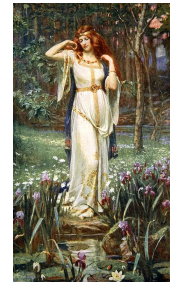


Still Here [b]

The pagan people of Europe

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'Freyja and The Necklace'
James Dole Penrose, 1890

The pagan beliefs held by native, European people expresses a spirituality resulting from their natural connections to an ancient, ancestral homeland.

European paganism is an animistic belief: that everything possesses a spirit/soul – including ‘inanimate’ things. It is experienced by people through immanence – awareness of being an integral part of the entire universe, and not just a detached ‘outside’ transcendent observer. These, therefore, provides a possible analogous link to the contemporary ‘conscious universe’ hypothesis.¹ The human experience of immanence is through numinous things – things that awaken deep spiritual emotions and insights (i.e. music, prose, love, hate, natural beauty, *et al*).

European pagan spirituality was/is not a religion – and should not be so crudely caricatured as such. There was/is no instructive, authoritarian ‘holy scripture’ or holy book, no religious ‘teachings’, no obligation to engage in worshipful prayer nor submissively prostrate oneself to a ‘supreme being’ or to religious icons/totems (either figuratively or in actuality).²

Notably, there was/is no defining of some outside ‘other’ as a necessary rationale for the existence of that pagan belief – of the identifying of some ‘other’ as an ‘obstacle’ requiring opprobrium, corrective action, conversion, conquest, or elimination.^{3 4 5} A belief that the gods (or God) would favour or ‘choose’ a people or tribe (over all others) will have been seen as not only preposterous, but also as a perverse and dangerous belief.

There were/are no customary practices to prevent apostasy within European pagan belief – such as ritual bodily mutilations (scarification, amputations, infant/child genital mutilation), or of the ritualized killings (or threat of killing) of unbelievers/apostates, or the ritual sacrifice of humans or animals (as a necessary demonstration of religious devotedness, or ‘test of faith’ founding principle). Such things would be seen as abominable behaviour.⁶

¹ The animistic characteristics of European paganism is therefore seen as being of particular contemporary relevance, given the contemporary interest and speculations in regard to the quantum-theory related notions of “*conscious atoms*”, “*the conscious universe*”, and the “*interconnectivity of all things*”, within the speculative hypotheses of ‘panpsychism’ as espoused, for example, by Federico Faggin, *et al*.

² However, talismans/charms were/are often worn as personal items by pagan followers of north European pagans (as, indeed is the crucifix, for the same purpose, by followers of Christianity).

³ The invented reports of a pagan Europeans predilection for human sacrifice, from the times of the Roman Empire and onwards, has been from those who would have had a vested interest in doing so – of (for example) Roman historians and military leaders (such as Julius Caesar, Tacitus, Lucy, and Pliny), or in later centuries of Abrahamic scholars and writers (such as the Jewish writer al-Tartushi of Andalusia in the 10th Century, or of Adam of Bremen or Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg in the 11th Century).

⁴ Such as, at Trelleborg, West Zealand, Denmark, *circa* pre-10th Century). See, also: ‘Human Sacrifices at Trelleborg’, and ‘Exaggerated Accounts? www.en.natmus.dk

⁵ The carving on the 7th Century Stora Hammars Stone, in Larbro in Sweden, presumably memorialising the tragic mythological war between King Kogni and Hedinn, is often cited as providing ‘proof’ that European (Norse, Viking) pagans indulged in human sacrifice (in regard to the third panel). It doesn’t. This is in regard to the stone’s carved depiction of: the abduction of Hildr by her lover Hedinn (and his murder of Hildr’s mother); the war against Hedinn by Hildr’s father, King Hogni, to secure Hildr’s return; and of Hildr’s efforts for a peaceful reconciliation between her father and her lover. The use of human sacrifice plays no part within that ancient mythological tale. Source: ‘The Norse Myths – A Guide to The Gods and Heroes’, by Carolyne Carrington, Thames & Hudson, London, 2017. [Author’s copy]. Re. ‘Eternal Conflict in Orkney’, pages 174-176.

⁶ Such acts would, not least, being contrary to this essential animistic nature of north European paganism.

North European pagan spirituality mythologises both male gods and female goddesses of equal sacredness, who manifest themselves through complex interactions with all other things.^{7 8} It includes a warrior ethos (for both men and women), based on the notion of justice and self-sacrifice, reflected in the character and the mythic stories of the courageous exploits of both ordinary mortals and (by allegory) that of the gods/goddesses and non-humans.^{9 10}

Therefore, it was considered that such courage, shown within one's lifetime, would be honoured by the gods/goddesses (i.e. Freya) in their after-life, for having shown extraordinary courage in fighting the evil 'monsters' – but not for having shown submissive devotion to, or worship of, or proselytising for, any of the gods/goddesses.

An important part of that pagan European tradition is that those (the heroes and heroines) who chose to confront evil 'monsters', knowing (and willingly accepting) they did not do so to solicit favour from, or to ingratiate themselves to the gods or goddesses. And they would do so even when beset by fear and doubt. Personal selfless courage was therefore seen as an especially virtuous form of behaviour (for both men and women).

It clearly included a belief in an after-life. Burials of both men and women would often be replete with ornamental and utilitarian 'grave goods', precious to the deceased in their lifetime – their personal weapons and jewellery; clay pots of food and wine; favourite domestic animals; and (for some) chariot burials where slaughtered horses would be interred to pull the deceased's chariot in their journeys within the after-life.^{11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18}

Life in those ancient times included a form of social organisation involving a conjoining of inter-family and inter-communal life. Such a communion of material and spiritual life was (and is still) reflected in the traditional annual feasting-festivals celebrating transitional times

⁷ In terms of the status of gods and goddesses: *“the goddesses are no less sacred, nor are they less powerful”*, see: Sturluson, Snorri, 'The Prose Edda', Penguin, London, 2005, '20. Odin The All Father', page 30

⁸ Such as the god Thor expressing his displeasure at the 'sacrilege' of Thjalfi toward the bones of a slaughtered goat. See: Sturluson, Snorri, 'The Prose Edda', Penguin, London, 2005, '44. Thor and Loki Begin Their Journey to Giant Land', page 54

⁹ Notably the pagan god Tiw is both the god of self-sacrifice, war and justice, whilst Freya is the goddess of war and beauty.

¹⁰ This, being so accurately portrayed (in the opinion of this author) in the story 'The Lord of The Rings' by the English 20th Century writer J R R Tolkien. Rather ironically, Tolkien was a devout (Roman Catholic) Christian.

¹¹ Albeit not always with the slaughtered horses. See, for example: 'The Wetwang Chariot Burial', compass, The British Museum, source: <http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass/ixbin/goto?id=ENC9988&tour=int>

¹² For example, the young 'sun dancer' Egtved Girl, of *circa* 1,370 BC.

¹³ For example, the Birka Burials (Sweden) – including a young 5-6-year-old girl, and a female warrior (10th Century AD).

¹⁴ Such as the 'water burial' Levalhulta site at Orismala in Isokyro, Finland, (*circa* 350 to 800 BC) of more than 100 individuals – seemingly of exclusively women and children - who were carefully 'buried' with precious, personal items, including jewellery.

¹⁵ Those burials could be of a single 'pit' or communal 'earth' internments (i.e. long-barrow, round-barrow, or communal graves), or of single or communal 'wetland' burials – containing the whole or cremated bodies of those who had 'departed' to an after-life.

¹⁶ In Britain, we have archaeological evidence from Worsley Moss and Lindow Moss (both in the Manchester area) where we have the well-preserved remains of two ancient Britons who clearly had been ritually killed. In both cases they had suffered a severe blow to the head, their throats had been cut, and they had been garrotted. In the case of Worsley man there is also evidence of decapitation – perhaps an example of the Celtic preoccupation with the head as the place of the soul, and the human spirit. We might, of course, wish to consider other scenarios other than ritual sacrifice – such as judicial execution. In this regard there are important observations to be made. The scarcity of physical evidence suggests that this was an extremely rare practice, even during the early iron-age the population of northern Europe would have numbered several million – however the marshes and peat-bogs very rarely reveal the preserved bodies of sacrificed individuals. Secondly, we do not know the circumstances governing choice of these peat-bog 'victims' – the evidence suggests they were not captured adversaries, and they may even have been willing (or least acquiescent) participants in this supreme act of spiritual observance.

¹⁷ Such as the fens of East Anglia and Norfolk, the peat lands of the Somerset Levels and Cheshire, and the 'Celtic' rivers such as the Thames, the Severn, the Usk and the Boyne.

¹⁸ Of, for example, of casting valued items into a 'wishing well', for 'good luck'; or of casting wreaths upon the water to honour the 'departed'.

of the year, of old endings and new beginnings (Mid-winter/Yule/Winter-solstice, Eostre/Spring-equinox, Litha/summer solstice, and of the Mabon/Harvest Festival/Autumn-equinox).^{19 20}

It was in these pagan times that trade and cultural links developed across all Europe (and far beyond); that a formulation, by custom and consent, of a common code of fair law and justice began; and that the development of the first major settlements of hamlets, villages, towns and (even) of proto-cities emerged.^{21 22}

Notably, early Europeans developed immense skills in observational cosmology. They knew of the long-term motions of the sun and moon with extraordinary precision, and they were able to correlate these with the cyclic changes of the seasons (including the four festival days of the mid-winter/mid-summer solstice, and the spring and autumn equinox). And by using those observations, they were able to create a 19-year Lunar calendar.^{23 24} Such skills were put to good practical use in hunting, farming and fishing – and in establishing the alignments of dwellings, burial places, and of sacred sites of spiritual significance.²⁵

End



Bronze Age Barrow, Stonehenge complex, England
[photo by the author, 28th December 2017, during a field-trip]

¹⁹ A Harvest Moon is therefore the full moon that occurs closest to the date of the Autumn Equinox, and a Hunter's Moon is the first full moon after the Harvest Moon.

²⁰ We have material evidence of these pagan 'feast day' sites, for example: at Durrington Walls in Wiltshire, England (from *circa* 2,800 to 2,100 BC); and at Ose, Ørsta in Norway (from *circa* 500 BC to 800 AD).

²¹ See, for example, 'How 7,000-year-old Nickern temples reveal Europe's elaborate culture', by Cahal Milmo, The Independent, 11th June 2005.

²² For example, the towns and proto-cities of the Trypillia/Cucutani culture of central Europe, of *circa* 5,000 to 3,000 BC.

²³ The lunar calendar can be determined from observations of particular phases of the moon falling on particular times of the year (for example, of a crescent moon on the eve of midsummer). This coincidence of particular days of the solar year with particular phases of the moon is repeated every 19 years – the lunar calendar cycle of 235 lunar months. One Saros cycle = 223×29.530589 days = 18.03001227 years, and one Lunar (Metonic) cycle = 235×29.530589 days = 19.000237 years (i.e. a deviation of just 2 hours, over a span of 19 years).

²⁴ For example, there are the many golden, conical 'wizard hats' dating from between 3000 and 1300BC that have been unearthed in Switzerland, Germany and France (and possibly also in Ireland). Research indicates that these 'wizard hats', heavily inscribed with numerous sun and moon symbols, were used to compute an exact Lunar calendar of 19 years.

²⁵ There is good archaeological evidence for the astronomical alignments of numerous dwellings, tombs and megalithic sacred sites (such as New Grange, Stonehenge and Callanish). And we have actual artefacts from the distant past that show that this pagan cosmology was established over a considerable period of time. For example, there is the exquisite bronze and gold Nebra Sky Disc (from Mittelberg in central Germany, dated *circa*. 3600 BC) with its explicit references to astronomical observations of the annual solar cycle (including precise representations of summer and winter solstice alignments), together with representations of the moon and of stellar constellations (of the Pleiades, in particular).

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