

## The Rune-Gild: Heathenism, Traditionalism, and the Left-Hand Path

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### ABSTRACT

*The focus of this article is the Rune-Gild, a rune magical group founded in Texas, USA, in 1980, and which has variously been described as a Heathen, a Traditionalist, and a Left-Hand Path organization. The influence of these three esoteric currents on the Gild is examined, as is the issue of how they intermix to fit a common frame of reference. It is argued that describing a complex movement such as the Rune-Gild in a singular fashion, by referencing to only one of these currents, involves the risk of providing a one-sided and ultimately inaccurate depiction. Instead, a description involving a thorough examination of all major influences is required, and this in turn makes it necessary for the scholar to achieve a high-level historical familiarity with a broad range of Western religious phenomena.*

### Keywords

Heathenism, Radical Traditionalism, the Left-Hand Path, esotericism,  
The Rune-Gild

### Introduction

The field of new religiosity is ripe with examples of movements that are difficult to categorize, and more acutely, movements that can be categorized in a number of different ways. Often any given category will bring with it specific connotations and portray the movement examined in a distinctly different

light than other possible categories. The Rune-Gild is such a movement. It is certainly esoteric, according to how this field is construed by scholars (see Faivre 1994; Hanegraaff 1996; von Stuckrad 2005), but this by itself does not say much. The Gild has been described as Neo-Pagan/Heathen (Harvey 1995, 58–59), Radical Traditionalist (Karlsson 2008), and as a Left-Hand Path movement (Backa 2008). All of these characterizations fit, but provide different, and sometimes conflicting, portrayals of the movement.

In order to achieve a comprehensive picture of a movement such as the Rune-Gild the many currents that have influenced it must be taken into account. This article attempts to provide such a picture of the Gild, and at the same time highlight the importance of historical awareness when examining novel religious groups. I will provide a discussion of the three main currents that have combined in the Rune-Gild: the enthusiasm for Heathen/Pagan themes stemming from the Romantic period and formulated in its modern form in the latter part of the twentieth century; Traditionalism, originally based on René Guénon's early twentieth-century rejection of Western modernity; and the Left-Hand Path, formed in the 1960s and 1970s in American manifestations such as Anton LaVey's Church of Satan, and European manifestations such as Kenneth Grant's "Typhonian tradition." A historical description of these currents is provided, and then a discussion of how these currents manifest in a common frame of reference within the Gild.

### **The pagan/heathen revival and scholarly descriptions of Neo-Paganism**

The background to the birth of modern Paganism can be sought in the Enlightenment. It was during this period that Christianity started losing its dominance, thus opening up the European religious field to greater plurality. Some felt that the ideologies of reason and rationality, as well as the universalist notions (Hanegraaff 1996, 411–412), institutionalized during the Enlightenment had created a world devoid of magic and mysticism. One response that ultimately gave birth to modern Heathenism came in the form of the Romantic movement, particularly in its German version in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century. The Romantics turned their gaze to the particular (Hanegraaff 1996, 419), in the form of the old and native, as well as the "natural" and "organic" (see Faivre 1994, 82–84; Hanegraaff 1996, 387–388).

Romanticism also gave birth to modern nationalism. In the late nineteenth-century Germany, the *völkisch* movement, which entertained notions of a national, ancestral, and racial history of "the folk" and a folk-spirit—the

*volksgeist*—was conceived (Gregorius 2009, 52, 55–56). Thus the romantic birth of Neo-Paganism stems from both a fascination for nature and the ideas of nation and race. The Austrian Guido von List (1848–1919) is very important for the rise of modern Heathenism. He conceived the idea of an esoteric, *Armanen*-level, understanding of the runes, and combined this with *völkisch* ideas in his 1908 book *Secret of the Runes* (*Das Geheimnis der Runen*) (Gregorius 2009, 57–58). Several Guido von List-societies existed in Germany in the early 1900s, and these developed practical techniques to reach an *Armanen*-level understanding of the runes (Gregorius 2009, 58).

The first Asatrú, or Odinist/Heathen, organizations were founded independently of each other in the United Kingdom, United States of America, and Iceland in the early 1970s. Contrary to popular belief, it is in fact American Asatrú, not the British or Icelandic, which has had the strongest influence on subsequent European heathenism (Gregorius 2009, 76)<sup>1</sup>. On Iceland, Asatrú has, since 1973, been an officially recognized religion with granted rights of providing legalized life rituals. The religion claimed nearly 800 members in the mid-2000s (Gregorius 2009, 71). There is some debate concerning the first North American Heathen group, in part depending on how Heathenism is defined. According to Swedish scholar Fredrik Gregorius, the first American Heathen group was Stephen McNallen's (1948-) Viking Brotherhood (Gregorius 2009, 74–77). This group was founded in 1969/70, but registered as a religious organization in 1972. However, the Odinist Fellowship was founded in Florida in 1969 (Asprem 2008, 46). Part of the problem is that there is a tendency, largely deriving from internal Heathen discourse and conflict, to distinguish between politically racist Odinism and the more apolitical Asatrú (see Asprem 2008, 45–46). The Odinist Fellowship was a strictly racist group, while the Viking Brotherhood was not. The latter is therefore regarded to be the first *Asatrú* group. While there is some merit to a distinction such as this, a clean-cut categorical division is somewhat problematic to make (Asprem 2008, 47–48), not least since the race-versus-culture tensions exist in most groups.

In any case, the Viking Brotherhood is of more relevance in the present context. This group was reformed as the Ásatrú Free Assembly (AFA) in 1976,

1. It should be noted that although there is a strong influence of North American Asatrú on its European manifestations, this influence does by no means imply that modern Asatrú is identical in the different localities. As Egil Asprem notes: "Even when much of the ideological production of modern Ásatrú stems from an American context, its export to other countries is not to be viewed as a homogenising process, but will always involve adaptation to local cultural and political circumstances" (Asprem 2008, 42).

and finally dissolved in 1986, largely due to the tension discussed above. Instead, the splinter groups Ásatrú Alliance (with a racist agenda) and the Ring of Troth (with a cultural focus) were founded. The instigators of the latter were two important members of the Rune-Gild; Stephen E. Flowers and James Chisholm (Gregorius 2009, 82). Due to Flowers' involvement in the Temple of Set he became a controversial figure for many Heathens, and subsequently discontinued his involvement with the Ring of Troth in 1995 (Thorsson 2007, Appendix 20). The AFA was re-founded by McNallen in the mid 1990s (Gregorius 2009, 78–79), and he has subsequently been reported to have become involved in the Rune-Gild (Thorsson 2007, 155).

The issue of scholarly discussions on and definitions of Neo-Paganism is of relevance for the present article. Firstly, Heathenism—at least the manifestation of it termed Ásatrú—is usually regarded a branch of Neo-Paganism, together with movements such as Wicca, Goddess Spirituality, Druidry, and Neo-Shamanism. Secondly, while definitions need not (nor should they) be finite, they are important conceptual tools that help us delineate and distinguish phenomena and fields, which can then function as the base of comparison with other phenomena and fields. This is of particular importance with new fields of research, which the study of Neo-Paganism (or Pagan studies) undoubtedly is. Due to this reason it is inexcusable that the anthology *Researching Paganisms*—marketed as “an exciting introduction to the new field of Pagan studies” (Blain *et al.* 2004, vii)—lacks any form of proper definition of (Neo)Paganism.<sup>2</sup>

Olav Hammer presents a list of common characteristics of Neo-Pagan religion (Hammer 1997, 124–126). According to Hammer, these are: the reverence of nature, often including active participation in ecological movements and lifestyles; the lack of authoritative dogmas; a similarity of practices, which include the common elements of seasonal celebrations, shamanic practices, magic, and initiation; a generally negative view of Christianity, though without any physically expressed hostility; the importance of sex-polarity in the practice of magic; and feminism, and the importance of the feminine divine.

The rejection of authorities and dogmas is included in the definition in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* as well. Paganism is furthermore described as a complex phenomenon consisting of many different traditions.

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2. A further question is if one should talk of Paganism or Neo-Paganism. According to Melissa Harrington the prefix is used mainly in the United States, to signal that it is a revival and can be labeled a New Religious Movement. The lack of a prefix is preferred in Europe. Furthermore, many (predominately British) scholars choose to use the term in plural (Paganisms), in order to show that there are many Pagan traditions (see Harrington 2007, 437).

It is also said that “Neopaganism is often inspired by the practices of indigenous peoples and the paganisms of the ancient world revealed through archaeology, classics, myth and history,” and that these practices are “recreated in the context of modern-day life in a continual creative process” (Pearson 2005, 828). Similar features are highlighted in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. The term Neo-Paganism is seen as covering a wide range of traditions, which essentially “share a desire to revive ancient pre-Christian nature religions” (Pike 2005, 6470). The closeness to nature is further underlined, as is tolerance of eclecticism (Pike 2005, 6472).

In several definitions of (Neo)Paganism the primacy of nature and the dependency on pre-Christian religious traditions is stressed. In the introduction to the early anthology *Paganism Today* Charlotte Hardman describes Paganism as “a religion based on nature worship and ancient indigenous traditions” (Hardman 1995, ix). What is of essence, then, for a general definition of Neo-Paganism is the focus on nature-reverence and a desire to revive European pre-Christian religious traditions. Which aspect dominates varies in different groups, and in Heathenism the revivalist aspect is commonly primary.

### Traditionalism and Radical Traditionalism

Traditionalism, as a current of modern esotericism, is according to Mark Sedgwick—the foremost authority on the subject—a movement which understands “tradition” as “belief or practice transmitted from time immemorial—or rather belief and practice that *should* have been transmitted but was lost to the West during the last half of the second millennium A.D.” (Sedgwick 2004, 21). The common feature of the many various manifestations of Traditionalism is the idea that the contemporary West is spiritually, religiously, and culturally empty and corrupt, and that the “real perennial wisdom” resides elsewhere—either in foreign localities and cultures or in older European indigenous traditions. For many Traditionalists, particularly the early ones, Islam with its Sufi mysticism represents the “authentic” and spiritually virile tradition of choice. However, already with the Italian Julius Evola (1896/8–1976), and particularly with more contemporary ideologues inspired by Traditionalism such as leader of the French New Right Alain de Benoist (1943–), the focus has shifted more towards European pre-Christian myth and culture. The search for *the* esoteric knowledge—the perennial philosophy—in the far away and exotic is not unique to Traditionalism. In fact, it has been a staple feature of most esotericism since at least the Italian Renaissance (see Faivre 1994, 58–61; Hanegraaff 1996, 327–330). What distinguishes Traditionalism, however, is the dominating focus on the contempo-

rary West as being flawed or in a state of essential crisis—in effect a rejection of all that which is regarded as quintessential to the modern West (though not necessary that which is regarded as “truly and authentically Western,” as we will see). Whereas many esoteric movements entertain ideas of cultural and societal change—the so called New Age movement<sup>3</sup> being a prime example—Traditionalists assume a specific approach to societal transformation. It often involves either a total rejection of the contemporary West—as in the moving away, physically and mentally, from the West—or a rejection of Western cultural norms and values such as democracy, egalitarianism, modernism, and modernity itself. This is clearly demonstrated in book titles such as *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1927) by René Guénon and *Revolt Against the Modern World* (1934) by Julius Evola, as Sedgwick notes (Sedgwick 2004, 21).

The Traditionalist current, or movement, can be regarded to have started with René Guénon (1886–1951) in the early twentieth century. Guénon, born in Blois, France, was involved in the occult milieu of Paris in the early 1900s (Sedgwick 2004, 39–40). In 1906 he joined Gérard Encausse’s (better known as Papus, 1865–1916) Martinist Order and in 1908 he went on to found his own short-lived group (Sedgwick 2004, 49). Early on Guénon was inspired by Hinduism, in particular the philosophical Vedanta which he saw as the “true” form of the religion. This is evident in his first book *L’introduction générale à l’étude des doctrines hindoues* (A General Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines) published in 1921, which, contrary to the implications of the title, is far from being a *general* introduction to Hinduism. In the book Vedanta is described as an expression of eternal, spiritual truth, a perennial philosophy (Sedgwick 2004, 23). The two subsequent works of Guénon, published in 1921 and 1923, strongly criticize Western occultism, mainly in the forms of the Theosophical Society, spiritualism, and early twentieth-century occultism. A point of critique was that movements of this sort represented “counter-initiation,” or initiation into false traditions rather than genuine, truly traditional ones (Sedgwick 2004, 24). Another foundational idea advocated is that of “inversion,” where what is in the West regarded as progress is in fact decline (Sedgwick 2004, 24–25). In his fourth book, *Orient et Occident* (East and West, 1924), Guénon advocates the redemption and salvation of the West through the means of oriental religion and philosophy (Sedgwick 2004, 25). After having moved to Cairo, Egypt, in 1930, Guénon found and converted to mystical Islam, Sufism, and came to regard it as *the* “Tradition” of choice (Sedgwick 2004, 74–75). Ever since,

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3. For my critique of the concept of the “New Age movement” see Granholm (2008).

Islam has had an important role in Traditionalism.

A distinctly more “Pagan” approach to Traditionalism was taken by Julius Evola. The Italian-born Evola became familiar with Traditionalism in 1927 and edited the journal *UR* from 1927–1929 (Sedgwick 2004, 98–99). Here, as in the book *Imperialismo pagano: Il fascismo dinanzi al pericolo euro-cristiano* (Pagan Imperialism: Fascism Face to Face with the Euro-Christian Danger, 1928, issued in 1933 in a “Traditionalized” German version; see Sedgwick 2004, 104), he dealt with Roman pre-Christian religion as an expression of “true tradition.” Later on, however, he dismissed Roman Paganism (Sedgwick 2004, 103). Evola was inspired by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and incorporated in particular the idea of the *übermensch* into his Traditionalist notions. He also operated with Johann Jakob Bachofen’s ideas of societies being either “uranic” (masculine, patriarchal, active, and strong), or “telluric” (feminine, matriarchal, passive, and weak). In a reversal of Bachofen’s ideas, Evola regarded the modern West as having devolved from its former “uranic” beauty and power into “telluric” weakness (Sedgwick 2004, 100–101). Evola tried to influence first the Italian Fascists in the late 1920s, and then the German Nazis in the 1930s with his Traditionalist ideas, though with little success (Sedgwick 2004, 101–108). Even with his fascist and Nazi connections Evola was hardly a racist in the traditional sense. As Sedgwick demonstrates, Evola was critical to the nationalist agenda of the Italian fascists and argued for a spiritual understanding of race rather than a biological one (Sedgwick 2004, 101, 107).

Radical Traditionalism—as a term coined in the journal *Tyr: Myth—Culture—Tradition*—is in the same “tradition” as Guénonian and Evolian Traditionalism (though without any major fascist or Nazi linkages). Western modernity is thoroughly denounced, and along with it the nation-state. On the journal website Radical Traditionalists are said to “reject the modern, materialist reign of ‘quantity over quality,’ the absence of any meaningful spiritual values, environmental devastation, the mechanization and overspecialization of urban life, and the imperialism of corporate monoculture, with its vulgar ‘values’ of progress and efficiency” (*Tyr* 2008). Instead, “the small, homogenous tribal societies that flourished before Christianity,” which are considered to have been holistic, are preferred (*Tyr* 2008). The aim is “[r] esacralization of the world,” through going for folk/traditional culture and a natural social order, contrasted to the perceived materialism, mass cultural qualities, and wealth-based hierarchy of the modern West (*Tyr* 2008). The denominator “radical” is here used to demarcate the movement both from earlier Traditionalism, but also more importantly from other, less specific,



understandings of tradition and traditionalism. The single most significant difference to earlier Traditionalism is the apparent absence of a universal perennialism, or at least the rhetoric about it. Instead of a universal, spiritual truth, the “traditions” are considered to represent a world order which is more sound.

Some other authors who have contributed to the journal are: leader of the French New Right Alain de Benoist; British musicologist and scholar of Western Esotericism Joscelyn Godwin; founder of the AFA Stephen McNallen; and Finnish radical eco-philosopher (or deep ecologist) Pentti Linkola. Also included are translations of work by Julius Evola and an interview with George Dumezil (by Alain de Benoist).

### The Left-Hand Path

The Left-Hand Path is the most recent development of the esoteric currents treated in this article. While certain manifestations of it, particularly Satanism (see Petersen 2009; Lewis and Petersen 2008) have received scholarly attention, the Left-Hand Path as a distinct esoteric current has not to any greater degree. Scholars such as Richard Sutcliffe (1995) and Graham Harvey (1997, 97–99) have discussed it briefly, and others such as Dave Evans (Evans 2007) and I provide lengthier treatments (Granholm 2005), with my own later work providing some more detailed discussion (Granholm 2007; 2009a; 2009b).

As a term, the Left-Hand Path can be traced back to nineteenth-century Western reinterpretations of Indian religious sources, particularly perceptions of Tantra. The idea that Tantra could easily be divided into the two main traditions as *Vamamarga* or *Vamacara* (“left way”) and *Dakshinamarga* or *Dakshinacara* (“right way”) resonated with the already established division into black and white magic (Granholm in press). The magician and occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) is also immensely important in the development of the current. While Crowley did not use the term “Left-Hand Path” as a self-designation, his use of sex as an initiatory tool, his antinomian stance towards traditional society and religion, his focus on Will as the primary tool of the magician, and his uncompromising attitude to spiritual progress have all influenced Left-Hand Path spiritualities.

From the early 1970s onwards, a positive re-evaluation of the term Left-Hand Path can be found in the works of British magician and author Kenneth Grant (1924–). Grant was the personal secretary of Crowley for a short period in 1945, and further developed the magical theories of his mentor. In the mid 1950s he opened a lodge of the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.)



(see Pasi 2005), which after some dispute with the then head of the order, Karl Germer (1885–1962), became the focal point of Grant's own version of the O.T.O, commonly identified with the qualifier *Typhonian* (Koenig 1999, 25–26). The March 2009 issue of the *Starfire* magazine renames the group the Typhonian Order (Starfire 2009). Grant's version of the Left-Hand Path is primarily spread through his writings, in particular the three Typhonian Trilogies published between 1972 and 2002.<sup>4</sup> In America the term Left-Hand Path can be regarded to have started with Anton Szandor LaVey (1930–1997) and the Church of Satan (1966) (see e.g. LaVey 2005, 151). Some other representatives of the milieu are the Temple of Set, founded in California, USA, in 1975, the Texan author Michael W. Ford and his Order of Phosphorus, and the Swedish-originated Dragon Rouge (see Granholm 2005), founded in 1990.

The Left-Hand Path is characterized by a combination of distinct discursive traits. The first of these is an ideology of individualism, which posits the individual at the absolute centre of his/her existential universe. It could be argued that most esotericism throughout history has been individualistic in character. However, the distinction with Left-Hand Path spiritualities is that this individualism is raised to the level of explicit ideology. The Left-Hand Path also involves a goal of self-deification. The aim of the practitioner is to become a creator, or a god, and this is effectuated through initiatory processes.

The most distinguishing trait of Left-Hand Path esotericism is its antinomian stance. Collective religious and cultural norms are questioned in the pursuit of individualized ethics (Granholm 2006) and spiritual evolution. The magician seeks to abandon his/her culturally given set of ethics, and adopt personal and individualized ones, and this is often realized in ritualistic fashion in spiritual practices through which the magician breaks religious, cultural, and personal taboos (commonly only on a mental level) (Granholm 2005, 137–138). The idea is that this will grant the individual a level of freedom and separation in his individualization and self-deification. Part of this antinomian discourse is an antithetical relation to what is perceived to be “the Right-Hand Path.” This includes religious (and often political, ideological etc.) groups that are “mainstream” and confer to established norms, as well as many forms of alternative spirituality which are regarded as being essentially

4. The first trilogy consists of *The Magical Revival* (1972), *Aleister Crowley and the Hidden God* (1973) and *Cults of the Shadow* (1975), the second trilogy consists of *Nightside of Eden* (1977), *Outside the Circles of Time* (1980), and *Hecate's Fountain* (1992), while the third and last trilogy consists of *Outer Gateways* (1994), *Beyond the Mauve Zone* (1999), and *The Ninth Arch* (2002).

collective in character, and/or conforming in ideology and practice. A particular Left-Hand Path thus defines itself in opposition to this “Right-Hand Path,” and becomes what this “mainstream” spirituality is not (Granhölm 2005, 138; 2007). Part of this antinomian stance is the preference of symbols and rhetoric that is commonly regarded as “satanic,” e.g. the inverted pentagram, talk of “The Prince of Darkness,” and terms such as black magic.

Further common traits in Left-Hand Path discourse, but not as dominant as the above ones, are the view of the human being as a psycho-physical totality and the appraisal of life in the here-and-now.

It should be noted that this construct is not to be taken as a check-list that can be used to determine whether a specific movement, philosophy or phenomenon is Left-Hand Path or not. Rather it represents a number of discursive traits that are in a central position in a number of philosophies which are both to historically related and structurally similar. That this construct is posited on the level of discursive traits rather than aspects of doctrine and philosophy is of significance. We are here then looking at practices rather than ideas, expressed both on the level of text and speech and other symbolic systems, and the level of social, societal, and religious acts. That this construct represents historical developments, particularly in the realm of the esoteric and the occult, helps us position the phenomena in a greater continuum of discourse-practice and examine their birth and development, as well as context and relation to and within other esoteric discourses.

### The Rune-Gild

The Rune-Gild was founded by Stephen E. Flowers (1953-), also known by the pen-name Edred Thorsson,<sup>5</sup> in 1980. Originally the organization went by the name *The Institute of Runic Studies, Ásatrú* (IRSA) (Thorsson 2007, 33–34). Thorsson has a long history in the occult and Heathen milieu of the USA. In the early 1970s he joined the Church of Satan, although his involvement was short-lived and never extensive (Thorsson 2007, 26). This coincided with a period of extensive familiarization with the occult, which eventually led him to join the Temple of Set in 1984 (Thorsson 2007, 40). This Left-Hand Path organization proved to be very significant to him. The same year as joining, he was accepted into the Temple’s Order of the Trapezoid, which

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5. Flowers originally chose the pseudonym Edred Thorsson due to fears that publishing books on runes and magic would be detrimental to his academic career (Thorsson 2007, 47). The choice of this specific name was, however, not arbitrary, and has magical significance. I will use the name Thorsson, as this is the one used in the majority of material related to the Rune-Gild.

largely focused on Germanic mythology. He was the Grand Master of the order from 1987 until 1996, and the editor of its journal *Runes* from 1986 to 1991 (Thorsson 2007, 82, 85–86, 95). In 1990 he was recognized to the degree of Magus with the utterance of the word<sup>6</sup> *Rûna* (Thorsson 2007, 46, 81–88). This is a word he “received” already in 1974 (Thorsson 2007, 28), and which originally prompted him to study the runes. Thorsson attributes great importance to his involvement in the Temple for the development of the Gild, and remains a member although he has since the mid 1990s largely withdrawn from active participation in the Temple (Thorsson 2007, 96).

Thorsson’s involvement in the Heathen milieu started before his membership in the Temple. In 1978 he got in touch with Stephen McNallen and joined the AFA. In 1979 he also organized a local group of it in Austin, Texas (Thorsson 2007, 29–30). When the AFA disbanded in 1986, Thorsson responded, as detailed above, by founding the Ring of Troth—as a “special project of the Rune-Gild” (Thorsson 2007, 44, 105–107. See also Harvey 1995, 58). Thorsson is a recognized scholar of old Germanic language and mythology, having received his PhD<sup>7</sup> at the University of Texas in Austin in 1984 (Thorsson 2007, Appendix 6; Karlsson 2008).

The first years of the Rune-Gild were quite low-key, much due to Thorsson’s involvement in the larger occult and Heathen milieus. In 1989/90, however, a second phase of the Gild began, when Thorsson started to lecture on the basic tenets of the Gild to a wider audience. He was also recognized a Magus within the Temple of Set, as detailed above, and met his future wife Crystal Dawn (Thorsson 2007, 120–121). Additional events of significance in the early 1990s was the 1991 publication of *Nine Doors of Midgard*—the official curriculum of study for the Gild—by Llewellyn, the establishing of Rûna-Raven Press in 1993 (Thorsson 2007: 61), and the opening of the Yrmin-Hall at Woodharrow—the “headquarters” of the Gild—in 1994 (Thorsson 123–124). The first in a succession of international World Moats was arranged in 1997 (Thorsson 2007, 132–133), and the independent scholarly institution the Woodharrow Institute was opened in 2002 (Thorsson 2007, 149–152). Thorsson has from the conception of the Gild functioned as its head, or Yrmin-Drighthen.

As the name of the organization indicates, Rune-Gild is focused on Ger-

6. The Temple of Set is an initiatory order with six degrees. The fifth degree—Magus—entails the member formulating a concept which has a bearing on the organization as a whole.

7. The PhD was awarded for the thesis *Runes and Magic: Magical Formulaic Elements in the Elder Tradition*, which was published by the academic publisher Lang in 1986.

manic and Scandinavian mythology. Of the Germanic/Scandinavian gods and goddesses Odin, or Wotan (spelled Òdhinn in the Gild), has a dominant position. However, the Gild is not focused on the worship of this god. Rather, he is termed the “god of inspiration” and is emulated (Thorsson 1987, 214; Karlsson 2008, 48–58). The specific focus of the Rune-Gild is on the Germanic/Norse Runes, which are regarded as far more than letters of an alphabet. Through intimate, esoteric knowledge of the runes, the practitioner can know himself and the secrets of the universe. The practice of the Gild centres on a series of exercises called “The Nine Doors of Midgard” (see Thorsson 2003). On the website of the Gild, rune work is divided into Rune thinking, which involves meditation and contemplation; divination in the form of Rune casting; *galdor*, implying the verbal magical use of the runes; the manufacturing of rune talismans; and, perhaps most importantly, self-transformational Rune-work (Rune-Gild 2009). The Finnish Rune-Gild member Ensio Kataja describes Rune-work as the “internalization of the runes” in way that lets one “experience and activate the power of the runes in oneself” (Kataja 2005, 89–90) in order to “effect change” (Kataja 2005, 90) in the outer and inner worlds.

The Rune-Gild is an initiatory organization, with the degrees—or rather levels—Gilder (or Runer), Learner (or Apprentice), Fellow (or Journeyman, Master, Drighten, and Erulian. Since June 2007 the membership process proceeds as follows: The prospective member purchases associate membership and receives the *Nine Doors of Midgard* (Thorsson 2003), and the *Gildisbók* (Thorsson 2005b)—the membership handbook of the Gild. The associate member then works on his/her own with the Nine Doors. He/she can advance to the first regular level, that of Learner, if accepted as an apprentice by a Rune-Master of the Gild (Thorsson 2005b, 120). The Learner-level involves a basic learning period during which the member studies historical runology—i.e. the academic study of the runes—as well as esoteric runology. Upon successfully completing one’s apprenticeship—commonly involving the production of a Fellow-Work that demonstrates one’s knowledge of both academic and esoteric runology—the member is accepted as a Fellow in the Gild. From the Fellow-level onwards the member is regarded a full member.

The Master-level is reached with the production of a Master-Work which is assessed by a committee of three existing Rune-Masters. This level signals that the member has achieved mastery of the runes and he/she is tasked with teaching more junior members of the Gild. The highest levels signal more extensive knowledge of the runes. The Drighten is “a Master who has over-seen the development of a school of other Masters” as well as having developed a unique

and personal approach to Rune-Work (Thorsson 2007, 62). An Erulian is “one who has refined a personal philosophy within the scope of the Germanic Tradition” as well as formulated this philosophy for the digest of others (Thorsson 2007, 62). (Thorsson 2005b, 61–62; Karlsson 2008, 57–59).

Thorsson details his own initiation in the Gild as follows: He became a Learner in 1974 upon hearing the word *Rûna*, a Fellow in 1975 when he wrote his first manuscript on runes, a Master in 1979 when he received his M.A. at the University of Texas at Austin and completed the manuscript for the book *Futhark: A Handbook of Rune Magic* (Thorsson 1984), a Drighten in 1984 when he received his PhD and *Futhark* was published, and finally an Erulian in 1988 with the formal utterance of the word *Rûna* (Thorsson 2007, 165).

## Heathenism, Traditionalism, the Left-Hand Path, and the Rune-Gild

### *The Rune-Gild and Heathenism*

As discussed above, the two defining features of what is commonly termed Neo-Paganism is the reverence of nature—often in the form of nature-mysticism—and a desire to revive ancient pre-Christian religion (Pike 2005, 6470). While discourses on ecology exist within the Rune-Gild, the issue is not given a particularly prominent position. However, the Gild clearly endeavours to revive ancient pre-Christian religion. This is in line with what some scholars have noted in regard to heathenism; it tends to be less ecologically inclined than other forms of Neo-Paganism and instead emphasize the revivalist aspects (see e.g. York 1995, 120. Harvey 1997, 64 contests this). Thus, the Rune-Gild could certainly be described as a Neo-Pagan movement, in particular a Heathen one. It should be noted, however, that Thorsson is very critical towards the term Neo-Pagan and has used it to criticize what he considers to be Heathenism that does not adhere to a “true” and “authentic” understanding of Germanic and Old Norse myth and religion (Thorsson 2007, 55). He would no doubt object strongly to the use of the term in regard to the Gild. It is clear from this that the common Neo-Pagan feature of tolerance of eclecticism (Pike 2005, 6472) is not present, at least when it comes to eclecticism within heathenism<sup>8</sup>.

Heathenism is also often described as the most distinctly polytheistic manifestation of Neo-Paganism (Harvey 1997, 67). This, however, is not exactly

8. It should be noted that while Thorsson is highly critical of the mixing of “traditions,” he does not see Heathenism as being superior to other (folk-)religions. He writes: “I do see the troth as basically a folk-religion—just as Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Orthodox Judaism or Shinto,” “We should aim for *respect*, not *tolerance*” (Thorsson 2007, 117).

a characterizing feature of the Rune-Gild. While Thorsson does acknowledge the many gods and goddesses of pre-Christian Germanic and Norse religion, and is open to their employment within the Rune-Work of the Gild (Thorsson 2005a, 27–39), the more than predominant focus is on the god Ódhinn. Furthermore, this god is not worshipped. Instead, Ódhinn functions as an archetype for the Runer's process of esoteric evolution and transmutation. As made clear in the foreword of the 1994 Llewellyn edition of *The Nine Doors of Midgard*: 'Indeed it [the Rune-Gild] is not a "religion"; the student is not asked to "worship" Odhinn, but to emulate him, and to become his or her own True Self' (Weschcke 1994, xiv). Thus, while the Gild is a Heathen organization, it is in many ways different from most other Heathen movements, and Neo-Paganism as a whole.

As discussed above, Edred Thorsson did found the *Ring of Troth* in 1987 as a specifically Heathen *religious* organization. This was, furthermore, done as a 'special project of the Rune-Gild' (Thorsson 2007, 44, 105–107). However, at least in the US the Rune-Gild was always separate from the Ring of Troth. The case was somewhat different in the UK. Under the guidance of Freya Aswynn in the early 1990s, the British section of the Rune-Gild was more closely connected to the Troth (Pearson 2005, 833), and there were indications that Rune-Gild UK was becoming more communal and "religious" in character (Harvey 1995, 58–59). Aswynn's association with the Gild was terminated in 1995 (Thorsson 2007, 129), and Rune-Gild UK seems to again have become more of an initiatory society than a religious organization.

### *The Rune-Gild and Radical Traditionalism*

Members of the Rune-Gild figure prominently in the principal forum for the Radical Traditionalist movement; the journal *Tyr: Myth—Culture—Tradition*. At least one of the editors of the journal, Michael Moynihan, is a Rune Master of the Gild (see e.g. Thorsson 2007, 137), and Colin Cleary, who co-edited the first issue of *Tyr*, was at least at that point also involved in the Gild (Tyr 2002). Edred Thorsson himself is also a frequent contributor to *Tyr*, having contributed articles for all three issues. He has also described himself as a "*traditional man*" (Thorsson 2007, 89). Thorsson furthermore demonstrates the anti-democratic tendencies of Radical Traditionalism in his comments on the publishing business: "In a democracy the majority rules—no matter how ignorant it is" (Thorsson 2007, 60). Ian Read, leader of the Rune-Gild in the UK and Europe since 1995 and a Drighten in the Gild since 2004 (Thorsson 2007, 129, 157), contributed with one article in the third issue of the journal. This, of course, does not necessarily mark out the Rune-Gild as



*an organization* as being part of the Radical Traditionalist movement. It does, however, demonstrate that some important affinities exist.

In *Gildisbók*, the handbook for Rune-Gild members, the characteristics of phases, or paradigms, of the Western world are discussed. To quote: “to the pre-Christian ancients there were many paths to ‘salvation.’ To the medievalist there was only one: Faith in Christ and obedience to the authority of His Church. To the Modernist there was also only one: Science and the idea of progress” (Thorsson 2005b, 23). Postmodernism, as the emerging paradigm, is identified by “[i]f it rings true it’s good, if it’s internally authentic it’s right” and it is furthermore said that “[t]his attitude *liberates* the individual to return to the true traditions” (Thorsson 2005b, 24). So, in an interesting way, pluralism of thought is regarded not as an enemy of tradition, but rather as something which facilitates the rediscovery of tradition. The above quotations demonstrate that the Gild, as an organization, has Traditionalist leanings.

An example of views pertaining to the Gild representing more “authentic tradition” is in the idea that the organization Rune-Gild is an extension or a reawakening of an ancient Rune-Gild. In Thorsson’s opinion there was indeed “a unified, coherent and organized Gild of runemasters in ancient times,” and the aim of the present Gild is to “re-establish the unified and coherent aspects of the ancient Gild” (Thorsson 2007, 13). He also regards the “Elder Gild as an *intertribal* network of individuals dedicated to Wôdan” organized “by the internal authenticity and prestige of the lore itself” (Thorsson 2007, 35). In Thorsson’s view old Germanic culture is not dead, it merely lies dormant. Consequently, it is then possible to “reawaken” it in its true and original form (Thorsson 2001, 7–8). These quotes demonstrate that a belief in the existence of a “real tradition” with the power to re-sacralize the modern world exist within the Gild.

A further example is provided in Thorsson’s insistence on basing Rune-Work on sound scholarship, and his distaste for mixing the Germanic/Norse tradition with other traditions (e.g. Thorsson 2006, 77–78; 2007, 51–52. See also Kataja 2005, 10). His extensive critique of authors who do not adhere to this is a clear demonstration of this (e.g. Thorsson 2006, 99–117). Another example occurs in the essay “How to be a Heathen.” In Thorsson’s view “[t]he ‘neo-pagan movement’ is rife with subjectivism,” with people “reconstruct[ing] the ‘past’ in the vision of their own private needs and prejudices” (Thorsson 2001, 3). Needless to say, Thorsson is very critical of this. This is an expression of the desire to keep “tradition” in its “pure form.”

A further example of Radical Traditionalist philosophies is the attempt to establish the foundation of a “local community” in 2000. Thorsson and his wife



announced their willingness to provide lodging for up to six months for Gild members wanting to relocate to the area (Thorsson 2007, 142–144). The establishing of “local communities” of this sort is a goal expressed in the journal *Tyr*.

### *The Rune-Gild and the Left-Hand Path*

In an article from 2008 Andreas Backa analyses Rune-Gild according to my conceptualization of the Left-Hand Path (Backa 2008). According to him, the Gild clearly adheres to the characteristics proposed by me.

The focus in the Gild is indeed on the individual and his/her own spiritual progress and transmutation. Óðhinn is not a god to worship, but rather functions as a model for the Runer’s personal development. Through the example set by this god, the Rune master can him-/herself become as a god (Kataja 2005, 20–21, 38). Thorsson distinguishes between Odinism and Odianism, the former implying the worship of the god Odin and the latter involving the emulation of the god. The Rune-Gild is according to Flowers an Odian, not an Odinist, organization (Thorsson 2003, xv).

While the importance of antinomianism is not as explicitly stated as in, e.g. Dragon Rouge or the Temple of Set, it is nonetheless a feature in the organization. Only through walking his/her own path, and finding his/her own morality and ethical system can the Rune master truly evolve. The Rune-Gild is an example of an organization where antinomianism by no means entails socially subversive activities. As Thorsson writes: “It is the heritage of the Odian to ensure the continued and vigorous development and health of the folk and of the host society at large. Odianism co-operates with them but will always outside the mainstream, we will always be outsiders—so it was in the days of yore, and so shall it ever be” (Thorsson 2003, xvi). Furthermore, the Rune-Gild is different from most other Left-Hand Path groups in the sense that an explicit critique of the “Right-Hand Path” is absent. Instead, there is a willingness to support “more religious” manifestations of heathenism. This can most likely be attributed to the Radical Traditionalist impulses within the Gild.

Being a depiction of a historical current of esotericism, rather than a checklist through which one can determine if a phenomenon is “truly” part of the Left-Hand Path or not, an adherence to the discursive traits I discuss is not enough to describe the Gild as a Left-Hand Path movement. The Rune-Gild is, however, in a direct line of evolution of the American manifestation of the Left-Hand Path-current. The Temple of Set was a development of one of the first Left-Hand Path movements, the Church of Satan, and Thorsson was, as I have discussed, deeply involved in the Temple for many years (as well as having earlier been an inactive member of the Church of Satan). As Thorsson

himself attests, the approaches of the Gild and the Temple are compatible, and he attributes great importance to his involvement in the Temple for his own magical/Runic development (Thorsson 2007, 96). An example is provided in Thorsson's description of Óðinn as the "first (oldest) principle of human intelligence" (Thorsson 2007, 139), which is comparable to the Temple of Set view of Set as the principle of isolate intelligence.

The Left-Hand Path approach works in some ways to counteract a purely Traditionalist approach. For example, in the essay "Why Runers Don't 'Blót'" (2006, 83–86) Thorsson gives a primary motivation to his objection to animal sacrifice as being that this would entail worship—something the Oodian is not focused on.

### Conclusion

This article has dealt with classification. It should come as no surprise that religious movements, particularly new and alternative ones, can be classified and described in many different ways. Each category can provide a somewhat differing picture of the movement described, and in some cases conflicting accounts occur. The Rune-Gild is a movement which, while not receiving much detailed scholarly scrutiny, has been variously described as a Neo-Pagan movement (Harvey 1995, 58–59), a (radical) Traditionalist movement (Karlsson 2005), and a Left-Hand Path organization (Backa 2008; Granholm 2009b). As I have shown, none of these characterizations is exactly false, but by focusing on limited aspects they do not provide a full picture of the Rune-Gild. A focus on the Neo-Pagan aspects will make the Gild seem closer to other forms of Neo-Paganism than it really is. A focus on the Traditionalist aspects will easily neglect the innovative and at times progressive elements at work within the Gild—for example an impassioned rejection of animal sacrifice (Thorsson 2006, 81–82) and a defence for the use of computers (Thorsson 2006, 15–16). However, in both these cases the issues are dealt with through the use of the notion of Tradition. A focus on the antinomian Left-Hand Path aspects will establish the similarities with Satanist, post-Satanist, and occultist magic orders such as the Church of Satan, the Temple of Set, and Dragon Rouge, but will downplay significant differences in the process. Of course, the Rune-Gild is not unique in being a movement which draws on elements of several currents of the esoteric. In fact, and at least in regard to contemporary esotericism, a mixing of different currents could be expected to be more common than uncommon. By this article I hope to have demonstrated that in discussing contemporary esoteric groups (and many other forms of current religiosity and spirituality), the scholar needs to maintain his/her historical awareness.

The benefits definitions and categories are always limited. They are tools of the academic trade, and should not be considered as absolute descriptions of reality in any definite way. Furthermore, what definitions and categories we choose to use will affect the outcome of our study. However, even though categories and definitions have only limited value, they are very important tools for us as scholars. We should not neglect these tools, and it is important for us as scholars to clearly (but in no sense finitely) define our subject fields. I find it rather troubling that scholars involved in the emerging field of Pagan Studies seem to think that they can get by without ever really touching on the issue of what (Neo)-Paganism is.

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