

Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Paganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 418 pp., \$140 (cloth), \$25 (paper), Open Access (ebook).

Many readers will be familiar with images of Norse runes and symbols displayed by white supremacists at the Unite the Right demonstration in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. Those images contributed to a new wave of concern about race and Norse Paganism. To many observers, Heathenry seems to be a religion that reifies regressive notions of race and serves as a counter-example to the progressive work of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Many Heathen practitioners decry the racist appropriation of the symbols of Norse Paganism, while other voices, including scholars, suggest that a deeper connection exists between racist thought and contemporary Heathen religion. *Norse Revival* continues the examination of race and racial attitudes and does so in a thorough and nuanced fashion. Of particular concern is the tainted knowledge that, according to Schnurbein, informs broad swaths of the international Heathen scene. Her book examines the transmission of racist ideas from *völkisch* and New Right contexts into contemporary Heathen religion, arguing that reliance on these sources is a poisoned well of sorts.

There are, of course, racist Heathens, those dark-siders who openly embrace racist ideals and the Nazi past. Schnurbein's book deals more thoroughly with the ethnicist Heathens who, under her careful analysis, are shown to have adapted "culture" in certain essentialist forms as a new racism. Then there are the a-racist Heathens who abhor the mixing of religion with these racist elements. While admiring their sincere opposition to racialist thinking, Schnurbein maintains that these Heathens continue to rely on tainted knowledge – sources, ideas, and paradigms that have their roots in the nationalist and *völkisch* milieu. This dependence leaves even the a-racists more vulnerable to racialist thinking, tied to concepts and forms of religion that are inevitably dangerous. If we drink from a poisoned well, then we all get sick.

While this thesis is by no means new, the book develops it through the detailed and impressive analysis of a scholar who has been observing the movement for twenty-five years. As seen in the breadth of the book, Schnurbein is deeply familiar with the European Heathen scene. Her opening chapter provides a thorough description

of the German Romantic and *völkisch* forerunners that established the context for the emergence of Heathenry. She includes a history of the contemporary movement in Chapter Two, which includes a helpful discussion of the internationalizing efforts of several Heathen organizations. Chapter Three introduces beliefs and practices, focusing on *blót* or sacrifice, rune magic, and *seid*, variously a shamanic or divinatory form of magical practice. The following chapters make up the heart of her analysis. Each drills down into various aspects of the Heathen experience, including race and ethnicity, polytheism, nature spirituality, scholarship, and the arts. The real strength of the book lies in these “core samples.” Like a geologist boring into layers of ice or sediment, she brings to light the veins of Romantic, *völkisch*, and New Right influence that wind their way through contemporary Heathenry. For instance, her discussion of ethno-pluralism in Chapter Four is particularly helpful in understanding its influence within American Heathen discourse.

She frames this work within a reflexive account of her conflicted engagement with the Heathen world. Beginning from the oppositional stance of a conscientious outsider, she describes how her perspective has grown to a critical but more nuanced appreciation for some aspects of the movement, its desire for rootedness and belonging, and the impact her own work has had upon it.

This scholarship is immensely valuable, especially for readers who, like some Americans, may be less familiar with these European sources and history. Schnurbein details the work of numerous *völkisch* thinkers and reveals the extent to which contemporary Heathenry has been reliant upon these precursors. She approaches Heathenry as an international network, laying out the sources, personalities, and interpretive methods that Heathen movements share across national and cultural contexts. She is also unequivocal in her critical framework and warns against lapses in critical analysis that gloss over or obscure *völkisch* memes.

Schnurbein is aware of other intellectual tributaries to the contemporary scene, for instance discussing the influence of Wicca. However, her focused evaluation of Romantic nationalism, *völkisch*, and New Right influences tends to overshadow and underestimate other formative ideas and sources. In the American Heathen context, those tainted ideas compete against a variety of other voices. These include the significant presence of other Pagan paradigms, a long history of non-*völkisch* experiences of nature, the pressure of feminist critique, and the particular religious history and identity politics of

America. Schnurbein deals extensively with several important American contributors including Edred Thorsson, Stephen McNallen, Diana Paxson, and Kveldulf Gundarsson. However, a second generation of Heathen intellectuals has begun to provide a reanalysis of their work.

This context complicates the process of transmission, which rarely occurs in linear ways. Practitioners repurpose ideas into new syncretic forms that may not resemble the sources from which they derive. Schnurbein acknowledges this at times, noting that Heathens are caught in a “field of tension” in which the reception of tainted knowledge, its repudiation by critical perspectives, and creative experimentation are all in play. However, these complexities of transmission could receive more thorough treatment.

Schnurbein’s assertive approach to dangerous ideas and tainted knowledge is warranted. As she points out, even a-racist positions and statements of identity may obscure a dependence on *völkisch* ideology. Accepting at face value the bifurcation of Heathenry into ethnicist and a-racist formulations may forestall deeper analysis. However, there are reasons to suggest a more positive and hopeful vision for the future of Heathenry, one that is more aware of and less reliant on these tainted waters.

*Norse Revival* is an important book that challenges and contributes to our understanding of contemporary Heathen religion. Readers will appreciate how Schnurbein’s lively discussion provides numerous points of entry for future research. The choice to release *Norse Revival* online in an open access format allows young scholars to make the most of its analysis. While not an introductory account, this engaging and thoughtful appraisal of Norse Paganism will be useful for serious observers and scholars of contemporary Paganism.

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