be a part of the heathen's cosmos in an effort to 'bridge the gap' between the modern and the primitive. Changing POV is not a simple process.

Raymonde Carroll presents one's worldview as being viewed as a part of oneself and should that POV be threatened one can feel the 'struggle for life'

itself. An integral part of the self must be obliterated.

“Indeed, my culture is the logic by which I give order to the world. And I have been learning this logic little by little, since the moment I was born, from the gestures, the words, and the care of those who surrounded me; from their gaze, from the tone of their voices; from the way I was raised, rewarded, punished, held, touched, washed, fed; from the stories I was told, from the books I read, from the songs I sang; in the street, at school, at play; from the relationships I witnessed between others, from the judgments I heard, from the aesthetics embodied everywhere, in all things right down to my sleep and the dreams I learned to dream and recount. I learned to breathe this logic and to forget that I had learned it. I find it natural. Whether I produce meaning or apprehend it, it underlies all my interactions. This does not mean that I must agree with all those who share my culture; I do not necessarily agree with all those who speak the same language as I do. But as different as their discourse may be from mine, it is for me familiar territory, it is recognizable. The same is true, in a certain sense, of my culture.”<sup>82</sup>

The modern worldview is an integral part of modern man including the 'reconstructionist' and to sacrifice one's worldview for another often brings along with it feelings of loss of something important. These personal feelings are often exacerbated by the response from the immediate community who ostracize those choosing to 'forsake their heritage.' In western culture, particularly that of modern America, this is often viewed as akin to a criminal act.<sup>83</sup>

The reconstructionist is not a special person but rather a person who has made a decision to take on an especially difficult task, a person who has decided to explore and examine his own worldview piece by piece over an extended time by purposely bringing each piece into conflict with another until the second worldview can be understood on its own terms.

## 4 Experimental Reconstruction

### 4.1 Matrices

The reconstructionist utilizes an approach to the study of ancient or contemporary but culturally different worldview designed purposely to expose *his own personal biases* and *prejudices*. For the purpose of this paper, we use the term *matrix*.

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<sup>82</sup>Carroll, Raymonde, *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience*, 1987, trans. by Carol Volk (The University of Chicago Press; Chicago, Ill.), p. 3.

<sup>83</sup>Over the 40 or 50 years, the general response to cults like Sun Myung Moon's (the 'moonies'), the Branch Davidians, Hare Krishna cults, neo-heathens of every flavor, various hippie communes across the U.S.A. and even to some degree the Amish, Mennonites, and Hutterites has been less than welcoming.

**matrix** *n., pl. matrices or matrixes.* 1. A situation or surrounding substance within which something originates, develops, or is contained: “*Folklore must be maintained in the matrix of a culture for some time before it can be accepted as genuine.*” (Horace Beck)<sup>84</sup>

What the reconstructionist is exposing then is the matrix of his own culture so that the breadth and length can be explored, examined, and defined.

Matrix is not synonymous with worldview, but, rather, worldview is a subset and a by-product of the cultural matrix. Worldview contains *that which is known and how each event relates to the other events of the known world* but the cultural matrix is the pattern into which a previously unknown event will be placed until it becomes part of the known world. In the example cited in the preceding section, the author placed the existence of dark skinned people and clowns into his cultural matrix, i.e. into the *people* category, then into the *exceptional* category. After time, with the gathering of a bit more information, clowns were placed into the *performers* category and negroes were moved into *people of color* area of the author’s worldview which was a subset of *people* of the known world, i.e. of the personal worldview. The *people* category then looked like the following:

It should be carefully noted that *caucasian* is not a subset but is synonymous with the main category of *people*. This is not an error. *Caucasian* in the mind of most Anglo Americans *is* synonymous with *people*. In fact, although not exactly a universal truth, it is common that the natively spoken word *people* or *person* in a language means *a member of the culture in which the language is spoken*; therefore, Diné (Navajo for *people*) means a Navajo person only, Lakota (Lakota for *people*) means a Souix person of the Lakota branch of the tribe only—their word for a Caucasian is *wasichu* (literally a ‘fat-taker’). ‘Caucasian’ for various tribes of color such as those of Africa, South and North America, Southeast Asia, etc. makes up either a either a subset of human being or in rarer cases a subset of animal much in the manner that some Europeans and Americans until recently viewed black Africans as being more closely related to apes than to human beings. Point of view, then, is determined by the cultural matrix within which one lives and is ultimately underlies, determines and shapes one’s worldview.

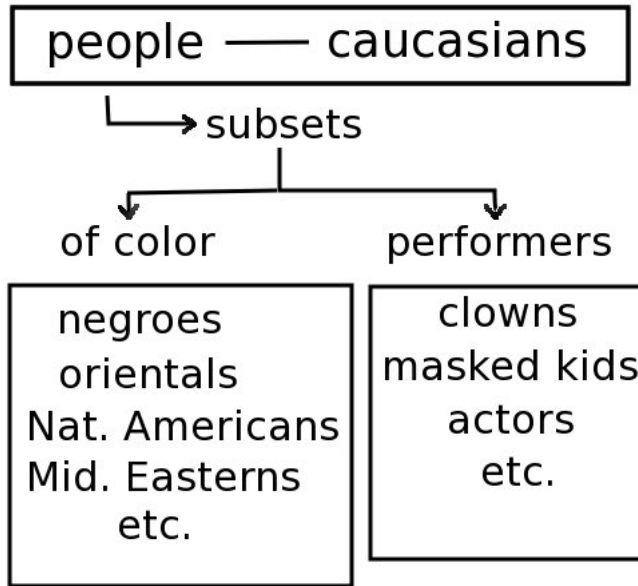
Reconstruction of the heathen Germanic worldview is far more complex than just ‘changing one’s religion.’ The ancient Germanic heathens had their own worldview, different from the modern, which was a by-product of their own cultural matrix which, in turn, developed from their collective life experiences many of which no longer exist. Because of this, the argument follows that the worldview can no longer be reconstructed. The scientific and technological, and communication boundaries have shifted significantly and modern man is no longer so heavily dependent upon manpower, animal husbandry, small farming, fishing, and oral tradition. More powerful power sources such as electrical, petroleum based, chemical, and nuclear-based have been developed. The

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<sup>84</sup>Definition taken from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: New College Edition*, 1978, (Houghton Mifflin Co.; Boston, Mass.) ed. by William Morris.



Table 1: The author's *people* category



modern knowledge base in areas such as medicine, biology, chemistry, engineering, physics, astronomy, travel and so on reflect these changes and because the modern experience is so vastly different from that of the Germanic heathen the cultural matrix which produced the ancient worldview no longer exists. “As a consequence,” the argument goes “the worldview can no longer be produced.”

The argument appears to be solid and is not completely disregarded by the reconstructionist. The reconstructionist realizes that the cultural matrix of the Viking Age no longer exists and realizing this, he attempts to utilize what is known about the worldview of the Viking Age people, i.e. known events and relationships between events as expressed not only in 'source literature,'<sup>85</sup> but as expressed in archaeological finds, what is known of land use, social relationships as expressed in legal code, war, peace treaties, wills and land acquisition and methods of land acquisition, and through artistic expression in all forms from simple clothing and home decoration, poetry and song, to carvings in stone and

<sup>85</sup>It is important that we hold what has been called 'source literature' in suspicion. In fact, very little stems from the true heathen Viking Age but rather *from* or, better, *through* church trained scholars. At best, it should really be called 'near-source literature' and this 'near-source material' often does not adequately explain what is found in the archaeological record or, in some cases, is directly in conflict with it. When one regards *cultural matrix* and *worldview* important to understanding 'meaning,' then one can understand this author's resistance to accepting the concept of 'source literature' as being the primary basis for reconstructing the ancient Germanic heathen's worldview.

wood. With this information, the reconstructionist then hopes to reconstruct the worldview and, then, through a type of 'backwards engineering' and glimpse into the underlying logic of the worldview.

The first question which should come to the reader is "Is this even possible?" No completely adequate answer can be provided, however, because experimentation is still in progress. On the other hand, it is clear to researchers (see the quote from Rudolf Simek above) and to many modern heathens that the current method of 'changing to an alternative religion' has produced little more than Norse-flavored Christianity. The reconstructionist knows that to gain a more historically accurate access to the Norse world there must be a thorough examination of one's own worldview and one's own cultural matrix. The rationale for this is to assure that as data regarding the historical Norse worldview are collected, the reconstructionist does not automatically filter the bits of new information through his own cultural matrix and thereafter apply 'the modern worldview' biasing the interpretation, and although this is a complex and lengthy process because one must gain *conscious knowledge* of one's own cultural matrix which lies largely below the level of consciousness, it can be done.

Rudolf Simek addresses the 'backwards engineering' problem of the ancient worldview, well spiced with cautions, for over-interpreting the collection of information. He readily admits that one cannot know for sure, on the one hand, but that on the other, the shift from the older worldview *can* be easily determined. Simek has summarized this in a very adequate and straightforward fashion:

"The old Germanic heathen's view of life after death was markedly non-uniform and relatively unsatisfying to his fellow heathens; finally, it was Christianity which offered an attractive alternative to this part of the worldview. As early as the the late Viking Age at the end of the first millennium, we come across written evidence which reports in detail, the various different concepts of life after death. However, prior to that literary time, information comes from grave finds which we have abundantly at our disposal as source material from the north and west Germanic cultures."<sup>86</sup>

Simek continues on about what *is* known about about the older true heathen worldview regarding Afterlife concepts before the Age of Syncretism:

1. Grave-yards were not separated from the communities as they were after the Conversion.
2. Graves, themselves, were outfitted for life continuing underground (in the grave) after the point of death.
3. There is no indication of an after-life destination such as Hel, the Halls of [*fill in the blank with a god's name*], or Valhalla on any memorial stone or

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<sup>86</sup>Simek, Rudolf *Götter und Kulte der Germanen*, 2004 (Verlag C. H. Beck, oHG; München, Germany), p. 109. Translated by the author.

marker until the region being investigated had reached it's own particular starting date for its local version of the Age of Syncretism, i.e. until Church missionaries had saturated the area.

4. There, at least, is a consistency from the Neolithic up through the Iron Age—it is during the Viking Age when changes begin to appear. The time associated with the 'changes' coincides with the entry of Christianity into the north.
5. *Valhalla* as an after-life destination begins to appear first in the southern Germanic regions and its successive development follows closely on the heels of the development of syncretism falling in between the native germanic periods and the point of conversion to Christianity. This is not the same as saying that Valhalla's development was modeled after the Christian Heaven, however.
6. There is a measureable difference between that which is presented in the sagaic literature and skaldic poetry and that which is presented in eddaic poetry where eternal fame and living in the gravemound plays primary roles in the former and destinations after death and the concept of dualism are in the foreground in the latter.

In spite of the fact that one can never really with certainty reconstruct the worldview of the pre-Christian Germanic heathen, reconstructionists are able to identify much of which was injected into the worldview from Christianity by examining and analyzing concomitant changes in the archaeological record. For example, no one can say with certainty that a heathen concept of 'soul' did not exist prior to Christinity; however, by examining the entire constellation of information dating from the Viking Age, one can observe the acceptance and development of spiritual dualism over a period of a half millennium to its full blown form by the time of Conversion and by gauging the line of progression can make educated guesses about the concept of soul prior to 500 CE especially when the guesses themselves are supported by the archaeological record itself. In short, then, reconstruction of the worldview *is* possible.

The second question and probably the more difficult to answer convincingly, since individual preference plays such a large role, is why one would wish to alter his spiritual life in the first place, i.e. "Why bother?" Many involving themselves in modern heathenry report that they have been on a personal quest seeking an alternative to the dominant religions of modern world; however, the reconstructionist is *not* simply on a personal spiritual quest but is attempting rather to understand the workings of the world as his perceived ancestors understood them. This requires something beyond a *surface change*, i.e. beyond simply changing spiritual vocabulary. In some ways, the modern modular approach to spirituality is more efficient than the older method of religion as a subset of worldview which, in turn, is a subset of the entire cultural matrix. The modular approach allows the individual the ability to retain parts of his modern belief system which are pleasing and to exchange those parts that are

non-pleasing for something which is more acceptable. It also allows for a quicker change of religion by shortening up the acolyte period since the entire worldview does not need to be reconstructed. Because of this, the modern modular approach is more preferable than the obviously more difficult methods of the reconstructionist.

The final question is “Is reconstruction of the Norse heathen’s concept of an afterlife necessary to the development of modern heathenry?” Again, as in the question above, the resulting response is a resounding and firm “*yes/ no/ perhaps/ maybe.*” The question really revolves around the definition for the term ‘modern heathenry.’ Defined as an ‘alternative religion’ like Wicca, the Red-Road,<sup>87</sup> and other various New Age cults, modern heathenry does not resemble what is known about the Viking Age; it is just another modern alternate. This has become the most common approach. Even though the vocabulary of modern heathenry as an alternative religion is similar and is usually based on old Norse words, the worldview is almost completely modern and, consequently, the meanings of the Old Norse words have been altered to accommodate modern concepts. Few serious authors regard *modern heathenry*, though, as anything but a thin imitation of the ancient practice (see Simek’s stance in Section 4.2). If, on the other hand, modern heathenry is to be viewed as revitalization of the *actual* ancient practices, then reconstruction in the manner described is vital for without it *modern heathenry* simply does not exist—it is, in fact, Norse flavored newagism. The practice of heathenry requires that the adherent work to alter shift his worldview completely.

Some authors have derisively written regarding the *McCulturization* of the world, and understandably so. Every religion created in the New Age has the same taste, smell, and look, and all the parts are interchangeable. *McCulturization* isn’t new, however; after the Revolutionary War there was the innovative move from the one-of-a-kind rifles built by master gunsmiths to an off-the-shelf model with interchangeable parts which was not only economic but it also made rifle repair simpler and less costly for the gun owner. The concepts of mass production and standardization of quality have essentially replaced the need for master craftsmen and what was once rare, costly, and related to status is now affordable by anyone. Automation and interchangeability along with mass production and standardization of quality are not bad in themselves, but rather good tools for dealing large groups of consumers. However, the same concepts used as a life philosophy often drive the spiritual pilgrim questing for quality of life, rich history and heritage; this is the quest of the reconstructionist.

There is something inherently beautiful about the older one-of-a-kind, handmade, all-or-nothing approach. If there were not, Gucci, Versace and Ethen Allen would all have gone out of business long ago. There is standard quality, and then there is *quality*. It is the latter which the reconstructionist seeks to restore. Rather than reproduce an antique look-alike radio based loosely on the radios of the 1930s complete with a slot for CDs and a *faux*-antique dial which

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<sup>87</sup>The term here is used to mean the collective set of American Indian traditions as practiced by non-tribal/ non-Native Americans, generally, white, middle class Americans.

picks up only local stations and which can be bought for less than \$40 at the local Wal-Mart, the reconstructionist studies the technology of the era, that of electronics, cabinet making, and tool-making as well as lifestyle, knowledge of physics, chemistry and metallurgy in order to *re-construct* the past and bring it into the present. The question “Why bother?” then has no good answer because it has more to do with ‘that which drives and propels the individual.’ It is one thing to say that modern man can derive meaning from the myths of the Germanic heathen north, but quite a different matter to wonder and attempt to understand what those same tales meant to the composers, tale-tellers, and listeners. This, then, is the realm of the reconstructionist.

## 4.2 A Reconstructionist’s Personal Experiments: Question Everything.

This section attempts to provide the reader with a very general outline regarding the approach to reconstruction. A single author absolutely cannot provide every individual reader with all the cautions and warnings necessary to the reconstruction of the ancient Norse heathen’s worldview. This is not possible because each individual researcher must first learn about himself and his own worldview. This endeavor of shifting worldviews becomes more of a personal journey of discovery about one’s own self and one’s personal history than merely changing one’s religion. As pointed out earlier in section?, one can only discover his own worldview by bringing it into conflict with another. Woodworkers have long realized that to achieve a perfect sanding job on an article, it is first necessary to ‘raise the grain’ by wetting it. The surface of the wood is made up of alternating hard and soft sections each of which represents one year of growth: the hard, narrow, dark grain of slow and long winter growth and the lighter, softer summer growth. In a sense, ‘raising one’s own grain’ through cultural conflict is important so that the individual bits of belief system, religious systems, and ideas of how events in the real world relate to one another can be identified so that when one looks over the worldview reconstruction in progress, one is able to clearly see his own.

Learning about worldviews is a fairly arduous process in the beginning because one’s old worldview is never very obvious. Making one’s worldview obvious, then, is a series of tricks and mental games. The mind must be tricked into revealing what lies underneath. In the beginning it can seem an almost impossible task, but, in fact, it is not. The ‘tricking’ is very similar to how one learns to analyze optical illusions, for example. At first it is probably most important to ‘loose in the grip of the dominant worldview’ so that it becomes somewhat unstable. Such instability is necessary so that mental shifting can take place at a conscious level later on.

In an earlier paper,<sup>88</sup> the author used the analogy of attempting to learn and understand the logic behind the older Galenic medical system. The older

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<sup>88</sup>Linzie, *Uncovering the Effects of Cultural Background on the Reconstruction of Ancient Worldviews*, 2004 (self published at <http://www.angelfire.com/nm/seidhman>).

system does not regard disease etiology and the disease process in any manner which is understandable today. Diseases were believed to stem from imbalances within the humor system of the human body and therefore cures were a matter of discovering exactly what the imbalances were and attempting to bring them back into accord with the entire system. Understanding disorders such as stroke and heart attack make no sense whatsoever in Galenic logic because the circulatory system did not exist. Not only did the circulatory system not exist, but neither did bacteria, virii, or other microorganisms. As a consequence, if one wishes to study Galenic medicine one is also required to understand the science and technology which supported at the time; in other words, one cannot just study Galenic medicine without understanding medieval physics, natural science, physiology, biology, botany, and philosophy. Additionally, one discovers quickly that a knowledge of medieval cookery and kitchen technology becomes very important since cures were often based in food. What originally started out to be only the study of an older medical system has quickly involved into the study of an entire era. So it is with the reconstruction of the Germanic heathen worldview.

*Immersion* is a technique that has been used for many centuries to teach second languages. The concept is simple and straightforward: completely surround one's self with virtually everything involving the culture and language being studied. This is often done by going to the country where the language is being spoken. As an axiom, this is considered the very best method for learning a second language. The corollary to the axiom is as follows: learning a second language in a rural setting is more effective than in a cosmopolitan setting since the chances for cross-cultural mixing have been reduced. Immersion for the heathen reconstructionist is not quite so simple as moving to a foreign country (although that can certainly help). Immersion would require intense reading but also the learning of one or more Germanic languages, developing an understanding of the arts, sciences, and technology (preferably with first-hand experience), cooking, etc. One of the pitfalls of this method, of course, is the tendency to engage in 'suitable substitution.' This is very noticeable at Renaissance fairs. Some of the participants are insistent on 'period costumes' made with 'period technology' and can often be seen at the Renaissance fairs spinning wool with homemade spindles, weaving on homemade looms, blacksmithing with 'period tools' while making 'authentic ironware,' tablet weaving designs in strips of cloth based on actual designs from archaeological finds and utilizing herbal dyes, or making chain mail by hand. Other participants are satisfied buying 'period costumes' from museum replica firms or even making their own costumes using modern technology such as sewing machines, store-bought cloth, or can be seen cooking their meals with food procured at the local food chain on Coleman propane stoves, etc. True reconstructionism requires an understanding of all that makes up the ancient worldview and although 'suitable substitutions' are often a necessity when living in the modern world, they detract one from gaining an understanding of the elder worldview in its entirety.

Immersion requires time and energy, and often a large workshop space. Consider, for example, reconstructing ancient bread-making techniques. Research

into ancient kitchenware indicated that breads were hearth baked. Most households had some kind of quern for milling grain which would have resulted in a fairly rough grained meal. Grains used were rye, barley, oats, and peas (depending on the region one is studying), salt, water, and possibly honey for sweetening. Common kitchen chemicals like baking soda or baking powder didn't exist. Leavening was available, at least by the medieval period, from the leavings of beer-, wine- or mead-making or simply through sourdough. Various utensils (wooden boxes, leather or bladder bags, sacks, bowls, and spoons along with iron and stone cookware) have all been studied and many of the items are easily reproducible. Investigating how peoples of the last one hundred years have made bread in primitive kitchens also helps. The bread making of early Alaskan pioneers, the mountain dwellers of Appalachia, various American Indian of North America tribes as well as Mexico have all been studied in detail. Various groups have used hardwood ashes or snow in the place of modern kitchen chemicals. European and east European groups have been studied as well. With a little bit of focused research, it is quite possible to reconstruct Viking Age bread-making techniques. This is exactly the same process which is used in living history museums today of which there are several now in existence throughout northern Europe. No amount of 'thinking' or 'reading' can replace the experience of actually baking bread in an unsophisticated kitchen.

On the one hand, studying a 'concept' such as an afterlife is, of course, far less tangible than baking a loaf of hearth bread. It seems only a mental exercise and should be completely learnable from books. This is the modular approach and while it may be functional for life in the modern industrialized world, the approach bypasses an important key: breadmaking, farming, fishing, hunting, weaving, small animal husbandry, game playing, artistic expression, wood carving, tree felling, house-building and mead-making were all part of the same worldview which spawned the heathen spirituality. Death, burial, afterlife concepts, etc. cannot be separated out and studied in isolation, nor should this approach be taken for this narrow area was completely integrated as part of the broader worldview. In our modern era of specialization, it is easy to forget that people at one time, out of necessity, sought to be a 'jack-of-all-trades.' Specialists existed to be sure. Lawyers, and healers are two groups which are fairly well documented, but in spite of that, every person was expected to know a little about law and a little about healing as well and lawyers and healers were still farmers, hunters, fishermen, or even slaves. The reconstructionist's approach to the afterlife, then, is not to study the Eddas but to engage in reconstruction those life's events which give rise to the spiritual view of things. The principle is that the spiritual is not separate from everyday life and by closely studying and reproducing everyday life with all its trials and failures, and successes and rewards, one will build the groundwork upon which the heathen's spiritual life was built. For this author, study of the Norse concepts of an Afterlife involved gaining a first-hand knowledge of death by working with the dying, helping with the funeral arrangements, dealing with families, etc. Few books can reasonably approach learning through experience.

Along with immersion, it should be mentioned that a good understanding of

the language(s) (in this case of old Norse, Anglo-Saxon, Old Saxon, Old High German, etc.) is mandatory. Common modern heathen uses of words such as blót, sumble, hörg, giant, troll, elf, etc. have come to mean something very different than what they actually meant in the original language. The reconstructionist will look at a word like 'elf' and ask "What did this actually mean to somebody living more than 1000 years ago in Scandinavia?" The neo-heathen is content with the modern meaning of the word 'elf' which is mainly derived from children's literature and the Santa Claus stories heard as a child. The reconstructionist will look at a word like 'blót' and ask the same question as he did previously. The answer quickly becomes, however, extremely complex because it requires an understanding of social relationships of the time, the construct of communities, early Germanic ritual behavior, techniques of animal husbandry/animal slaughter using 'period tools,' and the German status system as well as understanding of the religions and cults of the Germanic heathens; learning the meaning of the word becomes serious study in a large number of areas. Many are satisfied to place a blót on par with a heathen version of the Christian Sunday service, but such a view underplays and completely disregards the richness of what the word 'blót' meant. A word discussed above 'aptrburthr' is completely misunderstood by more the 90% of the people claiming to understand modern heathenry mainly due to an unwillingness in the area of language.

When this author first began to investigate the Germanic worldview, he was like most Americans monolingual and, as a consequence, books and research articles were often dry, unappealing, and were usually left unread. The significance of the etymological history of words like *Valhalla* or *Hel* were left to the 'big boys at the universities.' By the mid-1980s, however, I was fluent in German and had working knowledge of dialects of German (Platt and Pennsylvania German), a working knowledge of Old English, basic linguistics, Middle English, and a conversational knowledge of French. It was only after this that the importance of works like Bauschatz' *The Well and the Tree* and Edred Thorsson's article "Is Sigudhr Simundr 'aptrborinn'?" became evident. It was also the same period of time that I was able to look critically at J. Grimm's *Teutonic Mythology* finding errors of either logic or linguistics or a poor application of general applied anthropology or sociology and it was also at this time that the illogic of New Age authors became apparent rendering almost an entire genre of books useless for purposes of research with the exception of their use as bad examples.<sup>89</sup>

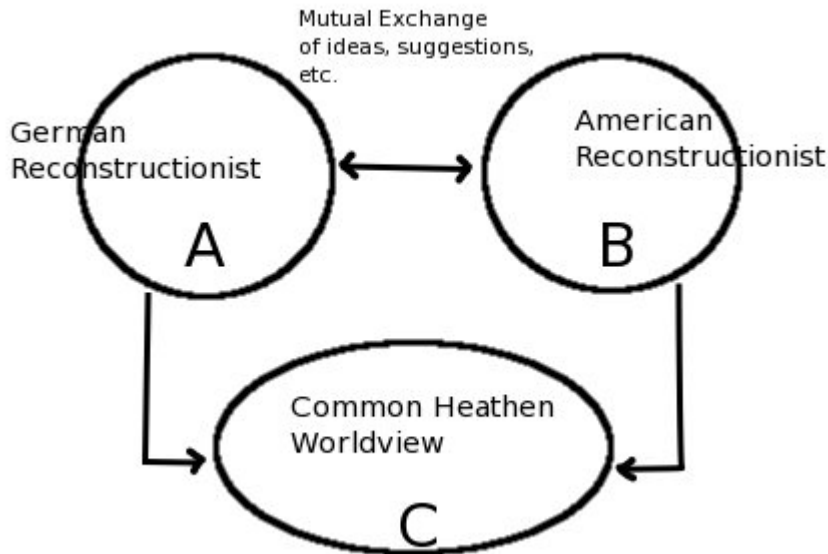
Not only does a second language allow one to explore the worldview more directly by allowing one to absorb information by the authors of source texts, knowledge of a modern Germanic language allows one access to research done

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<sup>89</sup>A very common approach for studying Norse Mythology used by newcomers to modern heathenry is to cull from books pertaining to wicca and its relationship to folklore. The mistakes made by the authors of these books becomes almost self-perpetuating like computer virii. The newcomer then passes the poor research, the errors of logic, and the incorrect information onto the next often through the various fora on the internet so that these can actually be classed as what Douglas Rushkoff has called 'a media virus.' (Rushkoff, Douglas *Playing the Future: What We can Learn from Digital Kids*, 1999, (Riverhead Books; New York). Killing such a virus requires healthy doses of skepticism and logic.



Figure 2: The crosscultural exchange of ideas in reconstructing worldviews.



in languages such as German, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, or Icelandic. Oftimes the approach to research and the interpretation is significantly different than the common American view. Authors such as Grönbech, Simek, Maier and Genzmer have provided eye-opening information regarding the worldview of the heathen which either has been unavailable in American texts or was simply glossed over. Additionally, knowing a spoken language—German, for example—allows one to exchange ideas with others involved in reconstructionism as well; these exchanges are important because now there are at least two trying mentally to shift from their two differing worldviews to a common Germanic heathen. The requirements then (see Figure 2.) become that

1. B must uncover his own cultural worldview by having it in opposition, i.e. culture clash, with the A's;
2. B must understand the B's worldview and the mental processes which the other must go through to get from A to C;
3. B must be open enough to observation and suggestion by A.

By working together, A & B should be able to attain C more easily and more efficiently. The difficulty is always allowing the “other” to make observations and suggestions about one's own worldview (which can sometimes be quite a 'touchy subject'). Germans and Americans often understand 'community,' 'marriage,' 'spirituality,' 'sexuality,' 'privacy,' and 'social exchange' in very different fashions. Germans will often bring arguments in a pub to an end by

agreeing to disagree after having made comments which would start a fight in an American bar, but can be extremely passionate, physical or even violent over the end results of a football game. A major pitfall for each is to assume that the other has the same worldview. In other words, the American assumes that the German correspondent's worldview is essentially *American*, for example, rather than *German*. Take the word/ concept 'community' as an example. 'Community' in the American mindset leans heavily upon the idea of communication so that not only is a small town considered a community, but so is a church, a bowling league at the local bowling alley, the regulars at the local pub, and an internet bulletin board. Germans tend to lean more heavily on geographic location.

In all previous papers, this author has stressed the need to examine one's own worldview. In this paper, it has been pointed out that worldview, itself, is the by-product not only of one's personal experiences but also of the entire cultural matrix within which one lives, and that the cultural matrix is made up of the collective experiences of the culture as a whole. It is important to realize that a cultural matrix not only provides individuals with 'answers' to life's little questions but it also provides the questions in the first place. The non-dualistic child's question "Daddy, what happened to [fill in dog's name here]?" is quickly reshaped unconsciously as a reflex. As soon as the answer begins (in a dualistic cultural matrix), the die is cast for the next time the question is posed: "Daddy, where do we go when die?" Such a question is only generated in cultures where there is an underlying acceptance of dualism. Watching an old Bugs Bunny cartoon where the cat is hit by a steam roller and his 'soul' peels off complete with harp and halo will just as easily reshape the question according to the dominant cultural matrix as a father's response will. We all swim in our cultural matrix giving it no heed like a fish in water. It is all around us like air. It fills our lungs and our lives and we rarely pay it any notice except perhaps during moments of 'culture clash.'

The importance of culture clash cannot be overstressed. Often, for the individual, the first time a cultural 'boundary' reveals itself is the result of culture clash. A concept such as 'time,' for example, seems rather straight forward for Americans: 24 hours, ticked off into minutes and seconds. Additionally, accept that some people are prone to arriving at appointments slightly early, some are punctual, and some are forever late. We don't, however, have a division for people who arrive a week late or 3 weeks late as is not uncommon on some of the American Indian reservations. Our cultural concept of 'lateness' does not generally extend beyond 20 minutes. And, for that matter, our cultural concept of 'waiting' also does not extend much beyond 20 minutes yet in Japan an important business man may be asked to wait several days before being seen and the chances are that the more important he is the longer he will be asked to wait.<sup>90</sup> The concepts of 'time' and 'waiting' then are bounded culturally and once the border has revealed itself it becomes just a matter of exploring

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<sup>90</sup>Edward T. Hall in his *Beyond Culture* discusses many of the cultural differences between the Japanese and Westerners from the perspective that it is difficult for Americans to comprehend nevermind function within the Japanese cultural context.

one's own borders. Of course, the Germanic concept of time isn't too much of a cultural issue in terms of 'lateness' or 'waiting,' but other temporal concepts such months, years, seasons, days measured from sundown to sundown, and the overall reliance on a lunar calendar rather a solar calendar become sticking points for the modern heathen.<sup>91</sup> Once a culture clash has revealed borders, though, the small tear in the fabric of worldview can be carefully probed until it can be grasped and torn wide open. The trick is in the 'probing.'

There is a pain associated with the reconstructionist's approach. The worldview, especially the American worldview (but really any worldview for the most part) is built to protect itself. There are triggers which set off the cerebral klaxons of Blasphemy, Depravity, Disgust, Perversion and the like. Here is an exchange between myself and another poster (who happens to be a respected friend of the author's). The writer reveals personal agony in tone and word:

*Original poster: And it would seem to make heathen practice seem more and more like the "experiment" you've referred to. If a religion is someone's life, I don't think the person is going to be satisfied looking at it as an encapsulated worldview, to be displayed or hidden depending on what the other worldviews up there might think or want, and if a religion doesn't aspire to become the lives of its adherents, I don't think it stands much chance of succeeding against the competition.*

(My response): Here you and I differ. I don't see religion or spirituality as a living thing. I see it as the byproduct of a cultural worldview. We do agree however that religion itself (in either case) is not and cannot be static. From my point of view, as the worldview itself changes so does the religion. This is most likely how and why Valhalla as and Afterlife destination developed and continued to develop into the late 1200s. This is most certainly how and why 'dying into the Halls of one's patron god and reincarnation were added onto heathenry over the course of the past 3 and a half decades.

In my mind the only real difference between a reconstructionist and an eclectic or neo-heathen (to use G. Lord's term) is that the reconstructionist constantly refers back to the source material like resetting the computer constantly rather than letting it run.

As has happened with medicine, for example, very few modern doctors can work within or even understand hippocratic/ galenic/ avecinnic medicine, yet this is the source of many modern diagnostic

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<sup>91</sup>In "Uncovering the Effects of Background Culture on the Reconstruction of Ancient Worldviews" this author brought up the solar calendar and how its use by modern heathens has essentially clouded the meanings of heathen holidays. The most obvious example is the modern regard for Yule as being a celebration of the winter solstice, i.e. celebrating the 'turning of the sun,' when in fact all customs point to its existence as a counter to the effects of the 'coldness' and the length of the night. Without understanding this innately, the heathen holiday of Yule is doomed to being a thin imitation of the rest of the New Age's Winter Solstice Celebrations and the real meaning remains hidden.

techniques, preventative medicine and the use of nutrition as treatment. This is still the current standard in much of the Middle East and for many disorders represents a far safer method of treatment. But to understand it the medical practitioner \*must\* adopt a second worldview, that of the humor theory. Most prefer to write it off. So is it with heathenry. My nature is to adopt the second worldview and try learn to function within its logic.

When one begins dissecting one's own worldview as if it were a nameless corpse in an anatomy class, there is often an autonomic response of revulsion.<sup>92</sup> This *response* needs to be studied itself; this is the **zone of discomfort** of one's worldview in the midst of a 'culture clash.' The clash brings on the feeling that *this is a thing which should not be done*. The questions should then follow:

- Why should it [the exploration] not be done?
- Does every investigator in every culture respond this way?
- Did the ancient Germanic heathens also react this way?
- Is there no evidence of individuals moving from heathen to Christian then back again?
- What about during the Age of Syncretism? After all, *syncretism* is two opposing cultures coming together—could not an individual accept heathenry, for example, but be able to function in both?

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<sup>92</sup>The author visited Hamburg, Germany, in the winter of 2004. At the time, there was a showing of the controversial art show called *Körperwelt* ("The World of the Corpse"). There is a large reaction by a significant percentage of people in any town where the exhibition is scheduled. Here is a typical letter taken from the internet easily revealing the revulsion commonly expressed.

*My wife just came back from the Körperwelt exhibition in Whitechapel, where Gunther von Hagens' Bodyworld can be seen. It comprises dead human bodies that have been skinned, dissected and positioned in lifelike poses, preserved using his "plastination" technique, in which body fluids are replaced by synthetic resins. Russian police are still investigating how 54 corpses and 440 brains were removed from a medical school in Siberia and illegally transported to a controversial embalming institute in Germany to make this all possible. It is the hair on the flayed bodies: that and the grim smiles the erect corpses (which are not enclosed but free-standing and can be touched, inspected etc.) display which is apparently most distressing (I haven't seen it and don't plan to go).*

Actually, there is far less legal controversy than is expressed here and the above author has misrepresented a significant number of facts. The anatomist, von Hagen, obtained the corpses in the standard fashion (for anatomists) by buying them from their families. There was a special release form signed to explain the project. The reaction by the populace is obviously not to the obtaining of the corpses nor to the procedures involved but rather to the fact that the corpses were artistically displayed.

Working with a worldview often dredges up feelings of revulsion "*We shouldn't be doing this! This is blasphemy!*" With time, though, it becomes completely obvious that the screams of revulsion in the brain are really stemming from worldview's self-protective mechanism and little to do with reality.

- Surely, there are other examples—American mountain men functioning equally well with a foot in both camps, early traders in India, Africa, the Australian bush?

Of course, one drawback is that one’s home community will consider him ’to have gone native’ or to have somehow self-transformed into a kind of *culture-heretic*, but the reality is that one simply has a grasp of two worldviews. A doctor who is able to function within the modern as well as the older Galenic system will surely be accused by his fellow practitioners of practicing ’quack’ medicine. The only rule of thumb is “Get over the initial fear and allow the horse of curiosity to have its head.”

Investigating the Norse concepts of Afterlife is fairly straight forward. The straight picture comes from the archaeological record and the historical record. We can ’see’ the early concepts and how the various mythological versions became slowly incorporated. We can see the development and the spread of Valhalla starting in the southern regions of the Germanic realm and how the Óðinn/Valhalla cult spread to the northern regions up to southern Norway and Sweden by the end of the 10th century. We can also ’see’ the concept of soul change from non-dualistic to dualistic over the century following each region’s conversion to Christianity. Rather than fighting or ignoring non-dualism or the gravemound as an Afterlife, the investigator can ask himself “What does it take, what does one have to *know*, to be comfortable with the gravemound as the final resting place?”

- Is it a universal given that the soul *must be separate from the body* or is that just part of our worldview?
- Are there no groups living today who hold to a non-dualistic belief?
- How would one’s holding to such a belief affect one’s behavior during life?
- Does there have to be a reward for having lived a good life? What would it be like if everyone were piled into a family grave, or, perhaps, a community grave?
- What would life be like if one knew that the only reward for having lived a good life was good memories among one’s descendants and community? What does it mean if one has lived a stingy or mean life?
- What does it mean if there is no path to personal salvation, personal development, except as can be attained while living?
- What is actual archaeological and historical evidence telling us about the Viking Age worldview?  
and, finally
- Unadulterated, is it possible to adhere to such a worldview today? Does heathenry *need* to be mixed with new age concepts or modern religion to make it palatable for modern man?

In the author's experience online over the past 15 years, the last question is often the opening point for the discussion as to why the heathen religion needs to be updated. Various reasons are given but what is rarely provided, usually related to a need to address specific spiritual needs, but what is not given is the origin of the 'spiritual need.' Example: "**I need to develop a personal relationship with the divine.**" The following then are the natural questions by the reconstructionist to himself in this case:

- Why is this 'personal relationship' important?
- Do *all* religions end with a 'personal relationship with the divine' or is this indigenous to egocentric cultures as opposed to communocentric cultures or cultures which adhere to a state religions such as those of ancient Athens, Troy or Beijing?
- Is a 'personal relationship' necessary? What happens if one doesn't address it?
- What is the origin of *my* particular need? My parents? The Catholic religion I was raised in? New Age books?
- Do I see characters addressing this personal need in the sagas, for example, or am I reading *into* it?

If these questions are posed on email-lists the most immediate response is "Well, X [name of favorite god] chose to initiate the relationship with me!" (usually, with a defensive tone which implies anger as well). Difficult to argue with, of course, but the die-hard reconstructionist questions on:

- Was this really a communication from a god, or just my wishful thinking?
- This sounds like a Christianity coming through. Historically, does everyone have a *personal* relationship with a god or does only the head of the local cult?
- Does the head of the local cult even have a *personal relationship* a god, or is he acting on behalf of his community?

The need for *eternal continuation of the personality after death* and some type of reward for being a faithful follower of a god appears to be a great concern among those seeking out a *spiritual path*. Oddly, though, until about 50 years ago, a good percentage of Christians believed that the dead reside in the grave until Judgment Day when they they would be resurrected to be judged and then sent either to Heaven or Hell. The author well remembers<sup>93</sup> being told that the dead

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<sup>93</sup>As mentioned above, the author's childhood memories of a semi-non-dualistic belief had been covered up by years of exposure to *alternative* beliefs such as Heaven/ Hell, reincarnation and various New Age variations. It was only after the incident in the library with Pueblo woman that the author was able to begin to recover the memories of the dead living in the graveyard and the traditions surrounding the belief. The author may 'well remember' those traditions now, in part, due to efforts at reconstruction, but 20 years ago those memories were deeply buried.

are in the graveyard. There was no talk of Heaven or Hell. My sister, my uncles and aunts, and my grandparents live there still. Graveyard customs regarding how to walk, talk, visit relatives, appropriate times for visiting, appropriate gift, decorations, etc. were all taught in childhood as a part of growing up in a rural community. Some areas of the country still tend to the dead in the graveyards, particularly in conservative ethnic areas.

Non-dualism isn't strange or foreign; many of us grew up with it. The problem has been that spiritual concepts imported during the latter half of the 20th century have supplanted the older beliefs so that they now appear strange. Many, if they are able to dredge up some of the memories of this older belief system, will find that the ancient Norse concept of life in the gravemound is an acceptable variation. Of course, the temptation is always that these older American beliefs are remnants of the older heathen worldview; this is most certainly not the case—they are merely remnants of an older Christian worldview—, but following this line of reasoning can make the process of delving deeper into germanic heathen's worldview somewhat easier.

The purpose of personal experimentation, then, is to reconstruct the worldview of the germanic heathen within the mind in a series of stages, and, done properly, what appears to be enigmas in the sagas and Edda begin to slowly resolve themselves as the underlying logic behind the events is rebuilt. The puzzles which remain generally involve a confabulation of Christian and heathen elements mixed together into a sycretistic goo. Even the best of reconstructionists find that interpreting a poem like the *Völuspá* is a tiring and almost pointless exercise.

Comparitive studies need to be done with caution. The tendency observed on internet mailing lists is for Americans to adopt American Indian concepts while at the same time drawing on Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and neo-paganry. Comparitive studies *can* be done: Uno Holmberg has done it—imitate his approach. Thomas DuBois has also done—imitate his approach as well. This author has also:

*We know how Germanic folks, particularly of the northern and western branches, buried their dead—they were outfitted for life in the grave. We know Vahalla, for example, didn't come onto the scene until late in the Viking Age and that most of what we know about Valhalla developed after the Conversion. Archaeologically, we can see the overlaying of Christian grave onto heathen ones. We can see the difference.*

*We know that the ancient Baltic religion once also utilized the concept of death into the grave and then around the 1100 - 1200s, they were heavily influenced by circumpolar shamanistic religions migrating from the east. We can see the difference in their graves which, in turn, reflect from their newly altered belief system so that by the time Baltic heathenry was eliminated through their own Conversion, we see a completely altered form of burial practice. We can thereafter see the move to Christianity which resembles the burial practices of*

*the northern Germanic Christians. The intervening step observed in the ancient Baltic practice does not exist in the Germanic archaeological record. The Germanics go straight from 'death into the gravemound' to the Christian-style burial mound.*

*We know that the Samí adopted many of the Germanic beliefs which they closely associated with. The Samí, a circumpolar shamanistic people, began to bury their dead outfitted for life in the grave rather than their older belief typical of shamanistic peoples which was to destroy the body completely either through rotting wrapped in bark (as occurs with trees left lying after falling in the forest) or through cremation after which the ashes are scattered (there is a probable correlation with the Germanic form of exorcism). Borrowing from Germanic custom, the Samí began to bury their dead as though life continued on on the sub surface. Even ship-graves in the manner of Vikings become evident even though the Samí never built or used ships!*

*Reflecting back then, we know what a grave looks like when it outfitted for the grave. The Vikings, no matter what the poetic metaphors looked like, outfitted the dead for the grave. Valhalla, Fensálir, the hall of one's favorite god, or reincarnation do not appear in the archaeological record.*

A last set of questions arises which deserve answers as well. Interestingly, they may have actually been some of the first questions asked and will also some of the first posed by those opposed to the reconstructionist's approach.

“How does dying into the gravemound lead to

1. spiritual fulfillment in life,
2. improved behavior which generates rewards, and
3. reward after death?”

In other words, “If the belief in death into the gravemound was maintained over centuries, there must have been some pay-off otherwise there would have been no need to resist Christianity when it first came to the north.” The questions deserve answers, but the answers don't come easily. It must be remembered that *everything* in the germanic heathen's worldview is different from the modern including the sense of self, the role played by the individual within family and community, and the sense of what constitutes reward and what constitutes punishment.<sup>94</sup> These questions appear small and insignificant if the asker is a reconstructionist for they are built into the reconstruction process itself, but for the non-reconstructionist the questions will most likely remain unanswered because the answers will make no sense to him. Spiritual fulfillment, rewards in this life, and rewards in the next are not the result of a norse-flavored religion, but rather by-product, a fortunate side-effect, of living one's life through a particular worldview.

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<sup>94</sup>This simple statement is broad enough to easily be an entire book.