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The Background and Nature of the Annual and Occasional Rituals of the *Ásatrúarfélag* in Iceland

Abstract. This paper is largely based on interviews which were taken with Jörmundur Ingi Hansen, and Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, the last two *allsherjagoðar* (high priests) of the Icelandic *Ásatrúarfélag* (a society which involves the active worship of the Old Nordic gods). The interviews focussed on the nature and background of the rituals and prayers used by the society for their annual rituals, for weddings and funerals, and not least as part of recent protests against large building projects in Iceland which are likely to have a long-term influence on the environment. Among other things, the paper discusses the degree to which rituals are based on ancient texts, and the degree to which individual priests can decide how they wish to perform ceremonies. To what extent are rituals decided beforehand, and if so, by whom? Alongside material drawn from these interviews, reference will be made to recent MA research by Eggert Sólberg Jónsson.

Key words: neo-Pagan religions, invented traditions, Pagan religion, ritual, performance, ritual space, fire

Unlike those who follow a “new age” religion, a “neo-pagan” religious community deliberately keeps a foot in two different camps associated with two different times. On one side, it sees itself as “pagan”, stressing not only connections to nature beliefs, but also that it is non-Christian, and has associations with pre-Christian belief systems. On the other, there is little question that it is *not* a direct continuation of a pre-Christian religion, but one that has been recently created in our own times. I use the word “created” rather than “recreated” deliberately, since the mere fact that a religion is “pre-Christian” also means that unless external Latin or Greek records exist, there are few if any contemporary records of how these religions functioned, and almost certainly none written by the practitioners themselves. The practices of “neo-pagan” religions are therefore bound to be a fine example of what Eric Hobsbawm referred to as “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm 1983). Such new

religions give us a valuable chance to observe the way in which traditions and rituals are created, and the ways in which they both make use of, and refer to the past, essentially drawing on the past as a means of establishing meaning and value within the present.

The following article will focus on the ritual year of the first neo-pagan group to start practising the worship of the old Nordic gods, in other words, the *Ásatrúarfélag*, who are based in Iceland and were officially established in 1973. Much of the factual material in the article is drawn from an MA thesis written by Eggert Sólberg Jónsson (hereafter ESJ) in 2010, as well as two lengthy interviews taken with the previous and existing heads of the *Ásatrú* movement, Jörmundur Ingi Hansen (1940–) and Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson (1958–), in February 2014. While not a member of the society, I have had comparatively close contact with them since directing an experimental production of the medieval dialogic Eddic poem, *Skírnismál*, for them in 1992 (Gunnell 1995: 2). As a teacher of Old Nordic religions and folkloristics in Iceland, I have also had contact with both Michael Strmiska and Stefanie von Schnurbein, the two international scholars who have given most attention to the group (see Strmiska 2000 and 2005, and von Schnurbein 1992 and 1995; see also María Erlendsdóttir 2001).

It should be stressed immediately that the Icelandic *Ásatrúarfélag*, like the original Danish *Forn Siðr* movement which was modelled on it (see Warmind 2006), has nothing to do with right-wing or any other political movements, outside a slightly left-wing interest in protecting the natural environment (see ESJ 2010: 145–158). The society came into being as a result of coffee-house discussions between the farmer and poet, Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson (1924–1993: see further Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson and Berglind Gunnarsdóttir 1992); Jörmundur Ingi Hansen, executive director of a record company (1940–); Dagur Þorleifsson (1933–), a scholar of religion; and Þorsteinn Guðjónsson, a teacher (1928–2000), all of whom were dissatisfied with having to pay taxes automatically to the Christian church. All were interested in officially establishing a religious group of their own that had closer contact with the Icelandic culture reflected in the sagas and Eddic poems, and with the Icelandic landscape. Around this core gathered a number of other like-minded individuals of various ages, male and female, includ-

ing many artists and students, all of whom had similar feelings about the church which was viewed essentially as a symbol of the establishment. The *Ásatrúarfélag* was formally established at a meeting in Hotel Borg on 20th April 1972, and officially accepted by the Icelandic government on 3rd May 1973. Sveinbjörn, as first *allsherjagoði* (high-priest) was then given the official right to carry out the *Ásatrú* equivalents of naming ceremonies (referred to as *nafngjöf*), confirmation (confirmation) (*siðfesta*), weddings (*hjónavígsla*) and funerals (*útför*). (On the establishment of the group, see further ESJ 2010: 90–112; on the first ceremonies see ESJ 2010: 175–190.) There were 21 members at the first official meeting on 16th May 1973. By 2013, the total had risen to 2,148 members in a nation of c. 320,000 (see www.hagstofa.is last viewed 25th October, 2014), making c. 2% of the Icelandic nation *ásatrú* believers, a figure supported by a recent national belief survey (see Ásdís A. Arnalds et al 2007).

Over and above the limited number of original local sources on Old Nordic religious practices (most written at least 150 years after the formal acceptance of Christianity in Norway and Iceland in c. 1000 AD), the essential difficulty with establishing this kind of religion is that like all other folk or ethnic religions (see Steinsland 2005: 31–34), it varied by time, place, and social and geographical environment, around certain shared linguistic and theological concepts.

Another consideration is that moral attitudes have naturally changed. Human sacrifice, for example, is obviously out of the question. The same applies to the idea of sprinkling blood after an animal sacrifice, a practice indicated by several saga accounts (the words *blóð* ‘blood’ and *bleyta* ‘to make wet’ lying behind the Old Norse word for ‘sacrifice’ *blót*) (see references in Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997; and Näsström 2001). As Hilmar Örn noted, such activities would be, in the very least, highly “messy” (interview 2014).

From the very beginning, those describing the new religion talked of it as being “*ný heiðni*” (lit. *new paganism*: my italics) (Sveinbjörn Beinsteinsson 1992: 132). As early as 3rd May 1972, the group is described in the newspaper *Vísir* as being “*Ásatrúarmenn hins nýja tíma*” (lit. *Æsir believers of the new age*: my italics); and in the first letter sent to the Icelandic Ministry of Legal and Religious Affairs, it is stressed that “the purpose of the society is to build up

and introduce the ancient religion of the Icelanders which had been legal until the year 1000, *to the degree that it meets the demands of new times and altered conditions*” (my italics). It is added that “the society will of course keep to the laws of the country and not practice any customs that conflicts with existing laws” (quoted in ESJ 2010: 96).

As noted above, Sveinbjörn was immediately officially permitted to carry out various rites of passage ceremonies. However, in addition to this, the group stated that they planned to hold various other ritual ceremonies throughout the year, ceremonies which they referred to from the beginning with the original word, *blót* (see above). By this time, the word had already come to mean simply “festival” in Icelandic (cf. the word *Þorablót*, referring to a recently recreated spring festival involving the eating of traditional Icelandic foods). The first *blót* referred to in the plans of the society (November 1972) are *Þorablót* (celebrated in late January, during the old Nordic rural month of *Þorri*) and then *jólablót* at Yuletide (ESJ 2010: 97). The first *blót* to be officially carried out by the society after their legal acceptance was on what Icelanders still refer to as the “First Day of Summer” (in their two-season system), on 18th April 1973, which was also the anniversary of the group’s founding (ESJ 2010: 106).

The nature and dating of the main annual festivals that the *Ásatrúarfélag* decided to take up over the following years reflect a blend of traditions, with elements drawn variously from early texts and folklore. Few if any of those in charge would argue that they were trying to recreate past ceremonies as they were “originally” carried out. Jörmundur Ingi, in a lecture held for the World Congress of Ethnic Religions in Antwerp in 1999 talks of “rediscovery” (Jörmundur Ingi Hansen 1999) rather than recreation. Elsewhere he refers to vestiges of cultural memory maintained in language and folklore (interview 2014). Hilmar Örn meanwhile underlines the need for the temple the group is currently constructing to be “*nútímaleg með gamla tilvísun*” (modern with reference to the past) (interview 2014), in other words, something that needs to function effectively in the present. Both high-priests stress, however, that most of their ceremonies, like those mentioned in the original sources, relate symbolically to the natural year and the environment. They feel they are still searching for the best forms of ceremony.

According to the few records that are available concerning the Old Nordic pagan year, and most particularly in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* (*Ynglingasaga* and *Hákonar saga góða*) (Snorri Sturluson 2011: 11, 97 and 101) and *Ágrip af Noregs konungasögum* (1995: 30–33), Old Nordic pagan festivals took place around mid-winter, midsummer and loosely around the times of the equinox (the start of the winter half-year in late October [the “winter nights], and the start of the summer half-year in late March). That these festivals were associated with festive drinking is supported by *Ágrip* and the Norwegian medieval *Gulapíng* law (*Den Eldre Gulatingslova* 1994: 19–20). The idea of an autumnal “winter-night” sacrificial meal having been common is supported by various sagas (*Gísla saga Súrssonar* ch. 10, *Piðrandi þáttir ok Þorhalls* chs. 1–2; *Víga-Glúms saga* ch. 6; and *Hákonar saga góða* ch. 17), while *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (ch. 49) mentions a large sacrifice taking place at the start of summer in western Norway. Further support for the dating of these festivals is given in Bede's *Reckoning of Time*. Theitmar of Merseberg writes of national sacrifices in Denmark taking place in January; while Adam of Bremen states in that the large Uppsala sacrifice take place at the vernal equinox in March (Adam of Bremen 1959: 207–208) (see further references in Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997; and Näsström 2001).

Today the Ásatrúarfélag celebrate five main festivals: Yuletide, Þorrablót, the beginning of summer in April, the so-called “*Þing-blót*” on the Thursday of the tenth week of summer (close to mid-summer) at *Þingvellir*, the original parliament meeting site from pagan times; and then the beginning of winter in October. Since 2008, another festival has been added on 1st December dedicated to the nature-spirits of the country (Hilmar Örn interview 2014), a ceremony which deliberately takes place simultaneously in all four quarters of the country. It might be noted that the *Þing-blót* meeting, which is the most popular, takes place on the date when the ancient Icelandic parliament used to begin each year.

Deciding dates for ceremonies was comparatively easy. More difficult were decisions about how rituals should be organised, and how a sacred atmosphere should be established which would turn these seasonal gatherings from being merely social into “sacred” (that is *hátíð*, lit. ‘high-times’ as festivals are called in Icelandic).

Both Jörmundur Ingi and Hilmar Örn agree that Sveinbjörn had little fondness for rules or recurring ritual and ceremony. His beliefs were largely personal, and most of the ceremonies that he was involved in leading at the start were characterised by this individuality, along with a deep respect for Old Icelandic poetry, not least for the Eddic poems which he (like Jörmundur Ingi, Hilmar Örn and most scholars today) believed had a background in pre-Christian times and even pre-Christian ritual. As noted above, it was clear that the new *blót* would definitely not be like the original *blót* which appear to have focused on blood sacrifice; the sprinkling of blood; prophecy; toasts to the gods; and a shared meal (see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997).

From the start, the Ásatrúarfélag has largely limited itself to sacred toasts and shared meals, which are given atmosphere and context by the use of ancient texts largely drawn from the *Poetic Edda* (see *Eddadigte* 1961, 1964 and 1971; translated in *The Poetic Edda* 2011); by the use of fire and candles and other symbolic items that have come to have importance for the group; and finally by the high-priest's use of ceremonial costume. Where possible, festivals and ceremonies take place outside, most commonly at the group's officially designated outdoor site on the Öskjuhlíð ridge behind Reykjavík (as well as at Þingvellir).

It appears that the establishment of central ceremonies and rituals, along with their temporal variation, was originally placed in the hands of Jörmundur Ingi Hansen (with some help from Þorsteinn and Dagur). The core activity initially involved passing a ale- or mead-horn around the circle of worshippers three times, participants then drinking to the gods, the chief-priest and then other figures of individuals' own choice, who could include ancestors or nature spirits (Jörmundur Ingi interview 2014). This activity was largely based on the earlier-noted account of an autumn sacrifice in *Hákonar saga góða* (ch. 14 and 17) which included toasts to the gods Óðinn, Freyr, and Njörðr and departed friends. Growing numbers led to simplifications in this ritual. The horns in question appear to have varied by priest, and all have personal meaning and stories behind them.

The next central ritual object to be added was a silver arm ring. This is directly based on accounts of sacred arm rings which were

apparently kept in pre-Christian Nordic *hof* (temples) and played a central part in ritual activities, most particularly oath-taking (see references in Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997). It should be stressed once again that the modern arm rings are never reddened with blood like that mentioned in *Ulfhljótslög* (see reference above). That presently used by Hilmar at all gatherings was originally made for Jörmundur Ingi, and is deliberately open-ended and slightly twisted (symbolically referring to the spiral cyclical ongoing movement of time believed in by both Jörmundur and Hilmar Örn). Nowadays it is held in one hand by the chief priest as he enters the room, while the other hand holds a horn filled with ale (see Figure 1).

A third key item, now only used at the summer *Ásatrúar-þing* meetings at Þingvellir is the ceremonial “*þingöx*” (*Þing*-axe) which is not meant to refer to Þórr’s hammer but is rather seen as a symbol of legal power (as in Roman tradition), and was introduced by Jörmundur at an early point. Such axes are not mentioned in the sagas, but have potential parallels in Bronze-Age Nordic archaeological finds.

Alongside the objects noted above, it was necessary to make decisions about ceremonial clothing and ceremonial space as a means of drawing a line between the ceremonial and the everyday, and introducing a sense of ritual liminality to the proceedings. Once again, while photographs show that Sveinbjörn occasionally made use of a form of Viking clothing at early gatherings, at others he seemed happy to wear a jacket or an Icelandic woollen cardigan. Jörmundur Ingi, who had a greater sense of the need for some degree of performance (which included the adoption of ritual dramas at the winter and Christmas *blót*) thus designed long white robes with coloured overlays which were based in part on archaeological finds and Iron-age Nordic iconography. For Hilmar Örn, the colours chosen for the overlays have symbolic meaning relating to the seasons, green being used for the first day of summer, name-giving ceremonies and weddings (see Figure 2); and red for Yuletide. Dark purple is used for funerals (Hilmar Örn interview 2014).

With regard to the marking of the performance space, the *Ásatrúar-félag* has used fire from an early point, commonly using a ceremonial bonfire or brazier which burns in the centre of the group, while candles or torches are situated around the space, often in a circle, thereby referring to the so-called *vafrlogar* (or flickering flames)



Figure 1. *The Horn and the Ring*. 2014. Courtesy of Silke Schurack.



Figure 2. Wedding ceremony. 2014. Courtesy of Silke Schurak.

that apparently surrounded the figures of Gerðr and Sigrdrífa in the Eddic poems, *Skírnismál* and *Fáfnismál* (*Eddadigte* 1971: 26; and 1961: 69). This effect is used whether the activities take place inside or outside. Atmosphere is given further sacredness by the quoting of lines of Eddic poetry (the *Poetic Edda* being seen by all the chief-priests as having more meaning than either the sagas or Snorri Sturluson's early thirteenth-century mythological *Prose Edda*).

The original pattern of ceremonies was largely decided by Jörundur Ingi, but has since been developed and standardised by Hilmar Örn. As Hilmar notes, each seasonal ceremony is slightly different, and coloured by reference to different myths. He describes the process of how (out of sight), he dresses in the robes, fills the horn and blesses it silently, before entering the space within the candles, beside the fire, with the horn and the ring. He then calls on the gods (Freyr, Njörðr and the "almighty god") in line with an



Figure 3. Ale offering. 2014. Courtesy of Silke Schurak.

article on oath-taking drawn from the apparently pre-Christian Icelandic *Ulfljótslög* (Law of Ulfljótr: see Landnámabók 1968: 315), after which a libation is poured onto the earth (a so-called *dreypiforn* ‘pouring sacrifice’) (see Figure 3). The horn is then passed around the circle. This is followed by the quotation of a strophe from the Eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál* (sts 3–4) in which the day, night, the earth, the gods and the different directions are called on. After this comes the quotation of other seasonally relevant strophes from another Eddic poem, *Völuspá*, which tells of the beginning, ending, and reappearance of the world, and then other strophes or the retelling or re-enactment of a myth. The group then proceeds to eat a meal together. (In earlier times, it seems that Jörmundur Ingi attempted to associate these meals with the sacral year, having different meats at different times.) For Hilmar, the ceremony is not fully over until the fire has been put out, the robes removed and the horn cleaned.

Unfortunately space does not permit any more than this brief introduction to the way in which the ritual year of the Icelandic *Ásatrúarfélag* has gradually taken shape over the forty years since its inception. Perhaps most interesting in discussing the subject with Jörmundur Ingi and Hilmar Örn is the degree to which the new rituals that they have both helped create have gained deeper meaning both for them and the other followers as time has gone on. As Jörmundur Ingi regularly underlines, once something has been taken up in such a religious environment, it is very difficult for it to be changed because people commonly see it as immediately having importance and having always been that way (interview 2014). Hilmar Örn also stresses the effect that the robes, the fires, the sacred objects, the words, and the settings have come to have on him personally. He feels that while standing in front of the fire with the horn and the ring, speaking the ancient words, he is somehow creating an opening to the powers in the environment, and in some way, touching local history, even though the rituals have been largely created (interview 2014). These examples illustrate clearly the ways in which beliefs create rituals, and how the performance of ritual in turn fosters belief and a new understanding of time and the world around us, even when the rituals in question have been largely invented.

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Magical Ceremonies during the Ritual Year of the Greek Farmer

Abstract: In the wake of the British scholar, James G. Frazer's claim that Greek religion reflects peasants' concepts connected with fertility magic, the very term has been criticized by most humanists during the entire twentieth century, while it has been present in scholarly literature written by anthropologists. Through a comparison between modern and ancient Greek festivals and rituals taking place across the ritual year, the article illustrates the importance of fertility magic to ensure the food both for the modern and ancient farmers, since *sympathetic magic* is a persistent characteristic of ancient as well as contemporary festivals. While performing various fertility rituals, the farmer assists nature to pass the worst of the winter. The point is that the magic works, and an important magical means of communication is indeed the festival and all the factors that it consists of.

Key words: agriculture, ancestors, death cult and rituals, fertility cult and rituals, festivals, Greece, modern and ancient, healing/purification rituals, sympathetic magic

Introduction: Some Notes on Agriculture, Magic and Religion

In agricultural societies, several factors are important to secure the future crops, particularly fertility rituals and death rituals in which important factors are the dead ancestors and also water. Both in earlier times and now, and all over the world, we encounter peasant societies where the living are dependent on the deceased mediator's successful communication with the chthonic powers to assure the continuity of their own lives through the fertility of the earth. Furthermore, the farmer is dependent on sufficient water. Every aspect of human life and divine interferences on earth is possible to express with water symbolism, and religious rituals and beliefs in connection with water to secure the future crop are found cross-culturally, be that in Asia, such as in Japan (Inukai 2007), in the Middle East and Mediterranean areas, as well as in Africa

THE RITUAL YEAR 10

MAGIC IN RITUALS AND RITUALS IN MAGIC

Edited by
Tatiana Minniyakhmetova and Kamila Velkoborská

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