

INVESTIGATIONS INTO ASATRU: A CRITICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

“Asatru”, the modern worship of the Heathen deities of Scandinavia and Northern Europe, is a relatively young, internationally developing religious phenomenon. Since the 1990’s researchers have gradually built a body of academic literature seeking to chronicle and contextualize Asatru’s multifaceted histories, beliefs, practices and social developments within the larger arena of Western societies. This critical historiography provides an overview of the most influential extant research of Asatru and frames the developing academic discourse. The article shows that Asatru is a dynamic, heterogenous web of intersected movements which are both rapidly developing, and prone to the influences of overarching societal discourses, and that this is especially true of popular and academic discourses aimed at Asatru itself. This historiography serves as a landmark demonstrating where we have come so far as researchers with our study of and relationship with Asatru, and what steps we might consider taking in the future.

KEYWORDS

Asatru – Paganism – Heathenism – Contemporary Religion – Critical
Historiography

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Pagan¹ movements have been increasingly developing on a global scale since about the 1970's (Strmiska 2005: 1–2; Rountree 2015: 1–25). One branch of Contemporary Paganism to have become particularly visible in Scandinavia, Iceland and the United States in recent years is Asatru.² This article provides a critical overview of the prominent academic research on Asatru and attempts to trace and discuss the international discourse of that research. As will be shown, researchers have published in multiple languages about the development of Asatru on both local as well as international scales. However, the primary academic discussion which I believe has begun to develop about Asatru as a movement (or series of movements) has been published in English. As such, while this article does mention many publications in non-English languages, its primary focus is on English language publications, and publications which are relevant to the discourses which this article traces. It is not a complete overview of all academic publications on Asatru.

Academic interest in Asatru is currently small but seems to be growing, and a discourse is beginning to develop among researchers which has become increasingly more nuanced. As will be shown, earlier observations, paradigms, and theories regarding Asatru are beginning to be rearticulated, criticized, and potentially abandoned. This is primarily because researchers have had more time to spend among Asatru communities and to familiarize themselves more intimately with the socio-political and religious environments and motivations that drive them. Asatru communities themselves have also played a reflexive role which has helped researchers to better articulate the Asatru experience. Lastly, academic research has had a significant impact on Asatru itself. This will be taken up in the conclusion.

A TROUBLED START

The 1990's and early 2000's saw Asatru begin to garner academic attention, primarily in the United States, with very few exceptions (von Schnurbein 1992, 1994; Strmiska and Sigurvinnson 2000). Despite the fact that, as later researchers demonstrate, Asatru was not an inherently racist movement (Snook 2015: 13; Calico 2018: 481), its introduction

1. I will use the terms “Paganism” and “Contemporary Paganism” to refer to modern religious movements which identify with and draw from ancient (or perceived as ancient) religions, and I refer the reader to Rountree's overview of the movements and their complexities in Europe (Rountree 2015: 1–24). See also Strmiska's overview of terms such as “Pagan, Neo-Pagan, and Heathen” (Strmiska 2005: 4–11).

2. “Asatru” is employed here as an umbrella term referring the modern, Pagan religious movements dedicated to reconstruction or reinvention of Old Norse Religion. The author recognizes that the term is contested and that many practitioners prefer other terms, such as “Heathen”. No word is perfect, and the author seeks only to employ “Asatru” as a working term for this body of work. For more on the contestation of “Asatru” see (Calico 2018: 5–6; Snook 2015: 9; Strmiska 2005: 128).

to academia in was ushered in on tides of media sensationalism which at that time portrayed Asatru as racist and violent. As a result, this early period was defined by research attempting to understand Asatru in the US through its relationship with racist movements. This presentation of American Asatru by researchers would later have an impact on Asatru itself, as well as media and academic views of Asatru in other countries as well (Asprem 2008: 42). The first prominent studies were conducted by Jeffery Kaplan (1996, 1997) and then expanded on significantly by Mattias Gardell in his book, *Gods of the Blood* (2003). The works of Kaplan and Gardell would become the introduction to Asatru in America for subsequent researchers as well as the public. Their research was not intended to overview Asatru itself, however. Rather, they sought to outline the ways in which racist and white nationalist groups in the US used Asatru and Old Norse religion within a wider matrix of white nationalism, national-socialism, and militarism (Gardell 2003: 3–22). As a result, the racist fringes of Asatru were portrayed in vivid detail, while the remainder of the Asatru movement was neglected. Gardell's work was particularly influential, providing substantial fieldwork conducted among prominent figures within the racist Odinist and Asatru networks of the United States.

AN EXPANDING PERSPECTIVE

The early research involving Asatru in the US focused disproportionately on its extremist fringes and, according to Jennifer Snook, contributed to the creation and perpetuation of a stereotype of American Asatru as racist and violent. This stereotype has resulted in popular media, watchdog and hate groups alike viewing and treating Asatru as a haven of racism and white supremacy (Snook 2015: 16). It also established a discursive platform for subsequent researchers in which Asatru's relationship with racism was the centerpiece. However, the first decade of the 2000's was marked by researchers who not only expressed concern over earlier researchers' neglect of non-racist forms of Asatru, but began to publish more descriptive, ethnographic studies dedicated to understanding Asatru as a religious movement.

Michael Strmiska published multiple articles about Asatru in the US and Iceland (Strmiska and Sigurvinnson 2000; Strmiska 2005). Fredrik Gregorius published a comprehensive investigation of Asatru and its history in Sweden in 2008 (Gregorius 2008). A number of articles and chapters concerning Asatru in Denmark were published which introduced and surveyed it as a growing religious phenomenon (Warmind 2002; R. D. Pedersen 2005; Bøgelund 2008). Jenny Blain published an anthropological monograph

on the use of “seiðr”³ in *American Asatru* (2001).⁴ Egil Asprem published what he described as a “tentative” introduction to Asatru’s early developments in Norway (2008). These researchers pioneered Asatru in many ways, laying down the first, albeit disjointed pieces of the map of the Asatru landscape. Among them, Michael Strmiska’s work was the most influential, and received the most attention from subsequent researchers.

In 2000 Strmiska published an article on the Icelandic Asatru organization, *Ásatrúarfélagið*, with whom he had spent a winter conducting field work in 1997 (Strmiska and Sigurvinnson 2000). It was the first substantive overview of the history, social and ritual structure, and beliefs of the *Ásatrúarfélag*. He followed it up in 2005 with a chapter comparing the uses of Asatru between Iceland and the United States. His section on American Asatru was based partially on Kaplan’s work, and partially on his own research, made up of information taken from the extant national organizations, and a number of interviews with adherents. In 2000 Strmiska drew a comparison between Asatru in America and Iceland, making the generalized statement that Asatru groups in the US had been known to espouse neo-Nazi ideology, but that he caught no hint of such sentiment in the *Ásatrúarfélag* (Strmiska and Sigurvinnson 2000: 13). In 2005 he presented the relationship that Asatruar⁵ in the US have with questions of race and cultural heritage in more nuanced terms and stated that previous studies had overemphasized racist forms of Asatru. He described racist leaning Asatru groups as fringe groups whom the majority of American Asatruar denounce and want nothing to do with (Strmiska 2005: 128).

Strmiska’s 2000 and 2005 publications on Asatru are primarily descriptive. They give a basic account of the history of the formation of the major Asatru Organizations in Iceland and the United States, and attempt to describe the beliefs, rituals, tenants, and sources from which Asatru belief and practice is derived. But the articles rely heavily on qualitative information provided by very few individuals, and the publications of organizational leadership. The result is that he tends to make broad, sweeping statements about Asatruar in Iceland and the United States respectively and he presents theories

3. Seiðr was a sort of Nordic “shamanism”. Blain discusses it as a modern magical practice. See Neil Price (2019) for a comprehensive overview of seiðr from a historic perspective.

4. Blain’s work is one of the few which specifically deals with the religious and magic side of Asatru. It is also unique in that Blain identifies as Asatru and is a practitioner of seiðr. The work is thus from an emic perspective. However, its extremely narrow focus means that it has had very little impact on the academic discourse of Asatru.

5. I employ the term “Asatruar” according to Icelandic conjugation rules, which themselves correlate to Old Icelandic conjugation rules. Briefly explained, “Asatruar” (Icelandic *Ásatrúar*) refers to practitioners of Asatru in both the singular and the plural. In Icelandic it is used as an adjective, but has been commonly employed as a noun, particularly in English. I would also encourage other researchers to adopt this as a standard when referring to practitioners of Asatru.

which do not make sense of the diversity of belief and practice or the complex identity formations which later researchers underscore.

The works of Gregorius in Sweden, Warmind, Bøgelund, and Pedersen in Denmark, Aspren in Norway and to some degree Strmiska's investigation in Iceland in many ways represent a shift in the treatment of Asatru by researchers. They sought to introduce, overview, and treat with specific and locally manifesting forms of Asatru and place them within the larger, global phenomena of Contemporary Pagan developments. While they all describe and elucidate the relationships which some Asatru communities have with questions of ethnic identity, cultural heritage, and race, they attempt to contextualize them within a larger matrix of socioreligious discourse.

THE SHIFT TOWARD CONTEXTUALITY

In the past decade, three separate ethnographic monographs have been published (Snook 2015; von Schnurbein 2016; Calico 2018), as have multiple anthologies on Pagan and esoteric movements which contain chapters dealing with Asatru. An overview of these suggests that academic views on Asatru are beginning to deepen as researchers have been able to build off previous research and reappraise older theories.

In 2015 Jennifer Snook published *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement: A Sociological Ethnography of American Asatru*. It was by far the largest and most comprehensive overview of any Asatru community at that time. The theme of her study was the politics of social identity within Asatru in the United States, and in many ways it was a response to the research of Kaplan and Gardell, whose work Snook, like Strmiska before her, criticized for its one-sided focus (Snook 2015: 14). Snook's monograph also provides an "insider" perspective, as Snook herself candidly identifies as Asatru throughout the book.

Snook's work demonstrates how the social and political currents of identity in the United States impact and shape the development of Asatru. She argues that this is particularly true of how Asatruar perceive and construct their own identities, and she emphasizes gender roles and questions of race, ethnicity, and the concept of whiteness. In the case of the former she argues that gender roles tend to reflect those of traditional American society, and that within Asatru, just as in wider American society, there seems to be a trend of misogyny that correlates with and contradicts a growth in female leadership (Snook 2015: 105–135). In the case of the latter, Snook contextualizes the complex racial and ethnic negotiations within Asatru identity formation as a part of the larger American discourse about privilege and post-colonialism. She concludes with what she calls the "daunting task" that Asatru communities in the US have before them. Asatruar, according to Snook, would need to find a way to reinvent "Germanic ethnic spiritual identities, as a subset of the larger category of whiteness, that would be clearly distinguished, if not totally divorced from, the legacy of white supremacy in a country in which racial politics and exclusions are woven into the culture's political and economic

foundation” (Snook 2015: 144). As stated above, Snook is very open about her own identity as Asatru and her own involvement with the movement in the United States. The task that she presents to Asatruar then should be treated by researchers as just as much a part of the discourse within Asatru as it is an academic observation.

Stefanie von Schnurbein’s book, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (2016) is at once the most comprehensive on Asatru, as well as one of the most limited. It offers the only international perspective on the genesis and development of Asatru from the beginning of the Germanic National Romantic period in the early 1900’s until today. She provides brief histories of modern Asatru in Scandinavia, Germany, the UK and the US. Despite this far reaching scope, Schnurbein’s intention is specifically to reveal and trace problematic ideologies of racism, ultra-right nationalism, and antisemitism (as well as other forms of othering) through contemporary forms of Asatru. Her study is therefore limited to the dissemination of ideas, philosophies, and other aspects of cultural history themselves, and she spends almost no effort with how Asatru is performed and experienced by practitioners.

Schnurbein’s objectives of uncovering dangerous elements in Asatru are apparent throughout her study. However, and probably owing to this conviction, she does not seem as interested in contextualizing those elements. In fact, she provides very little of her own field work, and relies on Gardell’s fieldwork in the US and Gregorius’ in Sweden (von Schnurbein 2016: 13–14). It has already been noted that Gardell’s work is problematic for its unbalanced portrayal of Asatru, but his research was also 13 years old by the time of her own publication. Based on the heterogeneous and dynamic nature of Asatru, expressed by herself among others (von Schnurbein 2016: 88–91; Snook 2015: 11–13; Calico 2018: 112–172), Schnurbein’s data should be viewed as unbalanced in some respects. While certainly “balance” is something that all researchers struggle with, this observation is important in the case of *Norse Revival* because Schnurbein’s arguments are often quite severe, and tend to paint a depiction of Asatru that is in many regards at odds with those of other current researchers.

Schnurbein focuses so strongly on demonstrating how an ideological element can be traced to problematic roots that she often fails to demonstrate, or disregards how that element has changed or taken on new contextual meaning. Kaarina Aitamurto observes of Schnurbein that “concerning such issues as contemporary Paganism, green philosophy and feminist spirituality, the aim of pinpointing the legacies of racism and anti-Semitism in these areas overshadows the anti-discriminative openings and endeavours within them” (Aitamurto 2016: 2). At other times she ascribes widespread practices in Asatru to an origin in National Romanticism, when in reality those practices are abundantly represented in Old Norse written sources and are widely accepted to have been a part of pre-Christian religion, from which Asatruar draw their own religious inspira-

tion.⁶ Despite these issues, Schnurbein's book is potentially one of the most important and influential studies of Asatru, not only because it underscores problematic ideological threads within Asatru discourse. Perhaps more importantly, the study presents itself in many ways as an activist treatise for Asatruar and those involved with the uses of Germanic religion to re-evaluate their own discourses and at times to amend them.⁷

The most recently published work on Asatru happens also to be the largest. Jefferson Calico spent five years doing ethnographic fieldwork in the United States before publishing a monograph which surveys Asatru on a national scale and from an anthropological and religious studies perspective (Calico 2018). Where Snook and Schnurbein focus on identity, addressing the ideological and sociological baggage inherent in attempting to develop a new religion derived from Northern European and particularly Germanic heritage, Calico's work is observational and descriptive. He also spends significant energy attempting to explore belief, ritual, magic, and epistemology. As such, it helps to fill in a hole in the discursive framework of Asatru which I have shown to have been overwhelmingly socio-political.

Calico's work sets Asatru within a framework that recognizes new religious movements' function as providers of solutions to societal tensions for their adherents. His main theoretical approach is what he calls a "river system metaphor". That is, religions are not static, but rather are dynamic systems with their own tributaries and confluences that add to and alter their character, creating subsets, and mixing into different confluences which create new and different forms of religion (Calico 2018: 114–115). Calico's approach results in a more dynamic portrayal of Asatru, as well as one which succeeds in mapping out more diversity in belief, ritual, and epistemology than previous studies.

What Calico observes is a religion marked by a "surprising diversity of practice" (Calico 2018: 481), and he accounts for this diversity through what he calls "tributaries" of culture. These tributaries range from academic studies to popular culture to the influence of the New Age movement. What makes Asatru so complicated in the US, according to Calico, is that every Asatruar and Asatru group draws on a diverse set of tributaries which inform their own practices in a myriad of ways. Calico concludes

6. For example, regarding the widespread use of toasts in Asatru, she says "the only aspect from medieval sources that is included in contemporary blots is the ritual drinking and toasting. This is probably a reflection of a 19th century Romantic imagination of medieval drinking rituals, which also found expression in student fraternities" (von Schnurbein 2016: 110). Not only have other researchers in this historiography shown significantly more elements from medieval sources than ritual drinking, the act of communal drinking in Old Norse Religious contexts has been widely written about and the assertion that modern ritual drinking is a reflection of 19th century Romanticism must be discarded. See Enright 1996 and Sundqvist 2002: 193 for examples of academic discourse on heathen drinking rituals.

7. Schnurbein observes that her research is deeply interwoven throughout Asatru communities and that it has had an impact in helping Asatru communities identify and discursively combat various groups and ideologies (von Schnurbein 2016: 353).

that due to Asatru's diverse and constantly changing forms, future studies must involve mapping more intersecting tributaries "and reflecting on how they contribute to Heathen attitudes regarding modernity, religious pluralism, race, gender and class" (Calico 2018: 481).

In addition to these three monographs, several articles have been published which have contributed in various ways to the developing discourse on Asatru. In 2015, the anthology, *Contemporary Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Europe: Colonialist and Nationalist Impulses* (ed. Kathryn Rountree) was published containing multiple articles on Asatru in different locations and from different perspectives. The anthology situates its Asatru chapters within the broader context of new religious movements in Europe. Mathew Amster offers up the most comprehensive overview of the Asatru scene in Denmark to date (Amster 2015: 43–63). Fredrik Gregorius offers a condensed version of his previously released doctoral dissertation (Gregorius 2015: 64–85). Numerous other authors either touch on Asatru (Velkoborská 2015: 86–109) or else contribute to the discussion on Asatru in important albeit indirect ways (Kraft 2015: 25–42).

Notable articles have also been released elsewhere. Terry Gunnell provides an investigation into the developmental background and nature of the rituals performed in the Ásatrúarfélagið (Gunnell 2015); Benjamin Weber Pedersen gives a brief introduction to Danish Asatru as a part of the larger Danish Contemporary Pagan scene (B. W. Pedersen 2016); Geir Uldal and Geir Winje provide a similar overview of Norwegian Asatru, but which essentially reaffirms the overview and points made in 2008 by Asprem. Of particular interest here is the contrast between the way in which Asatru in the United States was first presented by researchers, and the way in which researchers treated Norwegian Asatru. The works of both Asprem, Uldal and Winje describe Asatru in Norway as ostensibly anti-racist and vocally opposed to discrimination of any sort. The authors draw very clear lines between the Asatru groups and those groups which have used Norse symbolism for racist purposes, describing the latter as marginalized and less interested in religion as they are interested in "propaganda to spread their political views" (Uldal and Winje 2016: 371). Asprem remarks that the conflict which Asatruar in Norway have had with racism has been one primarily created by the media (Asprem 2008: 44–45). Lastly, as far as this historiography goes, Jennifer Snook, Thad Horrell and Kristen Horten have recently argued that Asatruar in the United States will continue to be unfairly accused of being racist, as well as forced to deal with actual racist uses of Asatru if they follow a pattern, as some in the US have, of attempting to construct an "indigenous" religion if that religion claims "white indigeneity". Such constructions inherently uphold and propagate systematically held racist baggage. They argue that Asatruar need to begin to deconstruct "whiteness", which is an artificial colonial tool of oppression, and begin constructing and emphasizing identities which are "pre-white" (Snook et al. 2017: 59).

DISCUSSING ASATRU

As stated in the introduction, both research and discourse on Asatru is limited. With the exceptions of Schnurbein and Strmiska, very little international comparative research has been done, and that which does exist has been about matters of identity as they relate to racism. Research on Asatru in the US has significantly influenced research on Asatru internationally. Likewise, researchers outside of the US have produced works which should inform future studies of Asatru both in the US and internationally.

An overarching theme which has become increasingly evident over the course of the past 25 years is the heterogenous and dynamic nature of Asatru. Strmiska and Snook both observed that the research of Kaplan and Gardell created a disproportionate representation of racist groups in the United States and underscored that the relationship between Asatruar and racial and ethnic questions is more complex than “racist” and “nonracist”. Schnurbein’s early work, questioning whether Germanic Paganism should be viewed as a “racist cult” should be held against her more recent work, where she admits not only to the complexities of Asatruar identity politics, but observes tremendous efforts by Asatruar to distance themselves from problematic groups and ideologies. The following is an example of how the discussion of Asatru and racism has developed.

In 2005 Strmiska attempted to describe how modern Pagan religions situate themselves on a racist or exclusivist “ethnic” gradient which he called the “reconstructionist/eclectic” polarity (Strmiska 2005: 21). According to Strmiska, the “reconstructionist” and “eclectic” gradient determines how Pagan groups treat with source material. “Reconstructionists” romanticize, recreate, and imitate source material associated with a specific ethnic group with the religious objective being to come as close to that original version as possible. “Eclectics”, on the other hand, mix elements both old and new, as well as from other religious traditions. Strmiska argues that reconstructionist movements appeal to those who are interested in creating and maintaining ethnic identities and look to the past, while eclectic movements emphasize relationships between nature, humanity, and a view of the future (Strmiska 2005: 18–22).

More recent research has challenged Strmiska’s gradient. Of Sami Neo-shamanism in Norway, Kraft observes that Strmiska’s continuum “fails to make sense of the complex mixtures of the postcolonial era, including the intersections between Contemporary Paganism and New Age, between colonizing and nationalist impulses, and between reconstructionism and eclecticism” (Kraft 2015: 25–26). She argues that the Sami theological profile is composed of both reconstructionism and eclecticism specifically shaped by the Sami’s social and historical situation in Norway. Their reconstructionist/eclectic profile allows for them to maintain indigenous status in a postcolonial setting as well as having access to more New Age developments (Kraft 2015: 29, 38). Amster finds that Strmiska’s gradient does not work for Asatru in Denmark either. There, the groups which are more interested in ethnic and nationalist identity engage in a form of Asatru which is only loosely connected to the Old Norse source material, while the Nordisk Tingsfælig

unambiguously stands opposed to any and all ethnic or national uses of Asatru, while simultaneously creating forms of religious expression which are more closely derived from existing material on Old Norse Religion (Amster 2015: 54–55). In the United States, both Snook and Calico show that “reconstructionism” is often altogether unrelated to the creation or maintenance of ethnic identities (Snook 2015: 48–60; Calico 2018: 38–44). Rather, both researchers underscore that Asatru communities in the US tend to use “reconstructionism” as a critical approach toward understanding the source material itself. Asatruar may use what they refer to as “reconstructionism” as an attempt to contextualize the sources they draw on, but they allow modern practices and theology to develop more freely (Snook 2015: 52; Calico 2018: 44). These researchers have demonstrated that Asatru communities’ reception of source material and relationship to discourse about ethnicity is too diverse for the “reconstructionist/eclectic” continuum as Strmiska presents it to be widely functional.

The general relationship between Asatru communities and questions of ethnicity, race, reconstruction and reinvention, has been demonstrated to be so complex in fact that it is difficult to make any kind of general observations. Gregorius has argued that Asatru in Sweden reflects general Swedish discursive trends which emphasize the notion that “Vikings” and pre-Christian religion as a part of their ethnic heritage. Yet Gregorius notes that Swedish Asatruar are openly against racial interpretations and open to members of all backgrounds (Gregorius 2015: 71). Amster observes that Danish Asatruar strive to be “apolitical”, much like Danish society, and yet serious divisions can be found within the Danish Asatru community based on politics (Amster 2015: 60). In Norway the main Asatru organization, Asatrufelleskapet Bifrost is openly opposed to groups which use not only Asatru, but Norse symbols and cultural heritage for exclusionist purposes, while simultaneously espousing the reconstructionist approach of creating a new religion based on pre-Christian traditions (Uldal and Winje 2016: 369). In Iceland, Terry Gunnell provides a case study that demonstrates how newly invented or “eccentric” elements that make up the *Ásatrúarfélag* have become so codified that even the ritual leaders can no longer easily change them without transgressing communal views of tradition (Gunnell 2015: 30–38). If there is a pattern to be seen in the developing discourse on Asatru internationally, perhaps Calico’s observation that it is both surprisingly diverse and made up of locally manifesting blends of cultural tributaries, is the most accurate.

REFLEXIVITY BETWEEN ASATRU AND ACADAMIA

To conclude this historiography, I would like to draw attention to the reflexivity demonstrated by Asatru communities over the past 25 years. Most researchers have observed that academic discourse is followed very closely within Asatru communities (Strmiska 2005: 19; Snook 2015: 51). Schnurbein describes observing how Asatru communities have reacted to her own research and that of others (von Schnurbein 2016: 63, 353). She

also describes observing an international shift in which Asatru groups have begun actively distancing themselves from problematic groups and taking more clearly defined anti-racist positions. While it is uncertain to what extent Schnurbein or others have played a role in that process, it seems fair to suggest that her works, which elucidate the relationship between *völkisch* ideology and Asatru more comprehensively than any other, have certainly been useful. Jennifer Snook is both a researcher and a member of the Asatru milieu, whose works represent a push from within Asatru for its collective members to address and at times reform their narratives. I have described the impact that Kaplan and Gardell have had on outsider impressions of Asatru. However, the impact that their research has had on Asatruar themselves is much more difficult to determine. To my mind a comparison can be made between the early research on Asatru in America and in Norway.

Egil Asprem's research demonstrates that the development of Asatru in Norway was impeded by significant prejudice by Norwegian society and its government. The Norwegian government, in fact, went so far as to actively attempt using its secret police to impede rituals and gatherings by non-racist Asatru groups during a period of what he describes as "moral panic" over fears of an underground world of Satanism, violent occultism, Paganism and human sacrifice (Asprem 2008: 50–52). This dark, Pagan/Satanic underground was, in reality, a fabrication by the media and part of a larger western moral panic that could be seen in the US as well. However, it gave a platform for racist figures like Varg Vikernes⁸ to actively promote the development of a racist Nordic paganism, and for a racist organization called Vigrd to develop (Asprem 2008: 59–60). Furthermore, Asprem argues that media and popular publications were responsible for creating links between Asatru and racism which did not in actuality exist in Norway, and he says that they perpetuated generalizations between the two. According to Asprem, "it is these that have posed a very serious threat to harmless religious subcultures which in reality lacked any connection to either Satanic ritual abuse or neo-Nazism" (Asprem 2008: 55).

As a direct response to the negative perceptions that they found themselves facing, the Asatru organization, *Åsatrufellesskapet Bifrost*, established a charter and bylaws which make their anti-racist position very clear, and actively established channels with the Norwegian government to help oppose Vigrd or other racialist Asatru groups (who were an extreme minority) (Asprem 2008: 64). With time, and certainly owing to their uncompromising position, *Åsatrufellesskapet Bifrost* were able to shake the distrust of Norwegian society, and in Norway today the battle against the negative stereotype is considered mostly won (Asprem 2008: 65). In fact, representatives of *Åsatrufellesskapet*

8. Varg Vikernes was a part of the early Black Metal movement in Norway in the early 90's and the sole member of Burzum. He was arrested for the murder of Øystein Aarseth of Mayhem. For more see Asprem 2008: 54.

Bifrost were eventually invited to participate in a legal hearing which proposed a ban on a number of Norse symbols for supposedly being neo-Nazi. In the hearing, Bifrost provided documentation that most of the symbols proposed to be banned belonged to world heritage, appearing in a long history of various religious contexts. Their role in the hearing helped in getting the proposal dismissed (Asprem 2008: 61–62). In this way, one might say that *Åsatrufellesskapet Bifrost* played an instrumental role in helping to preserve a part of world heritage, rather than allowing them to be wrongly written off as hate symbols.

The case study of *Åsatrufellesskapet Bifrost*'s treatment by Norwegian media, their response to it, and the subsequent change in their treatment, even putting them in a position of influence in at least some aspects of Norwegian society, might shed some insight on the reflexivity of Asatru elsewhere. Perhaps the initial negative spotlight, which certainly led to more nuanced academic discourse, has helped those Asatru communities which have been struggling to shape an authentic identity that both celebrates Old Norse religion and opposes nationalist and racist uses of it. Among these we can certainly place researchers such as Jennifer Snook.

On the other hand, perhaps by spotlighting racist extremists, and thereby advertising them over the efforts of anti-racist Asatruar, as we have seen in the US, early research has made the struggle of anti-racist Asatruar more difficult. It is interesting to contrast the treatment of Asatru in Norway to that of American Asatru by researchers. Asprem's work represents the first academic attempt to describe modern Asatru in Norway. In it he describes a context in which media representation of Asatru was not only inaccurate, but harmful to group Asatruar in Norway. No research exists that I am aware of that attempts to measure the impact that academic discourse has had on Asatru communities themselves, but it seems very clear that such an impact does exist.

It is my opinion that as we enter the third decade of the 21st century, researchers consider that there is a powerful "reflexive feedback loop" (Swancutt and Mazard 2016: 2) between ourselves and those people with whom we enter into dialogue with through our fieldwork and ultimately our publications. Asatru is young, dynamic, and very much tapped into our research and discourse. Whether we consider ourselves to be Asatru or interested researchers or both, by engaging with Asatru and with those who identify with it we become very real and very powerful players in the Asatru meaning-making arena, which is itself a part of the socio-political discourse in society at large. If we are more aware of the reflexive loop and even the overlap between academics and the communities that we research, we can in turn be more mindful about the ways in which what we say and what we do will matter in the long run.

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