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MYTHOLOGY AND PRE-CHRISTIAN NORSE RELIGIONS: AN INTERVIEW WITH TERRY A. GUNNELL

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Scandia: In your book chapter "Magical Mooning" and the "Goatskin Twirl": "Other" Kinds of Female Magical Practices in Early Iceland" you have explored two types of magic rituals described in a number of sagas. These rituals, as you demonstrated, probably make

reference to some kind of shared concept which involved a temporary evocation of chaos by overturning natural rules, temporarily breaking down the barriers between worlds. Is it possible that during these rituals some sort of journey to the Otherworld was sought, even if not by soul projection, but through the use of "auxiliary spirits" of some kind? Your chapter has also called attention to the notions of twist/twirl, something which seems not so distant, although not exactly the same, from notions regarding seiðr, the act of spinning and offensive projectiles. Do you think there is a straight connection between the act of twisting in these two types of magical practices, the spinning notion of *seiðr* and the *gandr* offensive magic mentioned in relation to Saami and Balto-Finnic cultures?

Terry A. Gunnell: I think in general we can say I don't think the magical mooning ritual itself or even the the what I called the "Goatskin Twirl", when people are waving something around their heads, these themselves aren't trips into the next World in the form of a shamanistic "travel". I think there's more likelihood that *seiðr* involves something of that kind but that's very difficult to say. Certainly in so many cultures, the idea of moving in a circle, in English, "going widdershins", which means walking going anti-clockwise is possibly found in both the accounts of "magical mooning" and perhaps the description of *seiðr* in *Eiríks saga rauða*, but this has nothing directly to do with a trip into the next world. It seems to be more connected with "undoing things" or changing them. Perhaps the same thing can be found in the mention of Guðrún spinning in *Laxdæla saga*.

Perhaps this is what Guðrún is doing when one of her lovers is killed when she says that she's been spinning and making wool while the killing takes place, but this is not so much travel to another place but an element of, in a sense, changing the present circumstances. The element of spinning anticlockwise can perhaps be connected to especially if we think about being against the movement of the sun it's going opposite to the making; it's the unmaking of things. Perhaps the same sort of idea is involved in the what I called Goatskin Twirl and also magical mooning in which the woman walks backwards, seems to walk around the building widdershins. In a sense she is also inverting things by looking between her legs up at the sky and also walking backwards, undoing, or unchanging things turning things inside out. As I

say, I think these sorts of ideas of going back against the sun or widdershins are international and circling is also a marking out of space or, even, in a sense, unmarking things.

Twisting is involved in a number of daily activities too, such as in spinning and threads which was going on all the time. One can imagine that watching wool and watching the spinning whirl takes you into a meditative state. On forms of twisting was involved in making swords for example, and similar activities are found in creating butter, making beer, making by turning, twisting, and stirring.

Scandia: In your article "Pantheon? What Pantheon?" You present very interesting reflections by questioning the sources in relation to the way in which the worship and rites of the Germanic and pre-Christian Scandinavian religions take place. Both the process that characterizes the cult of specific gods in places far from large centers, and the imposition of a pantheon logic promoted by the elites that inhabited these politically relevant regions are the cause/consequence of an ongoing process of class struggle that crosses the entire Viking Period?

Terry A. Gunnell: To keep it simple, my argument basically is that while the written sources written by the Nordic people themselves come from the later times, to my mind the sagas are essentially based on family memories and memories going back a long time We're talking about oral traditions and writing, and my argument basically is while Snorri and some of the Eddic poems talk about a group of gods living like a family with a "head god", very much like the Greek gods on Olympus, the saga accounts never talk about a group of gods or and people calling one one for one thing and another god for something else. They all talk about basically people worshiping one particular god. Even within a family, a mixed family, there is still just one basic god. To ignore that, in a sense, we've got to cross out a lot of material.

Many scholars in the past, were strongly under the influence of classical literature, and not least influence of people like Georges Dumézil... a lot of the interpretations of the way people understood the gods seem to come under the influence of his work, which is largely based on Indo-European class patterns, but early Scandinavia doesn't really have different classes for most people: the chieftain, a local chieftain, was also a farmer, and also a priest at

the same time, in the sense that he was involved in all of these functions. And when we look at the evidence on Thor we find that he was the god you call when you are traveling, he was the god that you called on to consecrate marriage, he seems to have been a multipurpose god, he wasthe god you called on to bless runes, he was the god you called on for weather and he was the warrior defender, without any question. The difference is that he was essentially a defending god, not an attacking god, and that needs to be remembered. It seems to have been very much the same with Freyr, whose name means Lord. So, he was no means an undergod. For some people, he was clearly The Lord, and especially for people in Sweden. So this raises questions simply about the picture that Snorri presents: if we look closer at those poems and those relatively few works that talk about a Pantheon, they seem to have a background in a society and a time in which a new kind of ruler was evolving, in Scandinavia, from about 500 onwards. These new national rulers weren't just ruling families or "clans" or anything of this kind as in earlier times, they were people who needed armies and followers from all over the place, followers who came with different sorts of beliefs. In order to create a large united body of such followers, these rulers needed to institute a sort of pseudo-family. The idea of the family remained central: if you have people from outside staying with you who you want to follow you, you need to set yourself up as a kind of all-father, and the same thing was being done with the religion: you set up another figure over the top of the other gods, someone like the new chieftain, a kind of all- father god. We of course also see this happening later on in Christianity, and the idea that people in earlier times had misunderstood things; enter Christianity comes in with "our father". It's an expression that is never used with Thor, and it's never used with Freyr. So, what I have argued basically, is that we should be aware that a lot of the imagery and the ideas of a parthenon that we get from the poems originated in such a society, this applies especially to material that has to do with Óðinn and Ragnarok and the end of the world in a final battle, things of this kind. The skaldic poets worked within such a society, that was where they belonged. They didn't just hang out at home with farmers; they wanted gold. And they can´t be considered normal icelanders either.

So, in a sense, what I have argued here, is that the idea of a Pantheon, with a father over the top, is something that developed at the same time as the idea of a large-scale king that rules a whole country, areas he can't physically see over anymore, a ruler who in a sense is taking

on the role of Óðinn in the same way, like Óðinn becoming the father of the other gods, he becomes the father of his people. The evidence that we have from place names is similar; the most popular god, the biggest and most widespread god, was Thor, when it comes down to it. It also seems that we can also see Óðinn taking over a number of myths and myth-motifs, and ideas earlier related to other gods. I know some people disagree with this idea of evolution of belief from the solo all-purpose Nordic god to the pantheon. All the seme, some historians of religion have suggested a similar idea, in other words that the idea of something like a Pantheon comes with cities: when you have people moving into a central place from all over the place: armises, courts, traders, people making swords, a hybrid area, that's where you get a Pantheon coming up. I think it also develops with the development of Athens in Greece; previously if you look at Greece, in most cases every island has one main single god, one main god. I know you can find some other religions which seem to have a Pantheon, but if we look at the Native American gods, for example, and I think even in South America, one commonly finds one particular god that covers everything, rather than a group of gods with different functions.

In short, as I've argued in "From One High One to Another", the biggest cultural change in Scandinavia wasn't the arrival of Christianity, it was this social change which takes place in around about 500, the arrival of a new form of kingship associated in part with volcanic eruptions that wiped out the sun for several years around 536, a time when society was changing radically and there was a lot of warfare going on at the same time. It was also time for a new way of thinking because the sun had disappeared. Really one can see it as paving the way for Christianity, the idea of a High god and the idea of a Heaven, the idea of a god who lives in two worlds, that once lived in our world, and steps down and up into the next world. These are Christian images that are being taken on board partly through contacts with Christian nations; it is quite easy to move from believing in Óðinn to believing in a Christian god. It is more difficult with Thor and other figures, but Óðinn has a lot of Christian elements to my mind.

Scandia: Based on your study "Óðinn in From One High One to Another: The Acceptance of Óðinn as Preparation for god", is it possible that Óðinn may have assimilated the Old

Testament ideas of god as the "Lord of Hosts" and the bestower of wealth? Because of this, Óðinn's warrior and ruler side would be maintained and even gain new impetus.

Terry A. Gunnell: The place name evidence certainly underlines that the belief in Óðinn was essentially focused around the central places. This is around Denmark, where large-scale rulership started somewhat earlier, and in the areas around Vestfold, Oslo, and around Uppsala, these are the areas where you find belief in Óðinn. On one side, these rulers were imitating and copying the Roman rulers that they and their ancestors had come across before, they were well aware of the ways in whichthat the Caesars had sold themselves, and in more recent times they had the example of the Frankish Empire and Charlemagne, and the way that they had put themselves forward. These were models of power to emulate. The problem was that if they joined Christianity, they'd be giving away control, and that was something you wanted to avoid, but in a sense you borrow a number of features of Christian rulership. It was natural that for trade, that you would be blending and working with Christians that were coming in from elsewhere, so it would be quite logical to accept a number of these Christian ideas. You can see it coming into influential works like Völuspá. There is a gradual influence of Christian ideas, and I think this applies especially with the figure of Óðinn. Another idea that makes sense, comes Jens Peter (Schjødt); this was the idea that the Germanic warbands who traveled away from home during the Age of Migrations and left a local area , moving into Rome and elsewhere, would sometimes take on another god of their own from those at home, that is quite possible to my mind that this might be a war god like Óðinn; he was different: a god of secrecy; it's a little bit like initiations into the Freemasons, or the Hell's Angels; you sign up and you get secret knowledge, and you follow this "Dark One". And then, when they come back from Rome or elsewhere, we see the arrival of this new god, challenging those gods that had been around beforehand, gods which in the Nordic countries were probably figures like Thor and Freyr.

But yes, in a sense, the acceptance of Óðinn and the idea of the Pantheon in a sense lays down the foundations for Christianity to come.

Scandia: in the text "The Season of the Dísir: The Winter Nights and the Dísablót in Early Medieval Scandinavian Belief (Cosmos)" you start with an interesting argument about joining the Old-Norse mythology alltogether without considering the differences among the countries concerning Scandinavia and the risks taken by doing so, and also mentions the Snorri Sturluson's writings to justify such actions. Concerning this topic, how can archaeology help this matter in order to clarify and demonstrate the differences between these diverse Scandinavian people from the past nowadays?

Terry A. Gunnell: Archeology is increasingly lending support to the idea that most of us at the moment now agree with, that there was a lot of diversity in belief across the Scandinavian countries. Of course, people spoke similar languages, but had different dialects and we can expect that like folklore, different versions of stories existed in different areas depending on how people lived, and what their cultural connections are. There would have been changes over time and by area.

Archeology underlines for example that there were differences in the way that people buried people, for example. Huge differences often. Even with boat burials, in Sweden, those areas in which people were burying people in exactly the same way were very limited in size. This underlines a huge amount of diversity. We know that, in general terms, in some areas people were cremated, and in other areas they were buried, in some places boat burials took place, in other places not, so there's a huge amount of diversity being underlined by archeology which backs up the idea of changes over time and area differences. And of course, archeology is the field in which we're getting new material all the time. With regard to literature, we've got almost everything that survived unless somebody finds some manuscript in the ground somewhere.

Scandia: is this not due to a necessary confrontation between the mythological uniformity presented by Snorri and the materiality of customs and religious beliefs prior to the society in which Snorri lived?

Terry A. Gunnell: Looking at archaeological evidence, the runestones show that the god associated with runes was mostly Thor and not Óðinn, who in literature was the god most connected to their use. It also underlines the fact that people weren´t believed to sail into the next world; ships in burial mounds were often anchored into position: That backs up what get in the sagas as well in *Gísla saga* the ship is clearly anchored and meant to stay exactly where it is. The same saga then mentions somebody walking to the next world. Evidently in the same area, two different beliefs existed about about death! So, archaeology often often makes us question ideas that we might accepted before, and more questions of this kind are continually coming up as we go along.

Scandia: In your article "Ansgar's Conversion of Iceland" in the journal Scripta Islandica, you propose an update on the reflection on the uniqueness of the Christianization of Iceland in comparison with older studies such as those made by Dag Strömback(1975), Orri Vésteinsson(2000) and others. The way you see it, do you think this conclusion takes place as a singular reflection or is it part of a more recent intellectual movement that tries to consider the integration of processes, such as the Christianization of Iceland, in a more global movement as proposed by the new Global History?

Terry A. Gunnell: I think we are considering a wider development of thought, and learning from experience. Certainly we have the account of Ansgar visiting Sweden, where he asks the ruler there: "How about accepting Christianity", and the ruler says "I can't do it officially alone because it has to go through a Thing meeting". There's also a hint that money has been given, and then the ruler throws the runes. Following local tradition, he asks the gods what should be done and strangely enough the gods come back and say "yeah, accept it". He then allows the Christian missionaries to have a base, to set up a bridgehead from which ideas can be disseminated. The same thing seems to have been done in Iceland as well. All in all, at the time the decision is taken, no huge changes take place when it comes down to it, but it does look like some money has passed between hands, in Iceland going to the lawman in question, Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði from Ljósavatn, in the north in the country. He goes under the cloak and in a sense that he contacts the gods and potentially also goes through pagan rituals, as Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson pointed out some time back.

This was the peaceful way of doing it, by asking your own gods and nobody's going to question them, because these are people who believe very strongly in fate something which was perhaps the biggest weakness of the Germanic tribes or even the Nordic people. They tended to trust fate. In both cases, the ruler in question goes through all of the traditional rituals which people accept, and, once those in charge of the ritual interpret this, you get a message back saying let's allow Christianity. A bridgehead this then created from which the new religion can spread out. Certainly there was no big change overnight; you've still got a massive amount of work to do, teaching people to read, you've got to get all the Bibles, and you've got to set up a more visible Christian base. The creation of such bridgeheads in the shape of the first churches can be seen also in places like Birka and also in Ribe, the big market centers, this is the way in which you could let Christianity take root, gradually. It was not something that happens very quickly. In a wider global sense, Christianity began with a grassroot movement, but when it gets to Scandinavia, it's working top-down: you start with the rulers who see it as a political game, a little bit like joining the EU, in a sense a valuable necessity for trade and political alliances. And then it's got to filter down to the local people and that takes time.

Scandia: is it also a question about integration?

*Terry A. Gunnell***:** Absolutely. It is like a state joining the EU for the sake of trade, politically, and the rulers also knew that if you can get people to accept one father god, you can get people to accept one father king, a new system of an Over-ruler.

Scandia: is it about the integration between Iceland and Rome, or between Iceland and Norway, and then Rome?

Terry A. Gunnell: I think Rome is a little bit further down the line, first of all, it's a matter of reestablishing connections with Norway. It's coming from Norway. The king of Norway wanted to have Iceland under his control and one good way to do that is through Christianity. As I say, if you can get them to accept one outsider god they can accept one outsider king and in Norway the church and the King were working pretty closely together. Yes there were other

outside influences; in the case of Iceland is coming in from Germany attempts to put them under the control of Hamburg-Bremen for example. Norway was meanwhile more under the influence of Britain with regard to Christianity, but a number of early German missionaries to Iceland come from Hamburg-Bremen that. And behind all of that we we get the pope being involved as well, so there are several levels of rulership and command, joining at the local level ultimately involves becoming part of this big wider family, which has an influence on trade and so shared ideas.

Scandia: Through your article "Legends and Landscape in the Nordic Countries" published in "Cultural & Social History: The journal of the Social History Society" you demonstrate a huge valorization of the oral tradition and its relation to space placing focus on the transmission of the legends and their function, also looking at those who transmit them and also their listeners; from that, we would like to know if you can tell a little more about what was the nature of oral transmission and the role of myths within Scandinavian society, and how might this have been connected to the Christianization of space?

Terry A. Gunnell: Two key things affect the way in which I look at Old Norse religion. These have a background in my earlier studies and interests which have influenced the way in which I've been looking at things in more recent times. One of these features is certainly my background in Drama which means that when I look at texts (and especially those connected to the oral tradition), when I look at the signs on the page, I consider also the way that they sound, sound that was received by people who are also using their eyes and their hands and their memories. Such texts were not originally just signs on a page; as sound they were experienced, but everybody hearing it would experience it differently. For me, most of the Old Norse materials that we have in front of us today have an oral background to some degree or other. If we put aside the translated Christian materials (which would also have been heard read aloud), even the laws had an oral background initially. So, for me it's a matter of considering how this material was received and how it was presented, and this means consideration of a lot of the dynamics involved, the performer himself, his knowledge of what the audience knows and the way in which the audience was a little bit like a keyboard that was being played.

Alongside this background relating to considerations of performance is my long-term research into Folkloristics. When you study later folklore from Scandinavia, for example, it is very, very, clear that stories change and differ by area. Indeed and when it comes down to it, as I've said a number of articles about the role of folklore in understanding Old Norse religion, we need to realize that Old Norse religion was essentially a kind of folklore. It wasn´t based on a book. As something passed on orally, it worked like folklore, it was experienced like folklore, it changed like folklore. It was influenced by the land and by the way of living. Like folklore, we need to get away from the idea of "the one book", "the one manuscript" and "the one story". We're looking at variety and change, and we're looking at those who presented this material and those who experienced it, at those who receive. Somebody presenting a folktale may have had a particular idea in mind but they don't know exactly how it's going to be received by somebody else, who may have had different experiences. It may well mean something different to them. We know this well with works of art, for example., Without any sounds at all, without words, they are just pictures open to interpretation.

Christianity brings in writing, and that's a very different thing. Certainly, as we know with churches, Christianity worked and played on experience with its use of music and stories and buildings with pictures and objects and windows, it involved a wide range of experiences that it used to convince people of the power of the new religion. But such experiences are very different from those inspired by a masked person telling a story by a fire at home, which would have been clsoer to the way that earlier mythology might have worked. As with Christianity, mythology also sometimes had a role in connection with rituals, giving them a new level of meaning. In the past, some scholars argued that all mythology was associated with rituals, an idea that most of us see as being pretty ridiculous. Stories like those of Loki were enjoyable stories to hear. Some merely explained things. They had different purposes. So we need to also bear that in mind as well. All in all, the key difference in the way that I tend to look at material like the Eddic or skaldic poems is that I see it as being almost like a drama text. It's something that works in space and will mean something different for everybody who receives it, and as such, its overall meaning will have changed by the day depending on what was happening around it at the time.

Scandia: : But what was the change in the way in which people related to these Myths at the moment they went through change in space from Paganism to Christianization?

Terry A. Gunnell: This brings us back to what I said about the changes that seem to have been taking place in around the year 530… in very general terms what's happening in the new central places with their new rulers, as religion is moving from nature into the buildings of the rulers. We have archaeological evidence to support this: in the past people were making offerings to pools and marshes and bogs and rivers, into which they threw weapons, food and even human beings as a form of sacrifice. From this period onwards, in Uppåkra in Sweden, for example, we swords being broken and deposited around the hall of the rulers, something which shows that in a sense that they were beginning to take over the role associated with gods, and connecting themselves directly with the gods. The key thing about this change is that religion was no longer connected to Nature, it was connected to a building and a particular person who was apparently often taking on the role of the god. It was very, very useful for the power of the ruler who was no longer just a normal person; he had gods in his family, making him in a sense a half-god; his blood was different. This move also made the religion a movable religion that was not limited to single natural sites. Like Christianity, it was no longer directly linked to Nature. It was not solely limited to natural sites in Palestine anymore, it was is something that you could take with you in symbolic form wherever you go, which was very effective for the rulers. Uprooting the religion meant from nature meant that your men don't need to regularly come back home to worship, they can carry out their worship with you wherever you are. This is a different sort of experience. It becomes centralized and organised, it becomes dogmatic, and over time writing gets involved, meaning no more changes in meaning. As we know about Christianity, we get centralised arguments about what is right and wrong, and changes gets more and more limited as time goes along, unlike Old Norse Religion in which the text seems to have been under construction all the time. At the same time, the Old Norse myths and poems take on new meanings, less related to beliefs and more to tradition and heritage. It was preserved for new purposes, and once written down, like the Bible, it became more resistent to change.

Scandia: Your paper "Early Representations of Old Nordic Religions in Drama'' which is in the book "The Pre-Christian Religions of the North" - from 2018 and edited by Margaret

Clunies Ross - we find some results of your research on the reception of themes of Old Nordic Religions in Scandinavian drama. Currently, the dramatizations that reach the world public on a large scale are the audiovisual productions for cinema and television. There are Scandinavian films that address folklore themes like trolls or religious themes like the warrior's journey to Valhalla. How do you interpret the reception of Old Norse themes by current Scandinavian audiovisual productions? What approach does this type of media usually present in relation to Old Norse Mythology? What would be your influences to inform the Scandinavian public about your ancestry and communicate to the world public about Nordic ancestry?

Terry A. Gunnell: I can say straight away that that I've been involved in working as an advisor on a number of productions of works that involve Old Norse poetry partly because people know that I'm interested in the dramatic side of things. Recent productions of works like *Vǫluspá*, and others. In one of these two articles, I mention one Danish production that was put on in Iceland which involved a performance of Vǫluspá through food… in a sense that we ate our way through Vǫluspá; there were different plates connected to different parts of the poem; in the sense it was very, very powerfully religious and ritualistic. You began with the creation of the world, you closed your eyes and a form of edible mud was put onto your tongue, , and later there was a sort of mythological banquet in which I, as a member of the audience, killed Baldr: I was given a gun, I was blindfolded, and invited to shoot somewhere; that was a frightening feeling. The tickets were very expensive but me and my wife were given a chance to join in because I had helped. Alongside us were a lot of very rich people in Iceland who to had just been involved in the banking crash in Iceland; the play ended with us being given champagne and some things to eat at the end, and along the back wall there was a living image of ragnarǫk going on; hands were coming out of a barbed wire fence, reaching out towards the audience who were happily drinking champagne and talking to each other and ignoring them. Very, very powerful. And one notes the fact that *Vǫluspá* in particular has become very popular as a central part of recent dramas something perhaps connected to environmental collapse, and the rise of Populism. In many ways, we're back in the 1930s in many countries, with the populous leaders, and the wars going on. I can see how *Vǫluspá* might have a new meaning for audiences. It works very effectively. I also worked with another

group in Sweden on another incredibly powerful production, which was also based around *Vǫluspá*, and a number of Eddic myths at the same time. More recently, I was very involved in the making of the Robert Eggers' powerful film *The Northman*, along with Neil Price who was the main adviser on archaology and Johanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir from Iceland who was involved with the language side. My part was to look at the beliefs and rituals, and various other things that I advised that should be done. We were reading over drafts of all of the scenes by us, to see what we felt, correcting it, and giving advice. It turned out to be an excellent film.

Of course, as a result of this work, we are also dealing with people who are making use of this material for the wrong reasons: white supremacists who haven't paid enough attention to the material itself and need to be educated, to learn the simple facts, for example, that the swastika initially came from India, and from people that were actually black, not from white society. Originally it had a totally different meaning. As I said, Óðinn wasn't the main god, and we aren't just dealing with war, women had key roles and we certainly aren't dealing with any battle between Old Norse Religion and Christianity. As I have noted earlier, we are dealing with a religion that was open to Christianity and was taking ideas from Christianity. There are a number of questions about the way in which this material is being used, but it is clear that as I have noted about its role in theatre, films and television, it is evident that people are finding it has a lot of relevance. But why this interest in Vikings and the medieval period? I grew up with cowboy films back in my distant youth. Cowboy films and films to do with King Arthur. It is possible that nowadays, King Arthur and his knights have become a little too nice, with its rescuing of young ladies and quests for Christian relics. People seem to want a darker vision, and it is noteworthy that a lot of this interest comes from America where it seems to echo the older stories of the wild west. In a sense it is a medieval wild west. People are settling places, and daring to go into the wild. That's part of the attraction. Of course, many Americans find further connection in the ideal of Leifr Eiríksson, which also involves Native Americans. We find similar echoes in the interest in Tolkien, in T*he Game of Thrones* and other series like *Vikings*, The Last Kingdom and films like also . This is a world that has magic and mystery, it's a world that sometimes nvolved elves and dwarves, wolves, werewelves and dragons, and not least gods. This longing for such worlds is something Tolkien was talking about, the feeling that people have lost and long for mystery, magic and the supernatural.

There is a strong element here of people "wanting to believe" (something written on a poster in the office of the *X-Files*' Fox Mulder, of "wanting there to be magic". This is I get inundated in Iceland with questions from journalists about such things and not least the the elf folk; I'm the one who answers questions about the Icelandic belief in "elves". You get all of these journalists coming to Iceland expecting that it's true that at least 50% of icelanders believe in elves; they seem to have this idea every Friday night you'll find Icelanders outside dancing around the rocks wearing elf costumes… No! But as I say to them, their search for such beliefs says more about them than it says about the Icelanders. It says more about their longing to go back to childhood, to go back to the magic of childhood, which they feel has been lost. They are loking for what Tolkien calls "**Recovery"**, whereby like the people of the distant past, you don't just look at a tree anymore as being simply an object; you look it as a living being, and look at the landscape as a whole as being alive. And Iceland is, of course, very alive. No Icelander would question that. So, this is what the journalists and their readers want to get back to, and to a certain extent, the sagas and Old Norse mythology have the ability to take them back. Not just to a Nordic wild west, but also to a world of mystery and magic and, in an age where the church has faced a large number of problems, there is a sense that this is a religion more closely connected to our local forenvironment. We nonetheless need to remember that this environment was also populated by a very multicultural society.

Scandia: Contemporary Norse Paganism has been the focus of many researchers around the world. In addition to being understood as "invented traditions", the Norse (Neo) Pagan movements (ex. Ásatrú and Forn Siðr) are constantly in a complex relationship between the past and the present. Although understood as a product of the contemporary world, the Ásatrú and Forn Siðr communities demonstrate a genuine interest in academic sources for the study of Old Norse mythology and religion, often claiming an authentic status for their religious practices as a reconstruction or revival of what was worshiped in the past in their ritualistic performances. Faced with this phenomenon, how do you understand this relationship between contemporary religions and the search for a way to recreate the Old Norse religion? At what level would it be possible to reconstruct these ritualistic performances of Old Norse religion in the contemporary world?

Terry A. Gunnell: It will never be possible to reconstruct it. Simply because of our personal backgrounds, our mindsets, and that fact that the world we live in is totally different, something that means that our expectations are going to be different. It will never be possible to reconstruct it as it was, each performance, and each ritual, even if it was performed in the same way, will be received and understood very differently As I said earlier, the performance of each ritual would also have varied all the time. There was no one ritual followed throughout Scandinavia. On top of this, all we have left are fragments of the elements, and that is soemthing we also need to realize. As I've been stressing here, our extant written is limited to what the poets felt the need to preserve, we don't really know what other people tend to believe.

Furthermore, we need to remember that most of what we have left is West Nordic which means it comes from Norway. We have very little idea of how things were in Sweden or Denmark. All in all, when it comes down to it, what exactly are we trying to reconstruct? A single Germanic or Nordic religion? There wasn't one. As I have stressed, things would have been local in nature and would have varied by area. One can see the interest in finding a religion that might have been associated more with your own personal local landscape here, a religion followed by your own personal forefathers. One needs to be very wary of people saying that this or that ritual is exactly the way that it was. If nothing else, we have a completely different attitude to blood sacrifices today..

Why do adherents of these new religions need to wear "viking costumes"? Clothes have naturally changed over time. All in all, we are dealing with personal interpretations. While it is important to at least try to keep to the sources, one should always be wary of anyone who states that Old Norse religion was like this or that. It needs to be remembered also that the Old Norse people do not seem to have told people to believe in their gods.Indeed, they were quite ready to accommodate other religions into their worldview as we see with the borrowings from Christianity which starts starts sliding in here and there. There was no antagonism between the religions. As I say, one can understand in investigating religions of this kind, and maybe their connection to landscape, as one can see for example in the artistic works for example of people like Einar Selvik and Wardruna. There were strong connections between the sounds of nature and Old Norse poetry and music.

As Einar would say himself about his work, this is not an attempt to recreate things as they were. It is rather an attempt to give us a sense of the experience that people might have received in the natural landscape of the past, an element of what Tolkien called "**Recovery"** as I said before. In Iceland, for example, the Ásatrúarfélag deliberately distance themselves from right wing groups and racism, and the same applies to many other groups of this kind in the Nordic countries and elsewhere. At heart, there is a strong desire to get back to nature, to get out of the building and get back to the landscape that in a sense originally gave birth to created these religions, and the landscape that still contains the remains of these religion within in it, in the shape of particular rocks with stories, and particular archaeological remains; there is a longing to reconnecting with this landscape as the people of the past did. Such reconnection is more important than telling people what is right and wrong and sidelining certain people with certain backgrounds. That was not what Old Norse religion was about. It was about so many forms of inclusion.