RALF HOPPADIETZ AND KARIN REICHENBACH (ED.)

Staging the Pagan Past

Ethnicist History Conceptions and Popular Culture in Central Europe

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Introduction: Staging the Pagan Past

Ethnicist History Conceptions and Popular Culture in Central Europe

Ralf Hoppadietz and Karin Reichenbach

The Pagan past, as the prehistoric and early medieval time before Christianisation, appears to hold a great fascination. It is evoked in television series about Vikings and barbarians, in computer games transporting players to bygone empires, in comic books depicting adventures of great ancient heroes. This volume examines fields of popular history culture, in which the Pagan past obtains a significance that goes yet beyond that of entertaining leisure activities. The articles collected here centre on the three fields of historical reenactment, ethnic Neopaganism and the black metal music scene, which are framed by further practices and media of history appropriation. In historical reenactment, history enthusiasts simulate a specific event or period of the past, often warrior battles, but also historical ways of life. The reenactment of ancient spiritual life often coincides with Neopagan religiosity as part of Native Faith movements that seek to revive religious tradition from pre-Christian times. This spiritual sphere also finds expression in the often mythically obscured historical references made in black metal music, which has widely embraced Pagan themes and developed subgenres like Pagan, Viking or folk metal. These three strongly overlapping fields of reenactment, Neopaganism and black metal form a setting where we observe how the Pagan past can become a place of longing, a projection screen and an object of identification, a setting in which images of history can ultimately merge seamlessly with radical right-wing mindsets.

The volume was inspired by a workshop hosted at the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) entitled "Neo-*völkisch* Conceptions of History in Popular Appropriations of the Past in Eastern Europe. Modern Paganism – Historical Reenactment – Music Scene".[1] The articles it contains are papers presented at the workshop, updated and expanded by their authors. They are accompanied by a number of additional texts to complement and enhance the volume. The workshop and this book build on previous attempts to describe the politicised entanglement of historical reenactment and its multifarious links to Neopagan religious movements and the black metal music scene for the German context.[2] We aimed to explore them in greater depth and place them in a broader, transnational framework. The comparison with other countries shows that the Pagan past is pivotal for many radical right-wing identity projects in Europe, which makes popular cultural formats of its appropriation for political exploitation particularly significant.

Close links between circles of reenactors, Neopagans and black metal fans have been evident since the 1990s. It seems that the "Pagan element" not only unites them but feeds a specific understanding of history with a close affinity to far-right ideals, which we set out to examine more closely in this volume. Apart from individuals or groups who are actively involved in the reenactment scene as well as in metal bands or Neopagan groups, the tight-knit relationship between the three spheres is also reflected in the themes, symbols and general aesthetic that they adopt. Ideas about the Pagan past seem to flow through these fields, reinforce each other and find wide audiences at large-scale reenactment events or black metal shows.

Without question, there has already been a wealth of academic studies on and investigative research into individual elements of this scene, be this from the perspective of museum education, religious studies or music sociology, each focusing on individual characteristics, social roles and political traits. They are too fragmented and specialised to list them here and all contributions provide insight into the current state of research in their respective areas. Up until now, however, there have been few if any attempts to explore what popular history practices dealing with the Pagan past have in common, what links them, and what makes them appealing and useful for the far right. We therefore saw great promise in focusing on how history is dealt with here, how the past is understood. Hence, this volume

attempts to examine what images of history are created, what narratives are (re-)produced and to what extent these match up with radical right-wing ideals and how they are being harnessed by corresponding actors, organisations and movements. All the articles thus address the role that the Pagan past plays as a foil for populist to extreme right-wing identity projects and their exploitation for political ends. They demonstrate how reenactment events, black metal concerts and Neopagan discourse produce notions of a pre-Christian past and images of Pagan societies that are grounded in a biologistic and ancestral understanding of "people". It is this essentially *völkisch*, or – to use a more internationally compatible term – ethnicist thinking, that seems to lie at the core of their approach to the past, and that enables exclusionary practices of identity and prejudice. Moreover, by conjuring up a supposedly more natural and original way of life than the one we live in today, pre-Christian societies are staged and idealised as heroic ancestors, they thus not only serve as the starting point for the idea of an unbroken ethnic continuum stretching to the present but are also evoked as the antithesis of (post-)modernity. Although this kind of understanding history draws on the nationalist-romanticist and essentialist ideas of the 19th and early 20th centuries, they are often adapted and updated to meet personal convictions and the challenges of the present day. Accordingly, the considered fields of popular engagement with early history display an ambivalent and selective relationship to latest discourses and findings from academic archaeological and historical research.

As the individual articles show, the practices of history that are analysed here can and do fulfil political roles by conveying notions of "belonging" and "non-belonging", by marking conservative ideas of society out as being "original" and "natural" or romanticising violent behaviour and masculine warrior elites. However, the political force that such images of history can build up cannot always be recognised in the form of traditional political activism. Whereas sections of the described milieus openly maintained links with extreme right circles around the turn of the new millennium, they have since shed many of their more obvious political trappings. Whether this is linked to the overarching shift in strategy by the far right, to shun overt racist views and white supremacist fantasies and instead cloak them in concepts of cultural inequality such as ethnopluralism, is one of the questions addressed in this volume. Notions of supposedly natural societies whose culture and way of life were adulterated firstly by Christianity – all too often regarded as a phenomenon with Jewish roots that was introduced "from outside" – and later by society's ideas of equality and diversity are created in order to lend legitimacy to anti-modern and anti-democratic concepts of life in the present day. In the guise of popular cultural approaches to history, such references to a long national historical tradition and ideals of a 'natural' way of life and culture combined with attempts to biologise cultural differences between human societies can be transported right into the midst of society. This is another reason why it is not sufficient to merely look at tangible links, activities or statements with extreme right-wing overtones. The way in which history is staged through public performance and popular media appears innocuous at first and sometimes even playful, so that it often escapes critical reflection due to its pop-cultural nature. However, it is these vivid images that can contribute to easily and unconsciously conveying an understanding of history that reinforces anti-democratic ideologies.

The terms "extreme right-wing", "far-right", "alt-right", etc. that are used in this volume cannot always be separated clearly from one another when zooming in on individual cases. "Far-right" generally refers to political beliefs that lie beyond the conservative right wing, although the boundaries are very blurred. The terms "extreme right" or "extreme right-wing" (in German *rechtsextrem*) are used in German criminal law as well as in many other contexts (including academic ones) where there are signs of a rejection of democratic principles and a willingness to employ or accept the use of violence to achieve political goals. All too often, however, it is impossible to make a clear assessment. This is because, even when corresponding attitudes are not voiced or explicitly demonstrated by other means, they can still appear as the ultimate consequence of adopting certain ideals. The "alt-right" (in German *Neue Rechte*, literally "New Right") generally refers to groupings or movements that set themselves apart from the "old" right, i.e. the traditional fascism of the 20th century in terms of their look and political practices but that preserve precisely its ideas of ethnic and racist exclusion and of radically heteronormative, hierarchical and autocratic models of society that the "old" right espoused. Many societal undertakings that are regarded as traditionally "left-wing", such as anti-globalisation, ecology and even feminism are seized upon and ideologically transformed by the contemporary far right. This has created a situation where conventional classifications of "left" and "right" are becoming increasingly unreliable and traditionally right-wing thinking such as ethnonationalism, antisemitism, the "blood and soil" ideology and anti-queer agendas can only be identified through a closer look behind the scenes. With this in mind, especially here, in the land of mythologised images of history, no claim can be made to precision in distinguishing the meanings of the various dimensions and terminological concepts of "right-wing". Nevertheless, the authors of the articles offer sufficient context for their case studies to enable the reader to determine which flavour of far-right ideology is involved in their individual examples.

The volume aims to contribute to both research and education on the exploitation of early history for far-right ideological projects ranging from ultra-conservatism and populist ethnonationalism to extremist racism and antisemitism. In so doing, it hopes to join the various studies, events and publications that have recently addressed topics such as political mediaevalism and the (ab-)use of the Middle Ages[3] or those that have dealt in general terms with polarised pasts and contested heritage.[4] It wants to expand these approaches by including a perspective on the Pagan past in (broadly understood) popular culture.

Reflecting the main topics covered at the preceding workshop, this volume focuses on three countries by way of example – Germany, Poland and Hungary. The decision to concentrate on these countries was made based on the response to the workshop. While the texts on Germany and Poland included here cover broad swathes of the topic, we were only able to reflect some aspects of the situation in Hungary. Nonetheless, they provide an important dimension to the varying extents to which state authorities tolerate, embrace and even impose ethnicist historical narratives.

Ralf Hoppadietz's article opens proceedings for Germany by taking a look at the reenactment scene exploring the long tradition of *völkisch* Neopagan ideals in the imaginations of pre-Christian societies. It is followed by the 'folk pagans' in German black metal described by Niels Penke and their preoccupation with Germanic culture and mythology, which reflect anti-modernist and antisemitic world views.

The next contribution by Hermann Ritter shines a spotlight on the links between extreme right-wing fiction, fantasy role-playing and conspiracy narratives. The two final articles in this section dedicated to Germany take a look at books and other writings dealing with pre- and early history and Nordic mythology that reveal obsolete nationalist concepts of history and ideological ties with the German *Neue Rechte*: Whilst Anna-Lena Heckel and Heike Sahm explain how the legend of the Germanic peoples is being kept alive in children's and young adult books, Hannes Buchmann and Julius Roch highlight the connection between views of prehistory and *völkisch* ideology based on the example of the *Institut für Staatspolitik*.

The second section, which is devoted to Poland, starts with Philipp Schaab's article, that uses the example of selected Neopagan groups to highlight the significance of historical references in ethnonationalist identity construction. In the following contribution, Mariusz Filip explores the period of post-1989 transformation as a major formative phase for Polish far-right Neopaganism. While Filip focuses on the broad spectre of political activism and networking, Karin Reichenbach's paper discusses whether identifying with the Pagan Slavs influences popular performances of history and exerts a cultural effect in the metapolitical sense. Michał Pawleta then examines various aspects of the politicisation of historical reenactment in present-day Poland. The section on Poland concludes with an article by Ryan Buesnel, which explores antisemitism and radicalism in the growth of Polish right-wing black metal.

For Hungary, Katrin Kremmler's article offers insights not only into the role played by reenactment in the state-sponsored reframing of the country's early history but also into the re-ordering of archaeology and history within an illiberal system. As the final contribution to this volume, Áron Szele's article illustrates the importance of mythological ancestry in Hungarian rock music.

For the success of this publication, which involved a great deal of effort for us as editors due to occasionally unstable and uncertain academic contract situations, we would chiefly like to thank the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) for funding the preparation of this volume and including it in its *Visuelle Geschichtskultur* ("Visual Cultural History") series. The editors of this series, Maren Röger and

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Perspectives from Germany

Of Gods and Ancestors

Historical Reenactment and the Long Shadow of Neo-Germanic Paganism

Ralf Hoppadietz

… The fog drifts ominously over the forest as a group of armed men on horseback gradually enter the scene. Accompanied by solemn cosmic music, the camera zooms in closer, and now we are looking into the grim and determined faces of the riders, whose weapons, kit and jewellery are adorned with numerous symbols … Two groups of well-equipped, heavily armed warriors face off in front of the museum visitors, their shields and standards emblazoned with markings from times gone by. A horn sounds, and the two sides charge fearlessly towards each other, bellowing warlike cries. Sword meets shield, axe clashes against helmet, and a steady stream of fighters fall to the ground while their comrades battle on fiercely …

Hardly any history documentary or archaeological museum nowadays can get by without presenting these kinds of performance, which are often put on or offered by what are known as reenactment troupes. Most museums – certainly, nearly all open-air ones – rely on these programmes of "living history", while a great many exhibitions open with live performances as a way of teaching history in order to stage events that are as memorable as possible. In addition, TV productions and other media relating to early historical themes regularly include reenactments and hence often contribute to the popularisation of images of the past that are highly specific and mostly one-dimensional (yet all the more impressive for it).[1] And the producers of these films benefit not least from the fact that these performers come fully equipped with clothing, weapons and, in some cases, even horses, obviating the need for expensive props. The authors and directors, meanwhile, are primarily concerned with using certain stylistic devices to give the viewer the sense that they are witnessing a reality that is spatially, temporally or socially distant from their own. Fictions of authenticity of this kind, which are key to commercial success, are achieved by aiming for the greatest possible degree of emotionalisation while harnessing the audience's existing viewing habits. These viewing habits are shaped primarily by TV or streaming series, feature films and the major Hollywood blockbusters as well as by video games. Thus, it is often series such as *Vikings* or *Rome* as well as fantasy films like *The Lord of the Rings* that will determine how plausible depictions of history and prehistory will appear in viewers' eyes.[2] Performances in museums often differ from these film productions in that the reenactment troupes generally act autonomously in front of their audience and these performances are rarely moderated by a scholar. This is especially true of the many archaeological open-air museums out there, most of which get no outside funding and thus have to hold their own as a service provider in both the education and entertainment market.[3] As a result, the boundaries between scientifically based findings and pure entertainment are becoming increasingly blurred.

"Reenactment" in this context is not to be understood in the sense employed by the radical historicism of Robin George Collingwood within the field of the philosophy of history.[4] Rather, reenactment is nowadays generally understood to mean reproducing and recreating events from (pre-)history as faithfully as possible. The aim is to create an image of life at that time by presenting archaeological objects and finds in their original context (as far as possible). Members of these kinds of reenactment troupes appear to promise that the historical events that they portray will create an experience for both spectators and performers that neither archaeological exhibitions nor academic debates are capable of competing with. Most forms of historical reenactment are underpinned by a desire for historical authenticity that lies at the heart of the opportunity to experience history that they offer through their performance. This authenticity is understood as attempting to get as close as possible to a vision of the past that is comprehended as historical reality.[5] For the performers, this means striving for the most exact reproduction possible of historical equipment and a faithful imitation of certain

activities, usually drawing on recent findings from research into pre- and early history. By contrast, little if anything is usually said about how many imaginary additions – an inevitable part of any historical account – have been made. Many reenactment troupes even set out their own rules and regulations in order to back up their claim to offer authenticity through detailed, well-researched performances. For example, the charter of Pax Celtica, an association bringing together various Celt-themed reenactment troupes, had this to say:

> One important aim of historical representation is to reconstruct the past as faithfully as possible based on scientific findings. Representations based merely on fantasy and intuition run counter to this fundamental principle. Although it is rarely possible to offer a fully true-to-life and authentic historical representation, […] the unavoidable compromises made as a result must not be discernible […].[6]

In general, attempts like this to provide a true-to-life representation of ages in history through the performative media of reenactment and living history are seen as a legitimate way to present and communicate the past. Besides the abovementioned desire for objects that are "authentic" – perhaps "historically accurate" would be a better description – the notion of the authenticity of the subject also comes to the fore in these performances. This type of authenticity refers to the personal experience of the reenactors, i.e. the immersive, physical and sensual experiencing of historical reconstruction and simulation as the fiction of a precise reliving of the past.[7] Many reenactors believe that this can be a way of bridging or even eliminating the gap between past and present and thus, that the past can be simulated apparently seamlessly.[8]

One can distinguish between various forms of reenactment as a basic principle:[9]

- Reenactment as representation of (pre-)historical military conflicts, markets and/or lifestyles without making reference to a specific event or spatial context. This form of representation is often associated with events run by museums.
- Reenactment as representation of a specific (pre-)historical event, often a particular battle, with reference to a specific location. The spatial aspect is especially important here; a lack of accuracy or historical authenticity in terms of the equipment used will be tolerated provided that it is concealed.
- Reenactment as representation of the lifestyle, culture and daily life of a particular age in history. The aim is to enable this long-gone world to be experienced by all the senses by handling and making clothes, tools and objects as authentically as possible and by using reconstructed buildings that are as faithful to the originals as possible. This kind of reenactment is often referred to as "living history", which the folklorist Jay Anderson has attempted to define as "the simulation of life in another time".[10]

Another reenactment-related development has been competitive armed combat (wearing armour), such as reenactment combat fighting (RCF), which is increasingly becoming a discipline in its own right as it builds on depictions of fighting moves and attempts to reconstruct historical combat techniques. This is leading to a situation where people are training and fighting according to all manner of different sets of rules (areas of the body where one is permitted to strike one's opponent, and so on). Invariably, this means that techniques and tactics are developed that will bring success in sporting contests played to these rules but that have no significance whatsoever for historical fights (for which these rules are irrelevant).

In view of the close links between the emergence of reenactment and living history on the one hand and that of the archaeological open-air museums on the other, this article sets out to trace this development with the aid of a few examples to serve as highlights, focusing particularly on Oerlinghausen – an example that still exists to this day.

Reenactment and open-air museums: a history

The earliest examples of reenactment are generally held to be representations of battles that were staged in the 1960s to mark the centenary of the US Civil War (1861–1865) in the US, where participants wore contemporary clothing and wielded corresponding equipment. During the decades that followed, these were supplemented by depictions of everyday life away from the battlefield in the form of living history.[11] As far as Central Europe is concerned, however, we have evidence dating back as far as the early 16th century of performances of events from proto-history. These include the Bavarian/Austrian *Fastnachtspiele* ("Shrovetide plays") about Dietrich von Bern and the Wild Huntsman, the show fights in Kriemhild's rose garden in Worms or the rural Hildebrand dramas.[12] The sheer scale that such representations could sometimes assume is illustrated by an example from the Munich area, where the Battle of the Milvian Bridge of 312 AD was reenacted by around 1,000 people in 1574.[13] In the 17th to 19th centuries, these kinds of staging of episodes from early history generally took place in public gardens, during pageants and in theatres. 1882, for instance, saw a reenactment of prehistoric pile-dwelling communities in the theatre in the Swiss town of Neuchâtel. What made this particular performance remarkable was the fact that it used tools that were exact replicas of original prehistoric finds. Similarly, the performances put on during pageants, such as in Rohrschach on the Swiss side of Lake Constance in 1889, are already being seen as an attempt to link historical presentations with architectural reconstructions.[14]

This period also witnessed the establishment of the first open-air museums virtually anywhere in Europe, with the oldest example considered to be the rural open-air museum founded in Skansen near Stockholm in 1891. Unlike the more recent archaeological open-air museums, these "farmhouse museums" were (and still are) not reconstruction museums in the true sense. Instead, they work with original or relocated buildings dating from the last three to four centuries under the guidance of ethnologists and experts in cultural and regional studies. These museums have been imbued with living history from their very early days.[15]

One of the earliest examples of extensive planning for an archaeological open-air park featuring living history was published in Graz in 1900 by Guido List,[16] but his design never came to fruition. List's proposal was to rebuild the Roman town of Carnuntum as it was in Late Antiquity together with its imaginary Germanic counterpart, a town called *Stillfried*. The entire complex was to be filled with both staff and visitors dressed in historical costumes.[17] With this complex, List – an Ariosophist – wanted to popularise his ideas of a Germanic way of life together with the Aryanist cosmology and racist "Germanic" religion that he developed (see below) by having it open to the public as well as during solstice celebrations and other large-scale events. Apart from a handful of individual precursors, the first open-air museums containing reconstructed pre- and proto-historic settlements were mainly built in the 1920s and 1930s. In Germany, apart from the famous pile-dweller settlements in Bad Buchau and Unteruhldingen, the first Germanic open-air museums to have archaeological support were established in Oerlinghausen and Lübeck in 1936.[18]

The open-air museum in Oerlinghausen in North Rhine-Westphalia was founded to mark the town's 900th anniversary.[19] Inspired by archaeological excavations of burial grounds and traces of settlements dating back to different prehistoric and early mediaeval periods, two buildings were reconstructed and presented as Germanic huts. These buildings provided the settings for a theatre production entitled *Oerl Bark*. Depicting the Saxons as a Germanic tribe and its young leader named Oerl Bark, the play was intended to present a new image of the Germanic peoples, linking them to National Socialist "blood and soil" mythology. The open-air museum was expanded with additional reconstructions of Stone Age and mediaeval buildings in the following year, creating an alleged long-standing Germanic tradition and heritage. The educational programme offered at pre-war Oerlinghausen included a range of different performative and hands-on activities aimed at youngsters in particular. It gave a political fillip to the National Socialists in a region that had hitherto been dominated by the Social Democrats.

In the first few decades after 1945, open-air museums were no longer exploited as vehicles for official state policy in Germany given the experience of the preceding years, and, for some time at least, ethnic and historical narratives derived from archaeological data were displayed in a far more cautious manner. Given this restraint, life-size archaeological reconstructions and attempts to breathe new life into museums using historical reenactors did not reappear until the 1960s or 1970s. Having been destroyed towards the end of World War II, Oerlinghausen was thus not rebuilt until 1960, and again in 1978 after a devastating fire. Living history performances are now conducted here too in close consultation with museum staff. Ever since it re-opened, however, repeated attempts have been made by neo-fascist and far-right groups to exploit the museum for their own ends in an obvious attempt to revive pre-war activities there. In 1964, for example, the now-banned organisation Wiking-Jugend ("Viking Youth") hosted an event in Oerlinghausen at the summer solstice. In 1982, the far-right extremist Juergen Rieger from the organisation Die Artgemeinschaft – Glaubens-Gemeinschaft wesensgemäßer Lebensgestaltung ("Community of one's kind – faith community for way of life true to one's nature", likewise now banned; see below) tried in vain to estab-

lish his Nordisches Archiv ("Nordic Archive") in Oerlinghausen. During the 1995 Viking Festival, meanwhile, Harry "Radegeis" Schmidt, a "grandmaster" of the Armanen-Orden ("Armanen Order"; see below), appeared there together with other activists. Far-right extremists from political parties such as the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands ("Nationaldemocratic Party of Germany", NPD, now Die Heimat), Die Rechte ("The Right") and Der III. Weg ("The Third Path") still attempt to hijack the open-air museum to promote their ideology.[20]

Two other examples of post-war open-air museums in West Berlin and the former East Germany (GDR) show that experimental archaeology also provided significant impetus for the growth of ancient history reenactments, which became increasingly popular after 1990. In the Düppel district of Berlin, a museum village was founded in 1975 that involved reconstructing a 12th-century settlement that had been excavated by archaeologists. Visitors are shown the mediaeval lifestyle as well as old handicrafts and farming methods in order to create a living image of the Middle Ages.[21] Reconstruction work at the excavation site of a Slavic stronghold and putative religious shrine in Groß Raden in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania started in 1982. With the support of the local socialist party committee and the local collective farm, archaeologist Ewald Schuldt managed to rebuild much of the site and display it in an open-air museum despite the objections of the GDR Academy of Sciences. This museum was likewise revived later on with demonstrations of craftsmanship and the past way of life.[22] Since the 1980s, many open-air museums in Germany have also had strategies for using living history to present aspects of daily life and the relevant material culture. Open-air museums have more than doubled in number since 2000 and have been joined by countless historical theme parks. This development is often associated with a wave of commercialisation and "eventisation" practices within history education that reflects changing ideas in museum didactics as well as the growing popularity of role-playing games, historical reenactments, medieval markets and TV programmes about history.[23] Since the late 1990s, numerous places that are regarded as Germanic, Slavic or Viking as well as other villages and forts have been converted into archaeological reserves or theme parks. Not all of these are publicly funded official institutions; some are private initiatives run by local historical societies, commercial companies or even reenactment troupes themselves.[24] Examples include the complex known as Ukranenland – Historische Werkstätten Torgelow ("Land of Ukrani – Historical workshops Torgelow") in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and the Frühmittelalterlicher Königshof – Gervina ("Early mediaeval royal court – Gervina") in Breitungen in Thuringia as well as the Historisches Dorf – Gannahall ("Historical village – Gannahall") near Nauen in Brandenburg, which will be looked at in more detail below. At these complexes, visitors acquire knowledge largely by themselves as they go round, meaning that there is no academic "corrective" to counterbalance the representations presented. Yet visitors have the impression that they are at an open-air museum that teaches its knowledge in an academically sound and scientifically watertight way.

Criticism of the concept of reenactment

Measured against its massive contribution to the production and popularisation of images of history, the critical examination of reenactment as a method for picking up and communicating (ancient) history must be regarded as largely under-represented. As illustrated above, reenactment as a concept is considered capable of practically reliving historical events by replaying them and, in so doing, of gaining a better understanding of life in times past. However, such an assumption hinges on the belief that historical knowledge is based on a practical understanding of the past in the present, yet such an assumption has to be deemed to have been refuted by a series of fundamental insights from the theory of knowledge and the theory of history. Even as early as the 18th century, the historical theorists Johannes Martin Chladenius and Johann Christoph Gatterer highlighted the locational constraints – in terms of space, time and everyday life – affecting the writers of history, which always have a relativising effect.[25]

The debate over the fiction of history intensified from the mid-20th century onwards. Apart from generally critical viewpoints – which conceptualise perception and knowledge as human constructs controlled by cognitive and social processes with, at most, conditional reference being made to an ontic reality – the main problem for any appropriation of history is that the past can no longer be perceived or physically experienced. Even though remnants from the past, whether they be archaeological finds or historically preserved evidence of observations, seem to provide a direct connection to the past that can serve as the basis for generating specific ideas about past events, these remnants no longer belong to the past because they are being considered in the present.[26] Starting from the notion that any act of perception and cognition is in itself the result of a construct, statements and concepts about the past must be understood as part of the present right from the outset. Rather than the past *per se*, what they actually reflect is the results of a number of cognitive and social processes in the present concerning questions relating to the past. It must thus follow that, rather than one truth, the potential truth of many histories must be acknowledged. This means that the writing of history is only able to make more or less plausible statements about the past. Within the rational and methodological framework of the historical sciences, the degree of plausibility is determined primarily by the density and proximity of sources, which, when critically analysed, are granted a "right of veto" to rule out invalid concepts of history. This "veto right of the sources" is a concept in the theory of history that assigns the source-critical interpretation of historical remains the role of making historically untrue statements recognisable as such. For one thing, the veto right of the sources limits the number of potential partisan interpretations of history to those that cannot be proved untrue or incorrect through source criticism. For another, it runs counter to a naïve objectivism that holds that historical facts can be understood and presented over time without taking account of the perspectivity of the respective historian in their time.[27] This thus makes it impossible to relive the past, and claiming to present authentic historical reconstructions even harbours the risk that "military actions and wars are trivialised and heroised since the reenactment cannot depict the hardships, cruelties, fears, fatal wounds and deaths that are part and parcel of military conflict".[28]

In the field of pre- and proto-historic archaeology in particular, these underlying methodological problems are exacerbated by the general lack of both written testimonies and other written sources. It should therefore be obvious that, even if we presuppose the existence of ideal conditions for passing down the material remnants of a specific (past) age, it is still not possible to resolve the dilemma, which is that we in the present do not know how these objects fitted into the culture of the past day to day and thus have no idea about the basic activities performed and routines followed by its people.[29] Logically, this must apply all the more to those areas of life that are not necessarily expressed in material terms, such as the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of the people belonging to these cultures.

It is precisely the idea of depicting a past era in an authentic fashion and the desire to put this into practice that prompts performances to go beyond merely presenting archaeological or historical sources in order to achieve narrative coherence. As the gaps that exist are filled in the process with narratives and personal convictions whose origins lie in other temporal and cultural contexts, this creates the appearance of totality, which in turn is deemed equal to the "historical truth".[30] Dense representations of this kind can thus easily become the conscious or unconscious expression of one's own ideological or religious beliefs.

This applies in particular to those areas of the reenactment scene that deal with the representation of Celts, Slavs, Vikings and the Germanic peoples,[31] where people's identification with the respective culture often goes well beyond presenting scientific findings in theatrical form. Instead, they attempt to link their own ethnic identity with the culture being portrayed by engineering a connection to their forefathers. It is from this imagined direct ancestry that they quite naturally derive as a matter of course their legitimate entitlement to make valid statements – that are understood as "authentic" – about these past societies. For example, as Heiko Gerull from the reenactment group Ulfhednar, which is related to the abovementioned project Gervina, explained with regard to the Germanic peoples: "I think and feel like my ancestors."[32]

Unlike when choosing and producing replicas of historical equipment or clothing, for which the reenactors tend to follow the illustrations and technical details from academic publications as closely as possible, often demonstrating an astonishing amount of knowledge in the process, they largely ignore the academic debate surrounding the cultural history and origin of these archaeological cultures. Instead of falling in line with current research, which argues in favour of a much more complex and nuanced understanding, they stick to academically outdated, oversimplified and romanticising images of ancient societies and the religions that they followed.[33] Onto this they project their ideas of an apparently "natural" and "unadulterated" way of life with

Popular Pagans

Germanic[1] Culture and Mythology in (Heavy) Metal

Niels Penke

Besides the "hellish" elements of Christianity, no other set of themes is as omnipresent in the various genres of heavy metal as the pandaemonium of "Germanic" or Nordic mythology. Odin, Thor, Fenrir the wolf and the World Serpent, the Valkyries and Einherjar, Yggdrasil, Asgard, or the end of the world in Ragnarök – these are all names and images that appear in numerous band names, in songs or album titles, in lyrics, on record covers or on t-shirts. Metal without all this imagery is hard if not impossible to imagine.

The variety and breadth of references to "Germanic" culture and myth is large, as is the scale of the political semantics: from apolitical adaptations and implicit or hidden political semantics through to overt political framings. In her fundamental study of heavy metal, the sociologist Deena Weinstein identified the important role played by "Paganism", i.e. the entire aggregate of pre-Christian religions in Northern Europe, in the emergence of a list of themes specific to metal.[2] It is a long way, historically as well as aesthetically, from the first bands, which initially referred to gods, heroes and artifacts of the "Nordic-Germanic" pantheon only occasionally in their lyrics, to the establishment of dedicated subgenres such as Pagan metal and Viking metal, which define themselves through their exclusive reference to "Pagan" and "Viking".

The procedure that Eric Hobsbawm described as an "invention of tradition"[3] would appear to be decisive here: the narrative design of one's own past, connected to pictures, symbols, slogans and practices. Where collective memory no longer reaches back to ancient times, and where tradition has broken off and ended a continuum of vivid traditions, imagination sets in, and the narrative begins. Its function is to reconstruct a whole picture from the written records and to enrich the fragmentary patterns by inventing the requisite elements that are missing. In connection with the Germanic tribes in particular, this is a phenomenon that can be traced back to early modern times (the 16th century) and that became most prominent in the Romantic period (early 19th century) but also to the *Völkische Bewegung* ("Folkist movement") after 1900 and to National Socialism between the 1920s and 1945. All these kinds of cultural heritage are still being maintained in one context or another. They go together in many of the neo-*völkisch* attempts to shape a "whole" Germanic culture and to identify themselves as Germanic people or tribes.

The main problems facing the proponents remain the same and are what all their ancestors throughout the centuries have experienced: the fundamental problem of "reviving" non-literary cultures whose earliest traditions can only be made accessible through archaeological finds – in the form of objects that are dug up and pictorial monuments that are preserved – and through descriptions penned by others, especially Roman authors. Thus the primary, "authentic", historical phase can only be reconstructed via foreign descriptions, while the first written testimonies come in the 8th century in the Old High German period – after Christianisation, in other words.

This means that alternative strategies are needed. One of them is to make the at-once tangible and abstract appeal to the "common blood" of all Germanic tribes and their ancestors, which is supported by the assumption of a "spiritual" kinship, a kind of eternal *Volksgeist* in the tradition of Herder.[4] Another strategy involves accentuating the "realness" and "trueness" of those identity designs that have to be confirmed repeatedly through performance and rhetoric. Tacking "Germanic", i.e. the supposedly "own" stories and traditions, enables a completely different personal reference to be made to the material than in the case of Satanism or mere fantasy. What "Vikings" and "Teutons" offer is significantly broader due to the number of diffuse historical references involved. In addition to the idealistic identification with allegorical figures representing "good" and "evil", there is one that enables people to make the historical and ethnic connection at the same time, i.e. to

fantasise about the geographical reference as "blood-based" descendants in a line of tradition understood as a community of descent shared with one's ancestors. And, with the aim of updating one's former enemies and counter-images at the same time in the positive identity designs for one's own people (*Volk*).

This kind of *Volk*, as an idealised and idealising concept, is always connected with origin, with the roots of tribes that inhabit particular areas – in contrast to the unspecified identities of "modern" life that are linked to urban living, mobility and multi-culturalism, plurality and hybridity. *Volk* opposes the centres of modern society by placing emphasis on the "periphery", on rural areas – in both space and time. The contemporary world is juxtaposed with past periods in history: pre-mediaeval, mediaeval or (at the very least) the Romantic era. This premise means that *Volk* always describes an interrelationship between certain spaces, people and the cultural matrices inscribed in all of them. This triad is what constitutes a *Volk* and, in the aggressive notion of a *völkisch* conception, a complex of racism and antisemitism.

Three main patterns can be discerned in the metal subcultures when one deals with Norse mythology and Germanic history. The naïve staging of – or as – Vikings for purely entertainment purposes that comes with the retelling of the old stories of gods and heroes and a politically unintentional use of these "cultural icons" can be interpreted under the heading of "Carnival" as understood by Mikhail Bakhtin.[5] The more ambitious appropriations that care about authenticity and seek out historical lines of tradition can be understood as "neo-Romantic". There are also bands and musicians who convey content that goes beyond the merely aesthetic and that voices political claims and demands with many elements in common with (neo-)Nazism. Metal is not the only domain where these modes of appropriation are part of the usual practices, however; they can be observed in literature or new-religious movements too.[6]

In all of these categorisations, falling back on one's "own" history and a "true", "un-alienated" culture has strong identity-forming powers, which always creates a positive self-image of the actors. Attributes of strength and health go hand in hand with a stereotypical imagery that consistently serves to elevate the "Siegfried type", the blond beast, to the ideal (and certainly does not always intend or desire the implications). In combination with a diffuse sense of anti-modernism, hostility towards civilisation and praise of a rural, subsistence-based way of life, some foes are always implied and are portrayed as being close at hand. What, then, is the counterpart to the supposedly "Germanic" virtues, their healthy people and their martial spirit?

Vikings and the Germanic peoples in the history of heavy metal

It all starts with Led Zeppelin's *Immigrant Song* (1970) from their album *Led Zeppelin III*.[7] This song deals with the Norman invasion of Britain and enjoyed relative popularity throughout the history of heavy metal, even though the band made no claim to be Vikings themselves. But it was a start nonetheless and, a few years later, the Canadian Jon Mikl Thor appeared with his "carnivalesque" portrayals of the eponymous Norse god of thunder (from 1973 onwards). Thor is further proof that Northern European history and mythology were already points of reference during metal's formative phase. Compared to later appropriations, their discussion remained superficial and was merely one theme amongst many. Moving into the 1980s, when the internationally established genre of heavy metal was entering a crucial process of differentiation into various subgenres and national scenes with their own structures and traditions, a whole host of bands were making reference to the Norse pantheon.

Several bands named after Wotan, Odin, Thor or Asgard appeared. The first person to identify himself as a Viking was Swedish guitarist Yngwie Malmsteen, who released the song *I'm A Viking* in 1985.[8] This song features a Viking's fantasies of looting and murder in a kind of role-playing poetry. The American band Manowar can be cited as a prime example of no less prominence, not least due to the lyrics of their songs *Gates of Valhalla* (1983), *Blood of My Enemies* (1984) and *Thor (The Powerhead)* (1984, from the album *Sign of the Hammer*, whose title also references the god Thor or, more accurately, the hammer Mjolnir that he wielded), which draw from the stock of Norse mythology. Unlike most of the other bands mentioned, Manowar's prominence and influence on the entire metal culture gives it a relevance that surpasses that of the others. This can also be seen in the band's martial aesthetic, which is expressed in its lyrics and on its album covers. This subtly varies constantly recurring motifs of massive battles and mighty warriors.

The members of Manowar themselves adapted these roles as virile warriors in strong forms of self-portrayal, which place themselves somewhere between the Siegfried of Wagnerian opera and the imagery of Conan the Barbarian in visual terms based on their chosen outfits and weapons. One of the fundamental constants is a hypertrophic ideal of masculinity that is modelled on the archaic images of heroes and warriors in films and fantasy novels and that makes repeated reference to "northern" stereotypes that have become style-defining and ever-present. An increased focus on Norse themes can be found in Manowar's 2007 concept album *Gods of War*[9] and its collaboration with fantasy author Wolfgang Hohlbein. Despite this "advanced" collaboration and the constant reference to themes and motifs from Norse mythology, however, Manowar's approach can in fact be considered as a kind of "carnivalisation" and "spectacularisation". The naïve staging of – or as – Vikings for mainly entertainment purposes, the retelling of stories of gods and heroes, and the unintentional use of related cultural icons do not go any further. This "carnivalisation" is not intended to pass judgment on the aesthetic value and the seriousness of what is presented; I am using the term merely to describe a mode of presentation that chooses its specific referentialisation and costuming as one of other possible purposes for the show and the amusement, without interfering with further interests – philosophical claims, historical connections or identity-forming functions. What one sees is the major part; no cultural tradition is generated, and no political claims are made.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the Swedish band Bathory attempted a more serious approach. The album *Blood Fire Death*[10] (1988) can be seen as the founding document of Viking metal, a subgenre whose thematic focus is exclusively on Vikings and Norse myths. After three style-defining albums with mostly Satanic content, the leader of the band, Thomas "Quorthon" Forsberg, attempted a reorientation with reference to Norse mythology. This mission was expressed in a sophisticated concept that was something of a novelty at the time. For the album's cover, he used the painting Åsgårdsreien ("The Wild Hunt of Odin", 1872) by the Norwegian artist Peter Nicolai Arbo, a well-known example of Norwegian national Romanticism (fig. 1). Besides the cover, some of the song titles also make reference to mythology: the album opens with an instrumental, *Oden's Ride Over Northland*, and ends with the title track, which

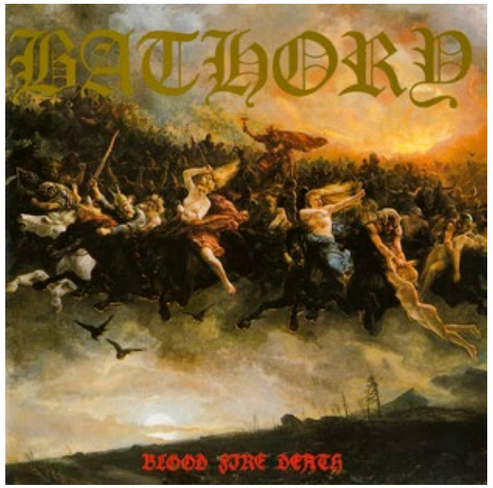

Fig. 1 Album Cover of Bathory, using the picture *Åsgårdsreien* by Norwegian painter Peter Nicolai Arbo. Bathory: *Blood Fire Death*. Under One Flag, 1988.

describes an epic battle and invokes imagery from the doomsday vision of Ragnarök from the *Edda*. It concludes by evoking a state where the "souls of the ancients" reign. Using polyphonic vocals, acoustic guitars and the sounds of neighing horses and thunderstorms, *Blood Fire Death* not only introduced new stylistic elements into (black) metal but also served to create a unique atmosphere that was the first of its kind and that set traditional metal apart. These efforts to find other suitable moods and atmospheres and their integration into a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* were stepped up further in the follow-up albums *Hammerheart*[11] (1990) and *Twilight of the Gods*[12] (1991), which explored Norse themes from every angle.

However, the first band to actually describe their music as Viking metal was Norway's Enslaved, who made their debut in 1994 with the album *Vikingligr Veldi*.[13] For the first time, Enslaved presented a concept that combined all the various aspects – the cover, the song titles, the lyrics in Icelandic and the portrayal of the musicians as Vikings in allegedly historical costumes. Their music and appearance are clearly serious; there are no recognisable carnivalesque moments in their concept. Enslaved thus defined a whole style and brought numerous bands in their wake (Einherjer, Amon Amarth, Thyrfing and many others) who helped

to establish Viking metal as a metal subgenre in its own right. However, this does not mean that Vikings or the gods and heroes of the Norse pantheon have disappeared from other subgenres. Rather, they have remained one popular set of motifs amongst many, e.g. in power metal, the various flavours of which range from carnivalisation through to extreme politicisation.

No explicit political content can be found in the metal bands and genres discussed so far. A link between Viking/Germanic culture and a political agenda is first identifiable in the case of the Norwegian band Burzum and echoed in terms of its ideological alignment by the German band Absurd. Both tackled the twin ideas of Germanic heritage and Viking culture with more seriousness. The two are rarely distinguished and the imagery used often blends one with the other – Germanic appears as the "general" entity while Vikings refer to a specific representation. Thus, this amplification is less about self-portrayal with historical costumes and weapons than it is about being inscribed in specific lines of tradition, which aims to create deeper connections than the superficial phenomena of the masquerade. While Burzum's Varg Vikernes has described himself as an agent of Wotan and his philosophy as "Wodanism", which combines heathen imagery and National Socialist thought under the emblem of Wotan/Odin, Absurd came up with the "Asgardsrei" as a mythical association of spirit-driven warriors. The CD booklet accompanying their album *Asgardsrei*[14] draws a genealogical line from Norse warriors of the Middle Ages through to the SS of Nazi Germany and beyond to the black metal musicians of the 21st century. They call for a cultural war and are certain of victory. "Der Sieg ist unser"[15] ("Victory is ours"), says one of their song titles.

There is also a close connection here with the *völkisch* movement, whose neo-Romantic Germanism paved the way for various racist and antisemitic movements at the turn of the 20th century that also bundled National Socialism in with them in order to achieve maximum impact. The affirmation of National Socialism and the Holocaust can also be explained by the *völkisch* element that Burzum and Absurd have emphasised.[16]

Against the background of metal themes and such implied ideals as masculinity, warriorship, bravery and sincerity that are widespread in metal in general, the radical formulation of a *völkisch*-fuelled antisemitism, especially in black metal of the 1990s, can be seen as a possible logical consequence. There is no attempt to find new images, either musically or in terms of the overall aesthetic. Instead, much of what was there before is amalgamated into a new and harsher concept in which certain moments are radically thought through to the end and combined with a martial seriousness that goes beyond the aesthetic and wants to have a real impact on culture and politics. What makes these approaches fundamentally different from the many others out there is the unconditional seriousness and – something that is often exhibited and attested to by prominent statements (such as murder, arson – both Vikernes/Burzum and the Absurd musicians went to jail for murder) – the will to act against everything deemed to be "false". As previous studies have shown,[17] the notion of "falseness" is closely linked to Judaism as the polar opposite of Germanic/Viking Paganism and people.

The "true" and its "other"

The question of why radical antisemitic statements frequently occur in metal contexts in particular can be answered by looking at the connections between some of metal's constitutive ideologemes. Antisemitism is presented in emphatic references to what is "real", "true" and "authentic" as opposed to what is "false" and "treacherous", which by contrast is associated with a widespread unease with capitalist modernity in order to have the responsibility for a global system converge in an image of the "Jew" as enemy, against whom the antimodern "corrective measures" are directed.[18]

One of the key lines of thought is the idea of "Germanomania".[19] This pathological overemphasis of the "Germanic" precursors of modern Germanness has developed a particularly radical and aggressive variety of the "German Teutonic myth".[20] It begins with the "rediscovery" of Tacitus's *Germania* by Humanist scholars in the 15th century, meaning that the images of what constitutes their "own", i.e. the Germanic and mythical, are always accompanied by ideas of an "other" with negative connotations that is (sometimes clearly, sometimes not) marked as "Jewish". Vikernes in particular, as well as other proponents of the National Socialist black metal (NSBM) subgenre – a form of extreme metal that is mainly defined by its positive references to National Socialism – in general may represent extreme cases but are not isolated phenomena. Rather, they appear in comparison to other references to "Germanicness" and similar conceptual self-designs only as the most radical and

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Perspectives from Poland

Christianisation as Trauma

Aspects of Ethnonationalist Identity Construction Amongst Slavic Neopagan Groups in Poland

Philipp Schaab

In Poland, where membership of the Catholic Church is seen as part of the national identity, it goes without saying that anyone and any movement that questions this particular status quo will find life somewhat difficult.[1] Nevertheless, there have been growing signs – especially since the end of state socialism – of a Slavic Neopagan movement that claims to represent the true, identity-shaping religion of the country (fig. 1). A headline in the Polish edition of *Newsweek* a few years back claimed that Neopagan churches were "mushrooming".[2]

However, the historical and religious roots of this movement stretch back into the 19th century when Poland was being partitioned and occupied by its neighbours. Although most Polish elites saw the Catholic Church as the protector of their national identity,[3] a tiny minority thought differently and linked the struggle for renewed political sovereignty with a desire to return to a pre-Christian religion and culture.[4] After the country regained its independence in the wake of the First World War, the first Neopagan Slavic communities emerged and began to formulate their own agendas. Amongst them was the group led by Jan Stachniuk, founder of the anti-Catholic *Zadruga* ideology.[5] His teachings would go on to form the ideological foundation of ethnonationalist groups that, since the 1990s, have been campaigning for an ethnically homogeneous Poland and for its conversion to the pre-Christian beliefs of the Slavs.[6] His legacy was taken up by communities such as Rodzima Wiara and Fundacja Watra.

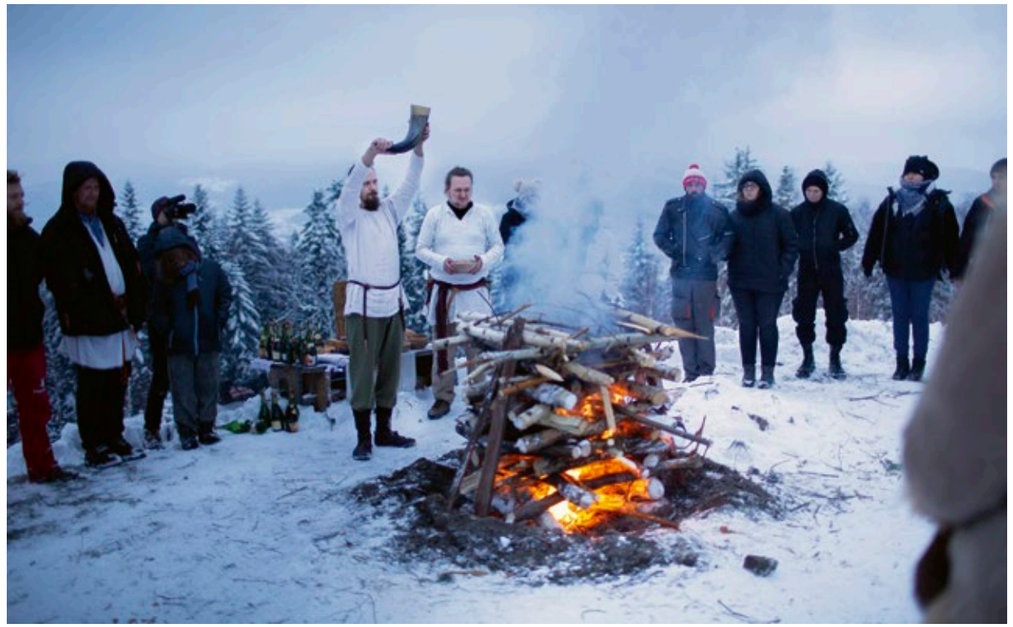

Fig. 1 Members of Polish Neopagan community Chram MIR celebrating *Szczodre Gody*, a winter holiday celebrated around Christmas.

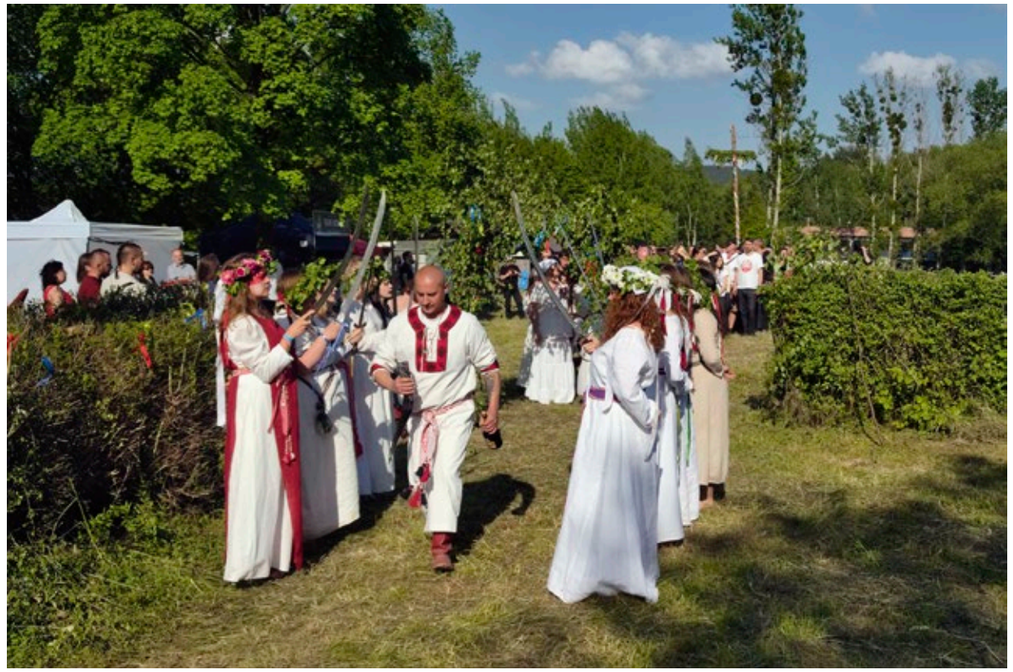

Fig. 2 Rafał Merski, *Żerca* ("priest") of Fundacja na rzecz Kultury Słowiańskiej "Watra" during the Slavic Native Faith Stado festival in Sulistrowic, Poland, in 2019

The concept of identity is key to any study of ethnonationalist views. Barbara Szacka describes it as the idea of the permanence of a subject or object over time. On a collective level, remembering the past plays a central role in defining what identity means.[7] For Werner Gephart, belief in a common ancestry is a core component of ethnically defined identity – he also talks of a "sense of 'us'" fostered by actors who attribute their actions to a commonality whose structure is of a spatial, temporal or social nature.[8] In so doing, he draws on Max Weber and his concept of belief in commonality, which is underpinned by the aspects of ethnicity and nationality. According to Weber, a subjective belief in a common ancestry is based on collective similarities in one's habitus, customs or beliefs and historical events. The community, he says, shapes our morals and promotes internal harmonisation amongst us but also sets us apart from the world outside. Commonalities or contrasts between different communities act as a repellent force or – where there is great similarity – an attractive one.[9] Socially constructed communities are essentialised and sacralised, and collective identity is seen as immanent, uncontestable and a "given". The stranger is not only a political but also a religious "other" who stands outside the identity-forming community order that draws its legitimacy from deities and ancestral spirits.[10]

According to Simon Coleman, identity – be it individual, collective, cultural, ethnic, national or transnational – is always defined in and through relationships with other people. The only meaningful way to foster self-identification as a community is by drawing a line between it and a counterpart. Thus ethnic, national and religious identity constructs lead to a demarcation between "us" and "them".[11] The Slavic Neopagan activists in Poland believe that Christianity should become a religious "other" from which they want to set themselves apart.

Overshadowed by crisis – Slavic religion and national identity in the 19th century

The ethnographer, historian and archaeologist Adam Czarnocki, who wrote under the pseudonym "Zorian Dołęga-Chodakowski", is regarded as the first person to advocate for a return to a pre-Christian Slavic religion in Poland. Influenced by Herder's concept of the *Volksgeist*, or "spirit of the people", and weighed down by the destruction of Poland's aristocratic republic by the major powers of Russia, Prussia and Austria, he came to the conclusion that Christianity was to blame for his country's downfall.[12] In texts such as *O Sławiańszczyźnie przed chrześcijaństwem* ("On the Slavs Before Christianity"), he expressed the hope of being able to find remnants of the old religion in peasant traditions and lore. Chodakowski is said to have described himself as a Pagan.[13]

The messages proclaimed by Herder and Chodakowski were received loud and clear by Bronisław Ferdynand Trentowski, who set about forging a national philosophy for the Polish people.[14] He advocated a pantheistic concept that saw nature as the divine being at the moment of its material existence or, put another way, God in His eternal and time-bound corporeality.[15] In his work *Wiara Słowiańska, czyli etyka piastująca wszechświat* ("The Slavic Faith, or the Ethics That Govern the Universe"), he argued for the reconstruction of the Slavic religion based on philosophy.[16] He believed that faith was the most important spiritual foundation for a community,[17] that abandoning the old religion had led Poland effectively to dissolve itself and that Christianisation had resulted in Asia triumphing over Poland and spreading the spirit of slavery.[18]

The historian Joachim Lelewel, an active supporter of Congress Poland on the left wing of the *Sejm*, was likewise influenced by Chodakowski and developed the idea of *gminowładztwo*, an early Slavic form of democracy.[19] Robbed of a country of their own, artists and intellectuals hunting for symbols, motifs and narratives that would create meaning and identity turned instead to the traces of the region's pre-Christian past, which was transformed into a kind of Slavic Arcadia during the Romantic era.[20]

Anti-Catholic nationalism in the 20th century – the *Zadruga* ideology

After Poland was re-established in the wake of the First World War, the first groups formed that were actively seeking to resurrect pre-Christian religious beliefs and systems of values. One of the key figures in these groups was the aforementioned Jan Stachniuk, who turned away from Catholic nationalism in the 1920s. With the *Zadruga* ideology,[21] he developed a worldview that combined a radical belief in progress with a vitalist and heroic philosophy.[22] He married the ideas propounded by Chodakowski, Trentowski and Lelewel with Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch*. However, he was also influenced by Max Weber's theories of Protestantism and capitalism. He denounced Catholicism as an "unculture" (*wspakultura* in Polish), which he said had made the Slavs passive, lazy and too focused on the life of the world to come. He wanted a new Polish human being who would re-embrace the warrior ethic of their pre-Christian ancestors. Religion and rituals held no interest for him. Instead, he called for Poland to modernise rapidly with centralist measures driven by a planned economy.[23] He may not have made any explicitly antisemitic remarks himself, but some of his followers did. Although he did not believe that the world's peoples were created unequal, he did not want them to mix. He called for eugenic measures to preserve the purity of the people, saying that "biology is the stem on which the flower of culture is to be grown."[24] He referred to himself as a nationalist.[25]

Stachniuk's legacy – Rodzima Wiara and the Fundacja na rzecz Kultury Słowiańskiej "Watra"

The fall of communism in the early 1990s enabled Slavic Neopagan movements to grow freely in Eastern Europe.[26] One such group, Rodzima Wiara ("Native Faith"), was formed in 1996 under the name "Zrzeszenie Rodzimej Wiary" before being renamed four years later. The group places itself firmly in the tradition of the teachings espoused by Chodakowski, Trentowski and, in par-

ticular, Stachniuk. Members such as its first leader Maciej Czarnowski and other activists like Antony Wacyk had been disciples of Stachniuk even while he was still alive.[27] Czarnowski's successor Stanisław Potrzebowski wrote the agenda entitled *Wyznanie Wiary Lechitów* ("The Creed of the Lechites").[28]

Rodzima Wiara has organisational ties to various political organisations, and several individuals are members of both the former and the latter. Particularly worthy of mention at this point is the Stowarzyszenie na rzecz Tradycji i Kultury "Niklot" ("'Niklot' Association for Tradition and Culture"),[29] which advocates on its website the racist idea of ethnopluralism and rejects multiculturalism and what it sees as the "Americanisation" of Europe.[30] Influenced by alt-right theories, it calls for the establishment of an Indo-European-Slavic civilisation and seeks to exert cultural influence in the meta-political debate.[31] Many members of Rodzima Wiara are also members of "Niklot".[32] Rodzima Wiara also has links to the group known as Zakon Zadrugi "Północny Wilk" (the "'Northern Wolf' Zadruga Order", or ZZPW), which is seen as bringing together the neo-Nazi black metal, skinhead and Slavic Neopagan scenes. Originally pro-Germanic and neo-Nazi, it went on to embrace a Slavic nationalist agenda aligned with the *Zadruga* doctrine.[33]

More closely linked to Rodzima Wiara is the Nacjonalistyczne Stowarzyszenie Zadruga ("Nationalist Zadruga Association", or NS Zadruga).[34] Established in Wrocław in 2006, it is – according to Agniezska Gajda – to be regarded as extremely nationalist and anti-Christian. She sees it as representing a racist, antisemitic and xenophobic agenda and combining nationalist, pan-Slavic and Slavic Neopagan views in its ideology.[35] Its member Stanisław Grzanka, who was likewise a ***Zadruga*** activist in Stachniuk's time, describes how the group sees itself as follows: "We reject everything that is alien to it [the Polish nation], that destroys it in parasitic fashion and that stifles its vital energies."[36]

The community known as Fundacja na rzecz Kultury Słowiańskiej "Watra" ("'Watra' Foundation for Slavic Culture", or "Watra" for short) was set up in 2009 by Rafał Merski and registered as a foundation four years later.[37] He acts as the community's *Żerca* ("priest") and has put together the group's agenda (fig. 2 and 3). He was previously an active member of another Slavic Neopagan community, Zachodniosłowiański Związek Wyznaniowy "Słowiańska Wiara" (the "'Slavic Faith' West Slavic Association of Believers"), which likewise emerged from the trail left by Rodzima Wiara.[38] Merski is also involved in the ultranationalist organisation Ruch Narodowe ("National Movement") and was a candidate for the radical right-wing party Kukiz'15.[39]

At the heart of Rodzima Wiara's religious doctrine lies a pantheistic concept of God as a force that is immanent within the world. Its texts describe a "divine will" permeating the entire universe and striving for divine perfection:

> The world is evolving together with the Primordial Force immanent within it – The One. Everything that exists is developing and seeks to constantly improve, to increase its power and the range of possibilities open to it.[40]

It holds that pre-Christian Slavic religion emerged out of the fusion of Neolithic "pre-Aryan" and later "pre-Baltic Slavic" and "Aryan" ethnic groups into a single people with a shared culture living in the part of the world now populated by Slavs.[41] Rodzima Wiara advocates the protection of "Aryan heritage" and a hierarchical model of society divided into estates of priests, warriors and farmers/growers.[42]

It aims to restore the unity of all Aryan peoples based on "the genetic kinship of the Aryan peoples and the Vedic sources of our civilisation and culture".[43] This collective identity is forged from close links between a community that is based on lineage, the environment surrounding it and a shared religion.

The characters of individual peoples and nations are formed out of the overlap between inherited traits of upbringing, pressure from the natural environment and the impact of their surroundings. If their origin and faith share the same source and are compatible with each other, then the conditions are created for a harmonious and strong character to emerge.[44]

Converting to "alien" religions, by contrast, causes psychological damage: "If one's genotype is at odds with one's creed, an inner rift emerges. The character of a person and particularly of a nation is unstable and weak, prone even to self-harm."[45] The decadence of Ancient Greece and Rome is alleged to have paved the way for "Judeo-Christianity" and thus for "unculture", with Christianity being a religion that destroys the

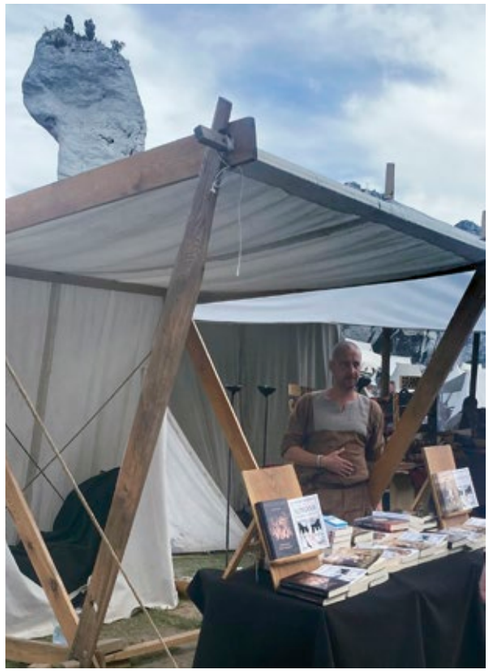

Fig. 3 Rafał Merski, *Żerca* ("priest") of Fundacja na rzecz Kultury Słowiańskiej "Watra" at the historical reenactment festival Najazd Barbarzyńców ("Invasion of Barbarians"), Ogrodzieniec, Poland, July 2024.

self-confidence of nations and the connection that they have with their gods.[46] One consequence of the "unculture" and decadence rampant in Europe, the organisation believes, is its willingness to accept migrants from Africa and Asia, something which is likely to destroy its indigenous culture.[47] According to Rodzima Wiara, the Aryan-Slavic nation has been in deep crisis ever since it rejected "prehistoric Vedic principles".[48]

Ethnocentric thinking shapes Rodzima Wiara's ethics.[49] It rejects "[…] mediocrity, ignorance, idleness and frailty, stupidity and fear, laziness and passivity, deceit and betrayal". All of these are negative character traits and consequences of the "unculture" identified by Stachniuk that had purportedly been instilled in the Poles by the process of Christianisation and that should be replaced by an ethical system that is regarded as indigenous, focused on life before death, and characterised by heroism, collectivism, the warrior tradition and creativity.[50]

Like many of his fellow Slavic Neopagan activists in Poland, Rafał Merski – founder, mastermind and leader of the group "Watra" – believes that indigenous Slavic traditions and values have been preserved in traditional Polish customs right up to the present day and were only ever associated superficially with Christianity. In his work *Słowiańskie dziedzictwo. Rodzima religia i filozofia* ("Slavic Heritage. Native Religion and Philosophy"), he set out his version of an indigenous Slavic religion. In it, he writes: "We are still very Pagan, unconsciously linked to our ethnic religion."[51] Belonging to one's native religion, he says, is just as inherent in and natural to a human being as being part of one's ethnic community.[52]

Fundacja Watra's worldview is also heavily influenced by Stachniuk's thinking. In his work *Slavonic ethics*, for example, in which he presents a philosophy characterised by heroism and nationalism, Merski claims that Christianity instilled a slave mentality in the Slavs and that its spread helped bring about various manifestations of "unculture".[53] Now there is the threat of Islamisation, he says: "We have already a destructive Christianization on our Continent, now we have Islamization. Islam grows more and more powerful and is just [as] alien to us Slavs as Christianity." According to Merski, the only thing that can save Europe is a return to its pre-Christian beliefs and system of values: "The Ethos of the warrior, mother, family, community, according to the laws of our Ancestors's laws and fundamentals bequeathed to us by our Ancestors."[54] For him, Christianity and secularism are both products of "Jewish thought":

> Those who promote such vile, subversive ideologies from Saul of Tarsus's racially-subversive and proto-communist Christianity to its modern but equally Semitic secular spawn are the enemies of all European folk in Europe and the world over.[55]

Quoting Rodzima Wiara adherent Antoni Wacyk, Merski calls for the creation of a new legend as an identity-forming narrative to mobilise the members of the community and help to forge a collective consciousness.[56] Merski sees the heroic warriors in the legend as the "archetypes", i.e. the role models that the Slavs – especially the men – are expected to emulate.[57]

Performing Paganism

Popular History Practices as Doing Metapolitics in Poland

Karin Reichenbach

A new wave of fascination with the early Middle Ages, the pre-Christian times of the Vikings and Slavs, reached Poland after the end of state socialism in the 1990s. It tied in with an increasingly resurgent interest in Nordic myths and a search for national roots in a remote ancestral past. Though it connected in many ways with former nationalist-cum-romantic perceptions of history, tradition and continuity as well as with pre-war politico-cultural, anti-Catholic and nationalist movements, it was in these early post-socialist days that the Pagan past became a screen onto which ethnic identification and political reorientation could be projected.

The Neopagan or "Native Faith" movement, the musical genre of black metal and the field of historical reenactment emerged as practices engaging with pre-Christian history and as popular media responding to a growing fascination with all things mediaeval. However, the overlapping milieus of their enthusiasts and audiences at the time were evidently inclined towards extreme-right-wing ideologies and formed small networks engaged in political activism.[1] Yet, these radical political efforts declined soon after the turn of the new millennium, while the level of seemingly unpolitical, cultural engagement in the abovementioned fields increased.

Wolin – "the best place for the meeting of our movement"

[CN: the following quotation contains a racial slur and provocative language]

> We are all against the modern system, especially Democracy and the nigger-loving system. We hate Christianity. We see [Democracy] as Z.O.G and Jew occupation. Wolin is a historical site of ancient pagan civilization. […] Here in Wolin, we feel the spirit of our ancestors. It is the best place for the meeting of our movement.[2]

This statement is taken from a report on the Festival of Slavs and Vikings, an international festival reenacting early medieval battles that has been held in Wolin, northwestern Poland, almost every summer since 1993. It consists of tournaments in which reenactors compete in individual duels or smaller groups, the highlight being a large-scale battle reenacting the Jomsvikings' defence of their stronghold against the Piast troops of Poland.[3] It is accompanied by a large market where traditional crafts are demonstrated and products are sold as well as by a programme of events such as the staging of Pagan rituals, musical performances and informative talks, occasionally even given by academic historians.

The report cited appeared in the 2001 winter issue of the *Resistance Magazine*, a music magazine linked to the white supremacist record label Resistance Records. At the time, it was owned by William Luther Pearce, who during his lifetime was head of the US neo-Nazi organization National Alliance and author of the infamous *The Turner Diaries*. The statement above quotes Igor D. Górewicz, by now head of a commercially successful Szczecin-based reenactment troupe and a publishing company, (former) long-time representative of the Polish Native Faith organisation Rodzima Wiara and collaborator on several musical projects inspired by Viking or Pagan history. He belonged to overtly extreme-right-wing Neopagan groups around the turn of the millennium but later abandoned political activism and distanced himself from any radical views.[4]

The *Resistance Magazine*'s feature is based on conversations with Polish representatives of the Wolin festival and what they said about uniting the Polish National Socialist skinhead scene with Neopagan/reenactment/black metal groups to work towards their common political goal of "preserving their heritage and building a better future for those who share their pure European bloodlines".[5] They describe the festival as a meeting place for the radical right in Europe that is centred on a Neopagan, nationalist and racist identity. As a "child of transformation", to borrow Mariusz Filip's description

from elsewhere in this volume, this movement attempted to gain political influence in Poland in the late 1990s. Instead, however, it was met with public indignation, and, as described in the *Resistance* report also with increased countermeasures by the police and state security, especially in the run-up to Poland joining the European Union. As a result, some of their supporters focussed rather on metapolitical activities from this point onwards instead of openly engaging in politics.[6] In a right-wing context, the term "metapolitics" refers to a cultural struggle (*Kulturkampf*) designed to influence the social consciousness from below in order to lay the ground for the radical right's expansion of political power.[7] Even if the focus is often placed on recent history and other areas of culture, the early Middle Ages are of particular relevance as well. Statements by actors involved in the radicalised Polish Neopagan scene made it clear, that the popularisation of history and the embracing of indigenous Pagan religion and Pagan-related music were regarded as metapolitical fields of action (see below). This suggests that this interplay between Pagan spirituality, warrior reenactments and mediaevalising music would seem to hold a certain appeal for right-wing extremists. As shown in this volume, this phenomenon can be observed in several countries, although Poland lends itself particularly well to a description of its development and current situation. Here, this triad of reenactment, Paganism and music scene, with its core discourse on nativeness and primordiality – whether deliberately pursuing a political aim or not – inherently connects to radical-right ethnicist and antimodernist patterns of thought and thus might, even unwillingly, produce metapolitical effects for extreme-right-wing agendas.

In all three of these areas, groups engage with the early Middle Ages through performance, and the broad extent to which these three scenes overlap can be seen in certain places, especially festivals such as Wolin, where mediaeval battles and the mediaeval lifestyle are reenacted, Neopagan rituals are practised, and folk bands play music (fig. 1 and 2). Many participants are active in all three fields at the same time: many modern Pagans are also historical reenactors, reenactors are fans or even members of folk or metal bands, and there are musicians who also perform rituals as *żercy*, as the Slavic priests are called. The three fields are also united by a specific look in terms of their clothing, gear, symbols and jewellery flitting between mediaeval markets and black metal concerts, and even the names of the various groups reference a common pool of myths and legendary figures.

Though a tendency towards right-wing extremism has been observed in parts of this specific milieu since the 1990s, it is difficult to assess how intense or how marginal this tendency is today, since the relationship with right-wing extremism has undergone a shift from radicalisation to an apparent de-radicalisation or de-politicisation. Nevertheless, elements in the appropriation of history that are compatible with right-wing ideologies remain and continue to attract right-wing extremists to this scene.

From national romanticism to turn-of-the-millennium right-wing extremism

Some ideas about pre-Christian Slavic societies have followed a longer trajectory in Poland, stretching back to the national romanticism and Slavophilia of the 19th century, when, especially during the time of partition, an intensifying interest in ethnogenesis and national roots had led people to explore folk traditions and attempt to trace them far back into premodern times.[8] According to Agnieszka Gajda, this – coupled with the reception of Johann Gottfried Herder's works – cemented "the perception that the Slavs represented a single people who were only temporarily kept apart".[9] A number of ethnographers, writers and artists, such as Adam Czarnowski alias Zorian Dołęga-Chodakowski, Bronisław Trentowski, Juliusz Słowacki, Stanisław Wyspiański, Ryszard Berwiński or Marian Wawrzeniecki, were inspired by these ideas and became precursors and founding figures of a romanticised concept of Slavic Paganism set against Christianity, which was presented as a foreign denomination causing fragmentation and deterioration from a primordial ideal and a united community.[10]

Although the Slavic spirit had grown in Poland during the 19th century, its currents did not give rise to any broader movements or organisations. The first groups in which Slavophile adherents of Pagan spirituality and heritage gathered did not emerge until the early 20th century and, even then, remained fairly loose associations and networks without any formal structures.

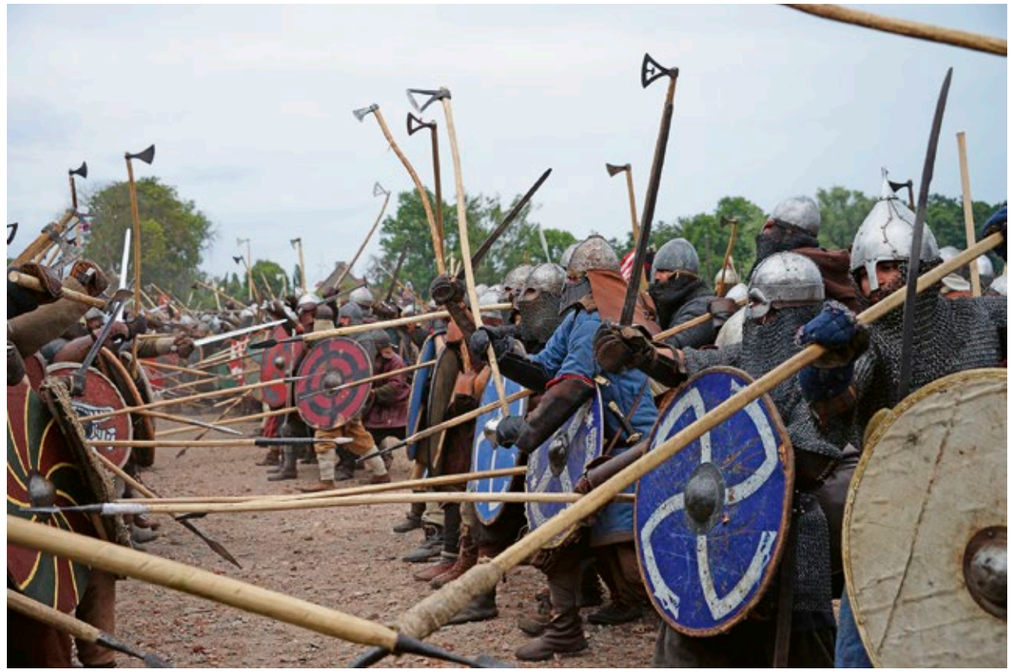

Fig. 1 Battle reenactment at the Festival of Slavs and Vikings in Wolin, Poland, 2017.

At least two of them still form ideological and aesthetic reference points for contemporary ethnicist Pagan identifications. The one that is probably most influential developed around the magazine *Zadruga* and its editor Jan Stachniuk in the 1930s. Even today, Stachniuk is described as an "almost legendary figure" who "continues to tower over the landscape of the Polish Neopagan movement".[11] His philosophy is very complex and his attitude towards Slavic Pagan faith ambivalent. Both seem to stem more from a strong criticism of Catholicism and its perceived negative impact on Polish society than from a connection to Slavic heritage or ancestral spirituality. Yet his concept of *wspakultura*, which translates as "un-" or "anti-culture", became important for the Neopagan movement and especially for right-wing groups connected to this "Zadrugian" tradition. It describes and criticises processes that work against and hinder cultural development if people do not actively help to create and develop the nation. Stachniuk and his adherents regarded the contemplative character of Catholicism as *wspakultura* and campaigned for its abolition.[12] His followers included Slavophiles but also supporters of racist ideas, and together they formed an ideology based not only on anti-Catholicism and *Rodzimowierstwo* – the Polish Native Faith – but also on a strong sense of Polish nationalism. Furthermore, Stachniuk's idea of an endeavour that was always active, progressive, developing and useful married up very well with National Socialist thought patterns, i.e. primarily Social Darwinist ideas all the way through to eugenics, and hence they formed a common point of reference for the radical-right Neopagan groups of the late 1990s and early 2000s.[13] Although a great variety of Neopagan orientations developed after the Second World War, including some branching into more folkloristic and/or ecological movements as well, various groups still follow the *Zadruga* spirit to this day. These include Rodzima Wiara, one of the major Native Faith organisations in Poland. Others, such as Toporzel Publishing, the "Niklot" Association of Tradition and Culture, the Zakon Zadrugi

Fig. 2 Polish Pagan Folk band Percival performing at the Festival of Slavs and Vikings in Wolin, Poland, 2018.

"Północny Wilk" and the Nationalist Association Zadruga, continue the tradition of a more pronounced combination of religious and political engagement.[14]

Back in the early 20th century, the fascination with Slavic folk culture and antiquity also captured the imagination of poets and artists, as shown in particular in the works of Zofia Stryjeńska, Stanisław Jakubowski and especially Stanisław Szukalski. The latter founded the artists' collective Szczep Rogate Serce („The Tribe of the Horned Hearts") with its periodical *Krak* (fig. 3), which was another important group, and Szukalski's works are still popular amongst present-day adherents of the Polish Native Faith.[15] His rich artistic oeuvre as well as his historical theories and his journalistic and political activism make him, with Stachniuk, another significant point of reference. Though spending most of his life in the USA, where his family had emigrated in his early youth, he studied and worked in Poland on numerous occasions, frequently depicting historical and mythological themes and figures, so his art appears as a "knot of currents where history, mythology, literature, political thought, art and sculpting and patriotism meet with a finally looming vision of national revival".[16] It is therefore not surprising that it features in many releases in the scene described here, including the covers of self-published political magazines or black metal albums and even on tattoos.

Only a few of the pre-war Slavophile- and Pagan-minded groups outlasted the Polish People's Republic, because, unlike in a few other socialist countries to some extent, these currents were suppressed, and some of their representatives, including Stachniuk himself, were prosecuted or even imprisoned.[17] Although the Polish government's history policy in the 1950s and 1960s did focus on the Middle Ages, it was only the period of the first emergence of the Polish state under the Piast dynasty, rather than the pre-Christian Middle Ages, that received major attention.[18] Nevertheless, the seeds of a fascination with Pagan mediaeval history, and the Vikings in particular, were sown amongst many young

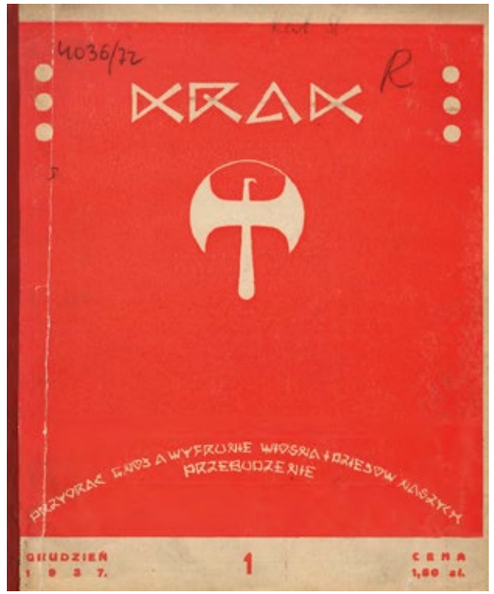

Fig. 3 Cover of *Krak* magazine (December issue 1937) edited by Stanisław Szukalski.

people of the late 1970s and the 1980s through the *Thorgal* comic series and similar pop-culture influences.[19]

The closely interrelated fields of Slavic Neopaganism and black metal music gained momentum after the end of state socialism as described elsewhere in this volume by Mariusz Filip for the Pagan movement and by Ryan Buesnel for the black metal scene. Both, like other scholars before them, identify the 1990s as a kind of (trans-)formation phase. However, this also holds true for early mediaeval reenactments of Slav and Viking battles, which, in Poland, developed alongside the Wolin festival.[20] Apart from a number of previous local initiatives, the festival began in earnest in 1993, when Scandinavian reenactment groups performed there. It eventually became a permanent annual event, for which an association was founded, and an open-air museum established.[21]

Historically and archaeologically speaking, mediaeval Wolin was home to Scandinavian trading settlements and one of the multicultural emporia in the Baltic region. However, it is usually also interpreted as being the location of Jomsborg, a legendary place on the southern shore of the Baltic Sea that various Icelandic sagas present as the fortress of the fabled Jomsvikings. This story forms the background narrative for the festival, providing the idea of a Viking stronghold on Slavic soil and thus uniting Slavic and Viking history. Furthermore, the Jomsviking saga portrays the Jomsviking warrior group as a particularly heroic community of men that was organised according to fixed social rules.

Though observers and chroniclers of the Wolin festival rarely discuss its political ambiguity in any great detail, a certain affinity has been discernible from the early years onwards. Apart from the prominent coverage in the *Resistance Magazine*, there were also reports from the early 2000s of violent and openly extreme right-wing visitors to the festival, such as neo-Nazis who inflicted severe beatings on people on the train heading to the festival because they did not look "Polish enough" to them and members of the Polish branch of the international extremist organisation Blood and Honour who visited the festival and chanted right-wing slogans.[22]

For these radical-right segments of the Pagan-mediaevalist milieu, the most important medium for the exchange of political ideas at this time were self-printed magazines ("zines") in which theories of the European New Right were discussed. Some of the actors mentioned and quoted in the *Resistance Magazine* report were also actively involved in editing and contributing to these zines. It even seemed as if the faction that described itself there as *Narodowy Socjalizm* ("National Socialism") was primarily Neopagan in character at that time.[23] During the transformation period, this movement arose due to the air of political resignation triggered by the social and economic problems caused by the transition to capitalism, coupled with euroscepticism and a new sense of nationalism. This led people to hark back to the culturalist and nationalist ideology of the interwar *Zadruga* group.

One of the political concepts discussed in these zines was that societies should be organised hierarchically and that elites are necessary in order to lead a nation, referring more or less directly to concepts proposed by Vilfredo Pareto and Julius Evola.[24] In particular, the latter's social ideal of a caste system, which framed racial and class-specific elitism as an Indo-Aryan tradition to be restored, is echoed in some of the statements made. This formed one of the key elements of Evola's anti-modernism, which was heavily inspired by the ideas of French intellectual René Guénon in many ways.[25] In order to establish "the ideal state", Igor Górewicz suggested, for example, to form an "aristocracy as a group that possesses special qualities in terms of mind, spirit, character and body […]. An aristocracy with a sense of duty and service to the state".[26] Elsewhere, he stated:

> Our task is not to reverse Mieszko's action and to re-baptize the Christians, to become 'pagans', but to long work to change the prevailing standards of organization and cultural activity, and at the same time researching, developing and propagating the Native Tradition and Culture [*sic*] in all their manifestations, so that in time to create a large social group that will be ready to take the role of a guide of Polish culture.[27]

Amongst other things, these elites were also given the task of ensuring a metapolitical reorganisation of social consciousness. The zines explicitly discuss "metapolitics" as a way to bring about "civilizational and historical changes",[28] referring to the approach conceived of by the *Nouvelle Droite* as a strategic pre-political phase for changing the collective awareness in a cultural revolution driven from the right by circulating and normalising ideas.[29] According to Strutyński,[30] this emphasis on a long-term approach to shaping public opinion and the formation of elites can be understood in the context of the unsuccessful attempts made to become a serious player in national politics. In this sense, Górewicz suggested at the time

> mastering the 'inner area', i.e., spiritual culture, to later transfer the action to the outer area, i.e., social life, politics. This is the task of preparing the ground. It consists of the idea that each participant in the 'Zadruga embryo' prepares the field in his own section, shaping the attitudes of co-workers, subordinates, acquaintances, in the field of views on history, politics.[31]

Also related to history as a field where attitudes can be changed was his previous involvement with the *Zadrugian* "Niklot" Association of Tradition and Culture. Being "a member of the leading board", he described his activism in 2001 as "not purely political, but [it] deals with a number of issues influencing political choices (this is metapolitics), such as the shaping of Polish and Slavic awareness and identity".[32] Similarly, he saw black metal music, too, as a "very suitable media to spread […] ideas".[33]

Whilst those actors representing the far-right wing of the overlapping scenes of Neopaganism, reenactment and musical culture openly expressed themselves politically at the turn of the millennium, a change took place in the late 2000s. They either distanced themselves and emphasised a rejection of previous attitudes, as Igor Górewicz did, or they stopped expressing themselves in a manner that was clearly recognisable as extreme right-wing.

Consequently, religious studies scholars have described this move away from overt political activism for the Polish Native Faith movement as a shift "away from the unquestioned inclusion of politics in the sacred circle and toward more cultural and artistic expression".[34] What is more, the increasing intertwining of Neopaganism with historical reenactment and Pagan metal/folk music cultures was seen here as a cause or symptom of this supposed shift away from political activism towards seemingly apolitical cultural activities. Following this line of argument, music and the popularisation of history had helped to "keep political slogans away from the sacred" because of a "growing interest in Polish Rodzimowierstwo" in areas that were described as "not primarily politically-oriented, such as the Polish metal scene or historical reenactment groups",[35] i.e. areas that had evidently had some very political tendencies indeed. This shows that these interlinked fields and their historical practices have not yet been examined in their entirety in terms of their obvious common features and their politicisation. With regard to the metapolitical strategies discussed around the turn of the millennium, this also raises the question of whether there has indeed been a shift towards this scene having an un-political – or at least a less political – character, or whether it is merely that the means have become more subtle and the images of history conveyed may still perform a metapolitical function.

Popularising Paganism and right-wing links in the present day

Visiting the festival in Wolin today, which now attracts up to 2,500 reenactors and tens to dozens of thousands of visitors each year,[36] one might notice that there are still many visitors wearing clothes, jewellery or tattoos bearing right-wing symbolism. Here, but also at other reenactment festivals most of the major "patriotic" clothes labels in Europe that are popular with extreme-right-

3

Perspectives from Hungary

“Eurasian Magyars”

The Role of Historical Reenactment and Experimental Archaeology in Hungary’s Illiberal Heritage Regime

Katrin Kremmler

In illiberal Hungary, the concept of historical statehood has undergone a process of political re-engineering, with a cultural heritage festival as a main site of experimentation.[1] In 2007, actors on the fringes of Hungarian academia and far right groups started revitalising Hungarian Turanism[2] – understood here as the belief in a shared cultural and biological link with people of Turkic descent – at a cultural heritage festival called Kurultáj,[3] which translates as “great tribal assembly”. In 2010, the promotion of Turanism was taken up by the Orbán government and, from 2019 onwards, was supported by genetics and bioarchaeological research carried out in new government institutions running parallel to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.[4] These new institutions play a significant role in furthering Hungary’s geo-economical alignment with Turkey, Central Asia and China. Putting on combat and archery reenactments and horse races involving 500–600 reenactors on horseback and on foot, national and international ethno-sports competitions, Neopagan rituals, nationalist rock music, and Hungarian and Eurasian folklore concerts and performances, Kurultáj is similar to popular mediaeval festivals all over Europe but on a surprisingly larger scale, attracting between 150,000 and 200,000 visitors over a long weekend.

Kurultáj is also a platform for popular science education, presenting the culture of Eurasian nomad warriors in a framing of what Marlène Laruelle calls “archaeological patriotism”[5] – patriotically interpreted results and considerations from the field of archaeology, in displays provided by the Hungarian Natural History Museum (HNHM), regional archaeology museums and, from 2022 onwards, the Hungarian National Museum (HNM). The new Eurasian “ancestors” of contemporary Hungarians are represented as “Europid-Mongolid” racial types, with archaeological crania and facial reconstructions prepared by the HNHM. Drawing on experimental archaeology, a range of reenactment groups and heritage communities participate in order to demonstrate the combat and cultural techniques of nomadic warrior military elites dating back to the Huns and Avars, all of which are considered relevant for Hungarian military history and statehood. This allows the Hungarian government to integrate what observers consider conflicting civilisationist agendas: “White” Christian Europe as the “real Europe”[6], and Eurasian civilisationism for the purpose of geo-economic, cultural and scientific co-operation with Turkic Muslim states.

Since 2014, the content and aesthetics of these heritage events in Hungary have been characterised by close partnerships with recently established major cultural heritage sites and events in Central Asia and Turkey: the National Museum in Astana, the world music festival Spirit of Tengri in Kazakhstan, and the World Nomad Games[7] in Kyrgyzstan. The Hungarian project is therefore part of a geopolitical network connecting various transregional culture war agendas: Kurultáj, held in the southern Hungarian countryside, is referred to as one of the biggest Turanist events in the context of Turkish Eurasianism. The event has attracted large numbers of Turkish visitors since 2014, and the cultural stage has been sponsored by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA). There are also links to the new (Pan-) Turkic History Museum and Statue Park in Ankara.[8]

As Aurélie Stern has shown in her ethnographic study of the Turkish delegations at Kurultáj in 2021 and 2022, the festival serves as an intermediate space for the circulation of conservative ideas at a transnational level; it is a space for the construction of a transnational conservative identity, where religious differences are resolved through Tengrism[9] as a shared ancient religion,[10] evoked in shamanic ceremonies.[11]

The Orbán government has increasingly embraced the festival since 2010, the opening ceremony is regularly held in the Parliament Building, and the speaker of the National Assembly László Kövér delivered the welcome address at the event site in 2018 and 2022. In recent

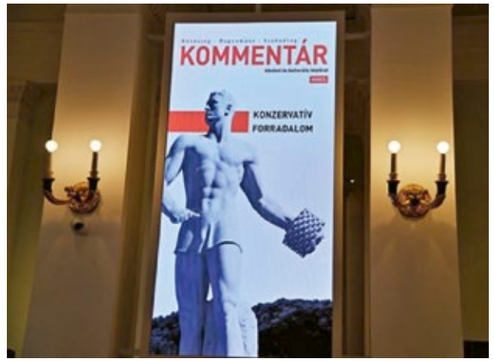

Fig. 1 Launch of *Kommentár* issue 3 at the Hungarian National Mueum, Budapest, published on Facebook in 2022.

years, the government has sponsored the festival with the equivalent of around 1 million euros per year.

Since the event's inception, the volunteers providing event security have been a regional branch of the Magyar Gárda Mozgalom ("New Hungarian Guard Movement"), a legal successor organisation to the far-right paramilitary Hungarian Guard that was disbanded in 2009 by the (then) socialist-liberal coalition government. In odd-numbered years, the organising body (Magyar-Turán Alapítvány, or "Magyar-Turán Foundation") hosts a smaller, "domestic", event called Ősök napja ("Day of Ancestors"), which caters to ethnic Hungarians from the neighbouring countries in the Carpathian Basin, the region covering the historical kingdom of Hungary in its pre-1920 borders imagined as ethno-national space. At the venue, a special exhibition pavillon is dedicated to vendors from Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine and Serbia.

As I saw for myself between 2014 and 2022, the strong far-right presence at Kurultáj and Ősök napja declined, whilst the government delegations from Turkey and Central Asia came to play a more central role, with their national television teams broadcasting the event to audiences back home.

Kurultáj's target audience in Hungary encompasses a broad spectrum, ranging from "ordinary" families and visitors attending with their respective cultural or sport associations performing at the event through to far-right politicians and visitors displaying explicit far-right affinities. Hungarian society is said to be polarised to a "pernicious" degree between liberal and national camps; the division is not only about political affiliations but also includes opposing notions of national culture and cultural belonging. It is important to note that the so-called national camp, which identifies with conservative to far-right concepts of national culture, is not united in terms of its political party affiliations and cannot be assumed to be pro-government. One aim of the new Eurasian project is to integrate and unite this "national camp" in metapolitical – cultural – terms against the liberal camp and "Western liberal hegemony".

This new Eurasian political project is not just a recent invention engineered and administered from the top down. It draws on a wide spectrum of alternative national prehistory narratives in the popular culture of the national camp, stretching back to the interwar period and the 19th century – Hungarian Orientalism – a tradition that only needed to be modernised and streamlined for the 21st century. The advent and rapid development of archaeogenetics is at hand: a group of nationalist scientists started looking for Eastern haplogroups in archaeological skulls from Hungarian territory in a pattern fairly similar to what historian Richard McMahon has described as "genetic ethnology".[12] In fact, shared genealogies with Central Asian physical anthropology were established as long ago as the 1960s.[13]

As already mentioned, displays of archaeological crania and facial reconstructions of "Europid-Mongolid" racial types are a key component of Kurultáj. Since 2010, they have been provided by scientists affiliated with the HNHM. According to the museum's annual reports, these displays started out as initiatives by individual staff scientists volunteering at the event, using skulls and other materials from the museum's collection.

Since 2016, this research strand has received new backing from geneticists from the University of Szeged. While researching 9th-century archaeological burial sites in Hungary, they identified a genetic link to Central Asia and started presenting their findings at Kurultáj in 2016. Since 2018, they have published their results in a number of international science journals.[14] Based on these findings, they constructed a narrative of historical Hungarian statehood and Central Asian kinship. By 2023, the Magyar-Turán-Foundation had developed an extensive international network for scientific cooperation and exchange involving a wide range of state institutions and individual scholars and scientists in Turkey, Kazakhstan and Mongolia as well as Western Europe and the US.

The illiberal heritage regime

A new government Research Institute of Hungarian Studies (Magyarságkutató Intézet, or MKI) was founded in 2019.[15] The term *magyarság,* innocuously translated as "Hungarian", conveys ethnic semantics of the interwar period. Interwar "*magyarság* research" was an interdisciplinary national sciences paradigm of studying the nation's body politic ("*nemzettest*") and ancient cultural and biological origins in an integrated approach that took in physical anthropology, archaeology, folklore studies, ethnology, medieval history, linguistics and orientalist studies. For all the interwar disciplines involved, influences from German science and scholarship can be documented, but have not been synthesised to date. As Róbert Keményfi and Tamás Csíki have shown, Hungarian *Volkstumsforschung,* inspired by its German counterpart, has used the cultural nation rather than the "state-nation" (the nation in the political sense) as a guiding concept, meaning that people were considered not only citizens but also part of an older religious, cultural, "racial" and national community predating the modern nation state. This notion was extended to include the Hungarian minorities in its neighbouring countries under post-First World War borders.[16]

In interwar physical anthropology, packaged as national science, this involved measuring and comparing 9th-century archaeological skulls and skeletons with living populations of the post-imperial ethnic Hungarian majority. While most of the other ethnic minorities were considered compatible, Hungarians with a Jewish and Romani background were excluded as "alien races", not only in terms of their "racial biology" but also for their lack of autochthony, as "recent", modern-era "newcomers" to the Carpathian Basin, which had been thought of as the Magyars' kingdom for a millennium.

MKI staff nowadays combine references to interwar authors concerning medieval Hungarian chronicles with cutting-edge archaeogenetics, their stated aim being to strengthen Hungarian national identity. The institute enjoys a sizeable budget, employs over 100 researchers and has signed cooperation agreements with most of the major Hungarian universities as well as a number of Turkish scientific institutions and the Mongolian Academy of Sciences' Archaeology Institute. MKI scientists publish extensively in international sciences journals and under international partnerships, and flood the Hungarian Science Bibliography database

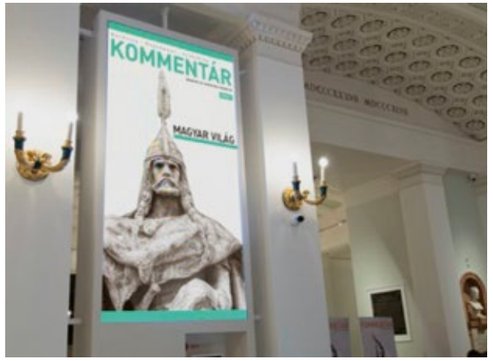

Fig. 2 Launch of *Kommentár* issue 1 at the Hungarian National Mueum, Budapest, published on Facebook in 2023.

(Magyar Tudományos Művek Tára, MTMT) with content (1,778 publications, 692 citations since 2019; number of entries: 2018: 0; 2019: 174; 2020: 442; 2021: 378; 2022: 150; 2023: 103).[17]

The MKI addresses the public through government and social media and through a partnership with Mediaworks Hungary, one of the biggest media companies in the country, for exclusive content in the (pro-)government daily newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* ("Hungarian Nation"). The MKI board sees their work as expressly continuing the interwar Turanist tradition of science and scholarship and provides regular accounts of the MKI's scientific progress on M5, the cultural channel on government TV.

Over time, the most prominent scientists that have presented at Kurultáj since 2016 – geneticists from the University of Szeged – have become affiliated with the MKI or its partners. In 2019, the physical anthropologist Zsolt Bernert, one of the scientists who had prepared the skull displays at Kurultáj since 2010, was appointed as the new director of the HNHM. His first project was to display the narrative of Hun-Avar-Magyar ancestry in the exhibition *Attila Örökösei – A hunoktól az Árpád-házig* ("Attila's heirs – from the Huns to the House of Árpád") in October 2019. In 2021, László L. Simon, a Fidesz member of parliament and former state secretary for culture and a writer and poet by profession, was appointed as the new director-general of the HNM. Simon is a member of the editorial board of the conservative/alt-right journal *Kommentár,* which, under his management, has been presenting new issues in the HNM on a regular basis, and

Fig. 3 Street parade commemorating the foundation of Hungary in Budapest, Hungary, 2021.

continues to do so.[18] The cover design clearly shows fascist aesthetics updated for the 2020s (fig. 1 and 2).

In 2022 the HNM had its own exhibition yurt at Kurultáj for the first time, [19] and several HNM archaeologists presented in the science tent. The new Eurasian narrative has been established and institutionalised to a point that it can integrate the scholarship of what even critical Hungarian scholars consider to be legitimate academic actors not known for their illiberal affiliations or nationalist leanings: in 2022, a scholar affiliated with the (then) Eötvös Loránd Research Network (Eötvös Loránd Kutatási Hálózat, ELKH) – which the government broke away from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) in 2019 and re-named Hungarian Research network (HUN-REN) in 2023[20] – presented their current work at Kurultáj.

The HNM cooperation with Kurultáj continues today: with the museum's yurt in 2024, exhibits, publications and products from the museum's gift shop available to festivalgoers. Dr. Gábor Virágos, Archaeological Deputy Director of the HNM *National Institute* of *Archaeology*, discussed future closer cooperation and research possibilities at Kurultáj 2024.[21]

By now, seasoned festivalgoers are ready to embrace any new information about Eurasian nomadic peoples of the past and present as part of Hungary's civilisational heritage and national identity. By early 2023, the MKI was becoming very vocal about its mission having succeeded:

> [It claims to have] reinstated the genuine past of the nation, restoring the truths of our chronicles […] and popular consciousness, which had been expunged from history with defiant insolence by malicious adventurers of foreign origin,[22] and with sheer blunt violence in the absence of scientific facts. It is now an indisputable fact that the Hungarians are the organic heirs of the Scythians, the Huns and the Avars, in short, of the Eurasian archery culture of the Steppe, the first representatives of which were demonstrably present in the Carpathian Basin six thousand years ago at the latest. There is no longer any question that a significant proportion of the Avars spoke Hungarian, and it is also clear that some of the Huns were already Christians – and it is in this light that the Scourge of God, Attila the Hun, who was punishing the West then drowning in aberrations and cynicism, should be interpreted.[23]

Besides establishing new research institutions, the Orbán government has also gradually been taking over existing state institutions of education and culture, such as universities, museums, scientific collections and theatres. The new Eurasian narrative is now being disseminated in museum exhibitions, state media and social media, music and theatre productions and the education system. What is at stake is the construction of a new hegemonic illiberal epistemic architecture.[24] Designs and motives inspired by "ancient Magyar mythology", which convey the aesthetics of the Eurasian nomads, are being generated and fed into the cultural mainstream, becoming part of the repertoire of national cultural institutions. Recent examples include the National Equestrian Theatre, the Open Air Theatre of Margaret Island, the National Opera House, the HNM, the Hungarian National Theatre, and the Capital Circus of Budapest (fig. 13).[25] The new narrative is being disseminated in the educational systems via school textbooks and national-education projects outside the state school system.

Aesthetics of Eurasian nomadic and ancient Magyar heritage are becoming increasingly present in public events and public spaces. The street parade commemorating the founding of Hungary in the year 1000 by St Stephen, the first king of Hungary, in Budapest in 2021 (planned for the Trianon centennial in 2020, postponed for the COVID-pandemic) clearly set out to dazzle its audiences by re-inventing the nation's ancient symbols in the visual language of contemporary pop culture, starting with 9th century reenactors of the conquest era and shamans (fig. 3).

They were followed by floats featuring gigantic portrayals of so-called ancient Magyar mythical totem symbols and symbols of Christian iconography: the Miracle Deer (whose design was inspired by the 6th-century Scythian Golden Deer from Tápiószentmárton in the HNM), the Turul bird, St Stephen, the Holy Crown of St Stephen, and the Virgin Mary. In 2022, the Hungarian National Bank erected a statue of a golden Miracle Deer as a new, monumental emblem of the nation's dynamic economic recovery and expansion.

Lifestyle influencers and a whole illiberal ethnocultural identity industry complex that encompasses fashion designers, media companies and other cultural producers are promoting Eurasian nomad culture as being liberating and fulfilling, desirable and emancipatory and a path to personal growth and spiritual fulfilment for young women and, at the same time, are grounding motherhood in a cultural national identity and the concept of the warrior nation and constitutional sovereignty (fig. 4).[26]

Fig. 4 Lifestyle blogger Rebeka Bársony in an online article of the newspaper Magyar Nemzet, 16 May 2021

In August 2023, the MKI, the National Theatre and the University of Theatre and Film Arts began negotiating future co-operation possibilities.[27]

Inventing the triumphant nation: the Battle of Pressburg (907 CE) as a victory over the West

While my interest was originally focused on government involvement and the output from state research institutes and state media, my attention was grabbed by the growing reenactment scene. My research was not an ethnographic study of individual reenactors or reenactment groups; rather, I sought a broader understanding of reenactment that invested in shifting the meaning of historical battles from defeat to a narrative of victory. Battle reenactments and representations are one aspect of a larger project of cultural production, in an effort to stretch Hungarian statehood temporally backwards to the era of conquest (fig. 6).

The allure of the Pagan past—the prehistoric and early medieval eras before Christianisation—pervades modern media, from fantasy novels and video games to Viking TV series and comics about ancient heroes. This volume explores the deeper, more political currents running through the popular fascination with these distant times. Focusing on three key areas—historical reenactment, ethnic Neopaganism, and the metal music scene—the book examines how these fields not only entertain but also serve as powerful vehicles for political ideologies.

The collected essays explore how these "popular Pagans" create romanticised images of pre-Christian societies, idealising their perceived naturalness, ethnic purity, and martial heroism. Drawing on ethnicist thinking, ancestral identification and nostalgia for an unadulterated past, these portrayals often disregard current scholarly discourse. Instead, they perpetuate outdated narratives, that are more in line with far-right ideals, fostering exclusionary beliefs and anti-democratic rhetoric. Based on research discussions initiated at the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe, this volume is the first to shed light on the political role of the Pagan past in contemporary Germany, Poland and Hungary.

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