

Stefanie von Schnurbein

Norse Revival. Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism

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Stefanie von Schnurbein has been studying Asatru for thirty years, long enough to be well positioned to write a weighty, carefully researched and introspective book on the intellectual and cultural currents from which spring both religious reconstructions of Germanic/Nordic religious thought and the academic study of Norse myth and religion. This she has done in *Norse Revival*. Her subject is not just Asatru or heathenism, the contemporary religion, but what she calls Germanic Neopaganism more broadly, which encompasses both Asatru and the German Faith movement founded in the early twentieth century. Her nominal thesis is that the same “sacralization of culture and simultaneous culturalization of religion” (8) that has brought increased interest in things “Norse” and pre-Christian since the 1990s has given Asatru increased respectability in the same period. I say “nominal” because the book encompasses far more than that. The text swirls around the author’s deep ambivalence about her and others’ fascination with pre-Christian Norse religion and culture and her abhorrence of the ideological baggage that always (she holds) threatens any approach to it. It is both a very learned book and a very sincere and personal one.

The first section of the book introduces us to Germanic Neopaganism through time and brings readers unfamiliar with Asatru today up to date. Chapter one lays out the “historical preconditions of modern Asatru,” some of which are the preconditions of Old Norse and Scandinavian studies. European Romanticism, the search for national mythologies, and the German Faith movement are all part of this. The emergence of Wicca in the 1970s is the other major ingredient. Chapter two traces late 20th-century Asatru in the US, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland back to its beginnings in the 1970s (there is an Australian connection) through its shift during the 1990s into increased respectability. Organizations take form, split, merge, and influence organizations in other countries. There are a lot of names, but it is important to have the history set out for us. Here, and in the index, groups are identified as a-racist, ethnicist, or racial-religious; the first two corre-

spend roughly to the emic “universalist” and “folkish,” and the last is instead of the more commonly-used “racist.” I missed any mention of Heathens United Against Racism (HUAR), one of the few not just a-racist but anti-racist groups to which von Schnurbein alludes in passing (7), but it may be too small—or its split from The Troth too recent—to have been mentioned. There are inevitable limits to the granularity of any study of this kind.

Chapter three outlines the “cultic milieu” of Asatru, what adherents believe and how they practice. It is the chapter most closely based on interviews and forum posts by individuals, with the result that more of the “multifaceted and contradictory” (vii) nature of human beings comes through. Von Schnurbein discusses how heathens come to Asatru, how Asatru rituals are constructed and when they are held, and the place of runes, Hávamál, *seid* and neo-shamanism, among other aspects. Scholars of Norse myth and religion will be interested to learn that Loki has finally attracted a cult (though they will wish to know more than is provided here). In my opinion, chapters two and three should be required reading for any scholar of Old Norse myth and religion. We should have at least this degree of familiarity with the history and ideas of the only other group to whom the materials of our field of study are as important as they are to us.

The second part of the book walks us through Germanic Paganism’s engagements with race, religion, nature, sexuality and gender, academia and aesthetics. Chapters four and five take up “Contested Fields.” Discussions of Asatru can get tied up in whether this or that group espouses a Nazi ideology without acknowledging that “heritage” and “ethnicity” are ideas formed in the same Romantic foment that produced that ideology. Chapter four, Race and Ethnicity, aims to fix that oversight, exploring the conflation of religion, culture, and ethnicity that formed in the nineteenth century and can be seen today not only in Asatru, but also in mainstream discourses that contrast “Christian culture” with “Islam.” Chapter five treats Concepts of Religion and Anti-Monotheism. Asatru is frequently constructed by its practitioners in opposition to Christianity, sometimes understood as a destructive, foreign and/or essentially Jewish monotheism, and sometimes to Islam understood as the most recent incarnation of an ever-oppressive monotheism. Sometimes, by a series of transformations difficult to summarize here, Asatru is constructed as a kind of secularism. This is all fascinating stuff, some of it connecting back to the German Faith movement or forward to the New European Right.

Chapter six examines Asatru as “a religion of nature,” both in the sense of being somehow closer to the world of trees and stones and in the sense of a having spontaneously arisen or being “proper” to this or that group of human beings. Forerunners are found in the German Heimat movement. Connections with the leftward-leaning mainstream environmental protection movement in the present are complicated. “The natural” also comes up in the context of gender and sexuality, the subject of chapter seven. Asatru is overwhelmingly dominated by men, and von Schnurbein traces some of its well-known masculinist values to Höfler’s theories of the Männerbund. The reception of feminist scholarship about archaic matriarchies has left a mark on Asatru’s imagining of a high status of women in pre-Christian Germanic culture. Some Asatru groups regard homosexuality as unnatural and inimical to a religion imagined as having to do with fertility; some regard their openness to different sexual expressions as a sign of their religion’s enlightened nature.

Some gender non-conforming Germanic neopagans have found a place for themselves as practitioners of *seid*.

Chapter eight examines the relationship between Asatru and academia, how heathens use the primary sources and how they use scholarship, especially that founded on holistic ideas of a Germanic antiquity. It is here that the skeletons in the shared closet—National Romantic and *völkisch* scholarship—are taken out and shaken. Whether or not one agrees with von Schnurbein that any attempt to reconstruct pre-Christian Norse myth and religion from the surviving sources is methodologically flawed and rather suspect, it is salutary to give the unsavory ancestors a good airing. She makes good points, too, about the aesthetic dimensions of scholarly reconstruction.

Chapter nine moves on to a consideration of the religious functions of art and the artistic functions of religion: the keyword is *Kunstreligion*. We are introduced to a range of artistic works that engage aesthetically with an image of pre-Christian Germanic culture. This includes literature by Tolkien, heathen authors, Tom Shippey (in his guise as Tom Holm), and others, as well as the drama, visual art and architecture of the German Faith movement. Music is also treated here, not just Wagner but metal and neo-folk music. These are not necessarily the kinds of music that heathens listen to, but they are examples of the creative productivity of understandings of the pre-Christian Nordic.

The final chapter returns to the personal note struck in the Introduction, making for an elegant exit from a looping, ruminative journey. Is a form of a-racist Asatru possible that would not reproduce “*völkisch* ideologemes” (6) of ethnic essentialism and exclusion? Germanic Neopaganism is always precariously positioned, she says. Must scholars abandon hope of glimpsing pre-Christian Norse religious thought and confine ourselves instead to the study of medieval Christian authors’ engagement with their own ideas of a pre-Christian past? Von Schnurbein says yes: the sources are too late and too fragmentary. The work of scraping Christian overlay from pagan relic is too much a ritual of purification, the work of assembling fragments always guided by intuition, aesthetics, and neo-Romantic dreams of a vanished cultural whole. I’m not completely convinced. I think von Schnurbein underestimates the current trend in the interdisciplinary study of Old Norse myth and religion that understands pre-Christian Nordic cults as highly local, oblivious to boundaries between “Germanic” and “Fenno-Ugric,” and already influenced by Christianity since the late classical period. But a great strength of *Nordic Revival* is that the reader need not accept this conclusion in its hardest articulation to find the book valuable, rewarding, even urgent. I agree entirely with the author that we need to seriously think through the stakes of reconstructionist methodologies. The challenge issued in this book’s pages is one all students of Old Norse myth must take up.

Norse Revival is about Germanic Neo-paganism (Neo-paganisms, really), not Germanic Neopagans. Von Schurbein’s concentration on the public faces of organizations means that the voices of individuals are underrepresented and those of the many unaffiliated solo practitioners are not represented at all. She does briefly mention practitioners of *seid* who do not identify as Asatru or heathen (247), but those few paragraphs barely hint at the diversity of practice among Germanic or “Northern Tradition” Neopagans today. Among them are devotees of Loki (Lokeans) and followers of Rökkatru, who venerate other figures traditionally viewed as inimical to the gods such as Fenrir, Angrboda, and Hel. Also among

them are non-reconstructionist heathens whose practice is based on experience and aesthetics to the near-exclusion even of the eddas. These individuals pose the greatest challenge to von Schnurbein's thesis. But von Schnurbein is after the large-scale cultural and intellectual history, and this she captures. Those in search of the idiosyncratic voices should turn to Jennifer Snook's 2015 *American Heathens* and René Gründer's work,¹ which von Schnurbein's book complements well.

Norse Revival is admirably self-reflexive, exemplative of the interpenetration of Asatru and academia, and respectful in tone on the whole. The bibliography includes works by heathen scholars. Von Schnurbein recognizes, too, that her own earlier scholarship has influenced Asatru in complex ways, and that it may have contributed to a disproportionate scholarly focus on racist elements. She also reports having found unexpectedly much in common with some of her interlocutors, some of whom were as concerned about the "potentially ethnicist and culturally essentialist" aspects of their religion as she was (354). A jolting exception to the rule comes early on when she explicitly deprivileges work by scholars who are themselves heathen relative to the masters' theses and dissertations by scholars who are not (12). This will unnecessarily annoy some of her readership.

That readership will be broader than is usual for heavily-footnoted works of humanities scholarship selling for €140 in hardcover. Not only does the heathen community eagerly consume scholarship relevant to its interests, but Brill has wisely decided to publish the volume electronically under an Open Access Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial license. This is good news, too, for those who wish to assign the book in whole or in part to students. Chapter eight alone, for example, would be a worthwhile addition to a graduate seminar on Norse myth and philology.

Norse Revival is not the last word on Germanic Neopaganism or even on reconstructionist Asatru at its most narrowly conceived. It need not be. The book is an erudite, nuanced work of scholarship—an important contribution to our understanding of a growing international religious movement, its intellectual and cultural underpinnings, and our relationship to both. If it is "much less sensationalist and not as immediately politically urgent as [the author] had intended it to be" (354), that is just as well: the subject matter is fascinating on its own. Moreover, it's urgent enough. The irony of the warning against seeking for identity in the past is that it shows the importance of knowing well one's intellectual genealogy. That knowledge can only serve us well while less benign revenants of National Romanticism are abroad, as they are today in the mainstream culture in which we participate as scholars and as citizens.

1. Snook, Jennifer. *American Heathens. The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement*. Temple University Press, 2015; Gründer, René. *Germanisches (Neu)Heidentum in Deutschland. Entstehung, Struktur und Symbolsystem*. Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2008, and *Blótgemeinschaften. Eine Religionsethnografie des "germanischen Neuheidentums."* Würzburg: ERGON Verlag, 2010.