



Transcript Episode 13: Ross' Rant, part 1

[start tune]

0:09 Jochem

Hello! Welcome to the Wyrd Thing podcast, episode 13: Ross' Rant, part 1. I am Jochem, and today I will talk with Rich and our special guest Ross about the role of academics in modern heathenry. Ross, maybe you can start with a short introduction who you are?

0:28 Ross

Hi Jochem, my name is Ross Downing. I am from the UK, and I lived in Scandinavia for the past 20 years, or so. I first got involved in heathenry as a teenager, when I was a member of the Völkisch group called The Odinic Right, which is... And specifically the one that now became the Odinist Fellowship. I was a Gothi. I eventually left.

And then, when I came to Sweden, I was a Gothi, a member of the Swedish Asatru Association, which is now called Forn Sed Sweden. I've moved away from that group, over the years. For no particular reason. But now I am really, more an internet heathen, or a solitary heathen. And I was involved in creating Declaration 127, with Xan Folmer. And generally I like to be involved in supporting, like, heathen groups and initiatives and things.

For my academic side I've got a Masters in the study of Old Norse Religion, and a second Masters in a study of Contemporary Paganism, specifically Modern Heathenry. And I am active in both fields of study, I publish academically and I present at conferences, and things like that.

I currently work for a UK-based NGO, called Inform, and we're located in the religious studies department at King's College in London. We research and document and advise the UK Home Office on religious movements, like cults and sects and things. And I am an editor and producer for them, in a forthcoming book on Bloomsbury publishing, and that's about heathenry and Rodnover, which is the Slavic pagan tradition, and how overlaps it with security studies. That should be coming out later this year. And that's me.

2:21 Jochem

Well, thank you.

2:22 Ross

Thank you. It's nice to be here.

2:23 Rich

I just wonder whether we can start, Ross, by asking you... Your work with Inform, obviously vital, and, at least literally, do what it says: inform the security services and people in the non-pagan sphere about what these sort of movements are like. If they're are a threat, or if they're just ordinary, I suppose. [Ross: Hmm.] How does that overlap with your academic work?



2:47 Ross

Well, that's... They literally... They recruited me from that. So, I... I think it was two years ago now, I wrote an article for the *Pomegranate*, which is the international journal of contemporary paganism studies. And it was a fairly innocuous article, on girls, heathen girls on Instagram, or girls that are... play around with heathen-looking mysticism, and things like Wardruna. This is like... I don't even think there is even a name for it. It's like a... I guess neofolk music had a lot to do with it, and like the computer game *Senua's Sacrifice*. There's a lot of aesthetics like that. So I was involved... Well, I wasn't involved – I wrote an article on that, and then, with my other work doing conferences and things, I was just contacted.

Originally, I did a leaflet for an anti-hate group in the UK, called Exit UK, that work with former white separatists who've been involved in the prison system. Or it advises and helps families of neo-Nazis. So, there was an overlap there between His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, and Exit UK, and the Police Pagan Association, which is basically run by a police officer called Andrew Pardy. He's affiliated with Asatru UK, I think, and he's based in Hertfordshire. He's a gothi as well. And he's doing some really interesting work for, I guess you could say, government bodies, and so he educates, like, civil servants and the police on pagans in general in the UK.

So, for example, if you've got a situation where someone has put up a kind of pagan-looking or occult-looking symbol at a crime site, normally like vandals or something, you might get a local police service that would contact Andrew Pardy and the Police Pagan Association, and ask them you know, are these... Blair Witch, or what is it... And the answer is, generally speaking like, this is just kids, fucking around. So yeah, that's basically how it all ties together.

4:59 Rich

And from that, Ross, you mentioning all these... this... the perception of kids... as you say, sort of messing about, or whether it's something more serious. And obviously, there's the connections to Exit UK, and prison, and white supremacy, and so on. That must be a bit of a challenge, because obviously to somebody who isn't part of that sphere, those symbols, you know, they see a hammer or they see runes... That all looks the same.

5:26 Ross

To be honest, you know, that's exactly the same discussion that we've had in heathenry, though, for decades. I would even say it's fundamental to the character and identity of modern heathenry. Because Wicca doesn't have these conversations. I mean, all right, to be fair Wicca does have a similar narrative or dialogue with itself and with society by saying, 'No, we're not witches in that way. We're not Satanists.' You know, the pentagram doesn't mean... sacrifice. And it's similar to us and the way we might say, 'Oh, we're not racists'. But I think that's slightly different in heathenry, because we are the only pagan tradition that has the unfortunate relationship or association with Nazism. And Nazism is obviously the ultimate, historical human experience of racism. So, it's the only religion, or the religion, that is most associated with racism. And people forget that – as in, people in heathenry forget that. That we are an outlier in religions in general. And it's quite a scary prospect when you put in perspective like that. And it's only recently, last couple of years, we've started... I say 'we' – like, 'they': educational bodies or investigative bodies in [unreadable] to governments.



I've only recently clocked on to this and realised how far-reaching this issue is, because when you look at, say, the guy that stormed the Capitol Building in the US, a couple of years ago, you know, with the buffalo head-dress on. He was all over the news, internationally. Because obviously it was an international event. It was, like, he got into the throne room of the king of the world. And his tattoos were an Yggdrasil, surrounded by runes; it was a Valknut; and I think he had a Thor's Hammer as well, on his chest. So those tattoos were, you know, for a lot of people who would have understood them, it was... that's some really bad branding, you know, and it's like we've not able to get away from this shit since the 1930s. It's still fundamental to who we are as a little, tiny, micro-religion.

7:41 Rich

Well, it's fascinating, because although there was various views of big orgs put out statements regarding the 'Q Shaman', I think he was called. Or called himself. [Ross: Yah] There was a couple of interesting things that I spotted, that... I can't find the original post, but one of them was that people who did a quick sort of deep-dive into him said that he, whatever his beliefs, he seems to be *some* kind of Christian? He was not a heathen, by *any* measure. And in addition to that, one – this is obviously straight into the realms of heathens having their own conspiracies – somebody said it looks like those tattoos are covering up something else. He's had possibly a worse tattoo underneath.

8:19 Ross

Right.

8:19 Rich

Who on Earth knows. But if you've ever seen any of the interviews he's done. Not the TV station, but there's a YouTube channel, I think, called 'Channel 5' or something like that. And they did an interview, like a very, very frank, you know, no holds barred, 'tell us your truth' interview. And goodness me, if you thought he was odd before... His perception was 'white skewed', shall we say.

8:41 Ross

Yeah, because he was part of the QAnon group, I'd say, almost delusional conspiracy theory group. And that's the thing like when you say about Christianity. I mean... I guess, from a religious studies point of view, you have to be quite careful about pigeonholing things, because it gets filtered through the media, because they try and... "dumb it down" is perhaps unfair, but they try and simplify it. And then that becomes the narrative, on the street.

Yeah, you might say: is this person a Christian or a heathen? If that's the question you've been asked by media, or by the police or something like that, you're in a tricky situation. Because quite often you've only been given a binary question, like a yes or no. And we don't work like that with religion studies. I mean, for instance, if you were to kind of change tact a little bit, but if you were to look at the early Anglo-Saxons... Are they Christian or are they heathen? You can't put them in one or the other.

I mean, if you look at the artefacts from Sutton Hoo. They... They're clearly heathen. But the people that were burying that stuff, were considered Christian by a lot of scholars until, you know,



for a hundred years until scholarship recently caught up and then said, “Hang on, you know, we can’t really call them one thing or another.” And that’s similar to these people today.

And even in the heathen community, you know, like, where do you draw the line between someone who is a Völkisch heathen and someone who is just a neo-Nazi? You know, the reaction from leftist or mainstream heathens is, these people are not interested in religion. They’re interested in politics. And that’s true, but then you’ve got a lot of these mainstream or leftist heathens who... who don’t even believe in the gods. I was one of them for many years. Most of my history as a heathen, I didn’t believe in the gods, as many of us don’t. Don’t believe in the gods as supernatural beings, but seeing them more as kind of Jungian archetypes. And that’s fine, you know, that’s also part of heathenry.

But what I mean by that is, on paper, if you were to try to look at it clinically and dispassionately, as a heathen you were criticising someone like the QAnon Shaman for being actually Christian or actually a neo-Nazi and not heathen. And you’re also criticising Odinists for being actually, you know, ‘macho Bro-halla’ and not heathen. Why is that different from a heathen who is actually an atheist? Because are you an atheist or are you a heathen? And then you get into this whole conversation about ‘what is heathenry’? If you can be an atheist and a heathen, is heathenry a religion?

11:17 Rich

That’s almost into the realms of philosophy there, aren’t you?

11:20 Jochem

Yeah.

11:21 Ross

That’s what we do in academia, right? I mean, it is kind of philosophical. Certainly in religion studies, it is a philosophical debate, constantly.

11:29 Jochem

Hmm.

11:30 Rich

So, where does that really leave you, quote-unquote – even if there is such a thing – “average heathen in the street”, as it were, in terms of their perception of symbols? Because even though what I would consider fairly obvious symbols, the swastika or whatever, even other symbols I have seen people have tattooed on themselves, without even researching them in any way at all. And that always surprises me.

11:53 Ross

I think you’re talking about the Vegvisir?

11:57 Rich

Vegvisir, well also the Aegir’s Hammer...



12:00 Ross

Yeah, the Aegir's Hammer. The Aegir Helmet of Awe.

12:04 Rich

Yeah, the Helm of Awe.

12:05 Ross

Or the Helmet of Aegir, yeah.

12:08 Rich

And I have seen people having tattooed those in a permanent marking... Well, okay, these days you can have them removed more easily, but still...

12:15 Jochem

Semi permanent.

12:16 Rich

Yeah. [Jochem: Yeah] What are your thoughts on those, Ross?

12:19 Ross

As tattoos. [Ross and Rich laugh]

12:22 Rich

Well, as tattoos, as designs, they look fantastic. But in terms of people having them as symbols of their faith... You know, I'm always a bit... Obviously you've wasted your time and money, but erm... There are other symbols, perhaps, you know?

12:34 Ross

Obviously, when you talk about tattoos, then in the whole conversation about tattoos as... like you say, as a permanent mark, but, you know, or as a... You know, the whole thing with tattoos is a conversation in itself, right? But I'm not too bothered about people making permanent mistakes on their skin. Because, in a way, that's just a physical embodiment, a literal embodiment, of the permanent damage that they're doing to themselves and society by carrying around misinformation. You know, they spend years of their life not just carrying a tattoo on them but spending their life under the misunderstanding of what heathenry is.

So yeah, when it comes to symbols, inside modern heathenry, I think the big issue is one of education. And that is a real bee in the bonnet that I have as a heathen, because of my academic background. So, you know, I've... I've got into arguments in the past on why I'm a real idiot, with getting dragged into, you know, a keyboard warrior. And a social justice warrior. Well, at least I have been historically.

So I've been accused of being a gatekeeper. Which is hilarious to me when you've got ten people who are admins in a group, screaming at you, saying that you're a gatekeeper, when *you're* the one in the minority. You're clearly not gatekeeping information, *they* are. And what you're trying to do is to provoke someone to think differently. Differently from the status quo. And the status quo in



heathenry tends to be following a kind of doctrine or dogma. And for someone who has been a heathen for... God, thirty years or something... certainly pre-Internet... The way I see heathen mainstream, if you like, relationship or concepts of heathen terms, heathen words, heathen... symbols, has changed dramatically.

But for instance, back in the nineties, the word for 'heathen' was 'Odinist'. It didn't have *any* connotations at all. That was the word. Then we went through a phase of 'heathen' kind of came in. But then it was 'Asatru', was the main word we used for many years. [Rich: Hmm.] I think that's one of the reasons why Asatru UK is still called Asatru UK, because it was founded kind of about that time, when 'Asatru' was the word. And in Sweden we had the Swedish Asatru Association. But then there is this movement where... And Asatru EU was founded. Then you have this movement, or I should say shift, where people started thinking: Well, Asatru is a modern Icelandic or modern Danish term. So, you know, 'heathen' is more, is more correct. And now 'heathen', I think tends to be, is widely accepted as the... as the correct nomenclature. You certainly have an attempt by the alt-right in the last couple of years to appropriate the word 'Asatru'.

15:23 Rich

I've seen... Another phrase that's on the rise is 'Norse paganism'. I've seen it said, written, that: "Ah, well, heathen, Asatru, that is too limiting. What I do is a bit more fluid, is a bit more open. So 'Norse paganism' fits what I'm doing."

15:36 Ross

Well, I don't like that, personally, as a heathen, because you are ostracising yourself. You're tribalising. And this is another thing that the alt-right love: they love to segregate us in our own community, and they love to tribalise us. So they even talk... You know, you have like 'theod'? They do it the other way, they say: "We're Anglo-Saxon pagans. We don't deal with Norse pagans." As if it's a different religion. And it's really moronic, because they're obviously basing their sources on Old Norse sources. And then, in some cases, just translating the word to... to something Anglo-Saxon where it never existed in Anglo-Saxon.

So, as a good example of that is, I think, they use the word, the name 'Bealdur' for Baldr, and that isn't historical in Old English. There is a word 'Bealdur' in Old English, which is cognate with Baldr. But it doesn't seem to be the word that was used. Historically it was 'Bealdec'; 'Bealdac'. And they don't use that, because they're just... badly educated. And this is the problem as an academic that I have, and I know a lot of other heathens with academic backgrounds. I'm really beyond jaded with the level of miseducation within heathenry.

And heathens are as well, you know. Non-academic heathens are really frustrated as well, because we can't find the sources that we, as a community, need. And *that's* why you've got people - to go back to your original question, off this fucking massive rant that I just had - that's why people tattoo a modern grimoire symbol, like the Vegvisir, on them, is because there is not enough education and proper academic knowledge in heathenry. This is simple. It is very, very simple.

17:21 Jochem

And I can imagine it is hard, because a lot of the history was oral and wasn't written down. So, we don't have books or whatever to rely on.



17:33 Ross

That is what we say. We say that in academia and we say that in heathenry, but I've had this conversation with academics. [Jochem: Aha] And the issue there is, we don't know what wasn't written down. [Jochem: Ah] So, J. Stanley Hopkins is a heathen, who's also an academic. I really like a lot of the things he comes out with. He has one site called Mimisbrunnr. And he started a new publishing company called 'Hyldyr', H-Y-L-D-Y-R. And he comes out with some great one-liners. So, he really dislikes the way heathens, so many heathens, talk about Snorri Sturluson is being an unreliable witness because he was a Christian. Because his issue is that, yeah, sure, but when you look at the Edda, and certainly when you look at the original Old Norse, or I should say medieval Icelandic, where he's writing, he quotes constantly. He's almost like an academic. He had an academic process. In the Prose Edda he is constantly backing up all his assertions with old poetry, which in some cases we know which was pretty much pre-Christian. 'Pre-Christian', which is also a difficult, controversial term – but it was certainly before the Christianisation of Iceland, so before the year 1,000. [Jochem: hmm]

So, for heathens to be just throwing around words like "Oral tradition, so we don't... We've lost all this information". Have we, though? Because if you look at the body of Old Norse mythology, it's quite impressive. The amount of information that we have about the Roman and Greek religions, pagan religions... We have a lot of knowledge about it, but that's because we've had people studying and researching that. It's part of modern, western culture, so we've had hundreds of thousands of scholars researching that. We have a comparable amount of written source material in Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon... the corpus. So, you've got to be careful when you start saying "Oh, we've lost all this." We don't have evidence for what we have lost, because we don't know.

19:39 Jochem

Because it isn't studied yet, you say?

19:42 Ross

No, it's that, I mean... We try to study and investigate and theorise about what we've lost. We try and do that, but the problem is, you know, making an assertion about what isn't there is fundamentally fucking stupid. You can't study something that doesn't exist. So, that has kind of trickled down into heathenry by saying: "Oh, we don't know things!" Do we, though? Because when you compare it to other historical religions, dead religions, say like Greek and Roman historical paganisms, we actually know quite a lot about Germanic paganism. So, I think we've got to be careful with that.

One thing we *can* say when we look at archaeology or archaeological remains, so like runestones or things like picture stones, which some people might call a runestone but they don't have runes on them... They're mainly from Gotland and predate the Viking Era, and they have these fascinating, really complex symbols on. Or sometimes they have actual illustrative scenes on them, of, say, what looks like human sacrifice. Or it might look like a *blot*, or something like that. With, you know, with dudes on, and ships, and ravens. Valknuts, or what people call the Valknut... That's preserved in one of these Gotland picture stones. That information that is on there, we don't know if we have that preserved in text. So, that's one of the areas that you might look at.

Or you might look at a grave, with grave goods. And you might look at that and say, we don't think that this information that we're seeing in here, has been preserved in mythology. So, that's where



you might say, okay, well, the meaning that is in this grave... So, the meaning that is in Sutton Hoo, for instance, has been lost in oral tradition. That is a good theory. I suppose you might say the evidence is that there is information being communicated in the symbols in Sutton Hoo that we don't really have written records about. So, that would be the evidence there. But even then, one of the reasons that you can identify something as religious symbolism in archaeological material, is because we *have* little hints about it in written material.

So, for instance, there is a Christian accusation of Anglo-Saxon pagans, in that they worship the stag and the snake. And you see the stag in the symbolism, in the grave goods at Sutton Hoo. Even on the top of what looks like a sceptre - it's often called the sceptre or the whetstone. And what's really cool about that as well is that it's got four sides to it, and on each end you have four faces. And each face is different. So, it's eight altogether, which, as we know, is like a typical religious number. And is also around, I think it's the tenth or eleventh century, we have Slavic idols that have been recorded with four faces, which is a rectangular object with four faces on, and that's an idol. They seem to represent four... four deities or a deity with four faces.

So, there is this theory that maybe the Sutton Hoo whetstone sceptre has images of gods on and it's topped by a stag. So back in the '40s, when they found it, the academic study of the sceptre hadn't really tied these other things together, and they just said, oh well, it's probably a Christian symbol because the stag occurs in the Bible, or something like that. And it's only over the generations... well, the decades... that scholars have started to put one and one, or two and two, together and said, okay, this is probably a pagan symbol. But then again, we go back to that conversation before and say, well, could it have been a pagan symbol that was relevant to Christians? And that is why it survived?

And then you also talk about the snake. Why is the snake found in Old Norse runestones, which were made by Christians? It's all over the place. The runes are carved in a snake or a dragon. For many decades, or even I guess centuries to a point, it was assumed that it was Jörmungandr; and then other scholars have said, well no, it was probably the snake as a symbol of evil in the Garden of Eden. And then now we're in the situation where we say well, can't it be both? Maybe that is why it was used for such a long time, because it meant things to people on a very complex, nuanced level. So it touched on the mythology of heathenry, and it touched on the mythology of Christianity.

24:09 Rich

I'm sure there's a paper or something I read about snakes-slash-... and in heavy quotes here... dragons on the eaves of houses? Or on the entrance or something? I remember seeing something about that, and that was a recurring motif. Why would you put it on your house? For some reason that sort of... Are they being sent away, sent up to Heaven? Is it a Christian symbolism? Or is it meaning something else?

24:31 Ross

This is something we don't do in heathenry. We spend most of our time talking about whether we should reclaim the swastika...

24:38 Rich

I don't! I don't do that, Ross. That's one thing I don't...



24:41 Ross

But what we don't do is, say, talk about these old symbols, like you say; so what... If Jörmungandr is a kind of satanic symbol in... a kind of anti-cosmological symbol – you know, a demonic symbol if you like – in Nordic mythology, so, Jörmungandr is a bad thing. You know, he kills Thor; he destroys cosmos... Then why is it all over historical heathen artwork? It's *everywhere*. So that is something we need, as a community, to really kind of... I wouldn't say meditate on, but certainly discuss, and explore, and research, and maybe, yeah, maybe meditate on, maybe contemplate.

There are a lot of these symbols in... historical symbols that are just neglected. Going back to what we talked about with education, right, you know we spend a lot of our time, say, looking at runes, just because those are the most shallow, obvious, modern associations that we have with historical heathenry; and they're descended from Victorian archaeological finds. So that's why, one of the reasons why we continue to associate horned helmets with Vikings: because, in the 1800s, they were finding objects with horned helmets and they thought they were from the Viking Age; well, it turned out they were from the Vendel Period, or from the Bronze Age.

And even now, you know, I think a lot of heathens, and people outside of heathenry, are fully aware that Vikings did not have horned helmets. But at the same time, it's used in Viking media, you know, Viking-flavoured media, so you have them in films even today, you have them in computer games even today... To my horror, a couple of years ago, there was a horned Viking on the advertisement for, I think it was an American – but I think it was also associated with the Danish national museum, which is normally excellent. By the way, if you ever get chance to go to Copenhagen, go to the National Museum. It's amazing in regard to Viking archaeology and bog bodies and all the Bronze Age and the Vendel Period. It's amazing...

But they were putting on, you know, the advertisements for the exhibition they were using a Viking horned helmet; and you know it really upset a lot of scholars because there were scholars involved, obviously, in the museum, and why it was decided that it was okay to use a Viking in a horned helmet I don't know.

And then it's not surprising that people have these ridiculous Victorian ideas about the pagan past and, within heathenry, why we continue to have these shallow and erroneous ideas about the past. It's not really our fault, or it's not the fault of heathens, in a way. It's the fault of academics.

27:30 Rich

There's also an argument that, well, not an argument but a thing that I noticed when I sort of came into heathenry, that the sources that I could find most easily that were free – or legitimately free, shall we say, without pirating anything – tended to be old literature, which would probably be from the Victorian era; maybe some stuff from the '60s if you were lucky... Mostly from Victorian stuff, or even older in some cases.

So that's one side, but the other thing is I've gone deeper and realised that those are – have – many many issues with them, some are okay, some aren't and, you know, even learning the difference is one thing. But one thing I've noticed is, as I found quite recently doing some research, was the number of sagas I couldn't find any English translation for at all. Okay there may be later ones; but I thought well, surely there'll be, even if I can't find them somebody will have done it somewhere. I literally had to run through Google Translate. I could find them, but you know to get a



sort of garbled... run it through Icelandic, okay that's not right; run it through Norwegian, that's not quite right... But you would get the gist of like a paragraph at least, or like a little sort of verse.

That was amazing to me, that, to me it's not just a matter of bad historian sort of stuff from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but there's other sources that people aren't even reading.

28:49 Ross

And that's the fault of academia. It absolutely is. I've spoken to people at Aarhus University, that's a great bunch of folks there, with a really good history of the study of old Norse religion; though the current guy that mainly specialises – a fairly young guy called [Danish pronunciation] Simon Nygaard, or [English pronunciation] Simon Nygaard, I guess you would anglicise it as – and he's a former student of Terry Gunnell; and we've talked about this situation where there's so much in the study of old Norse religion that... a little bit like we were talking about oral tradition... that it is common knowledge, it's what we're teaching in the university courses on the study of old Norse religion. But we don't actually have textbooks for it, which is bizarre.

So there's a lot of articles and PhD theses and things like that - theories, and even archaeological reports of new discoveries – are not being turned into academic books that we can use on courses, so... When I did my Masters in what was called Viking Studies in Scotland, the majority of our course material was fucking academic articles. And it was a real pain in the arse for the university because they had to pay for all these access, for these different sites that controlled, that had deals with these different academic journals. It was costing, you know, a small university a hell of a lot of money just because there wasn't a publishing company that had an interest in gathering this information into a book, a textbook.

And there wasn't the publishing support going to scholars, say like Terry Gunnell or Simon Nygaard... Certainly Simon Nygaard because Terry has his own, has his books – but Simon is not being supported with being published. And at the same time, universities are cutting down on their departments. So a kind of meaningless, socially irrelevant, obscure department like the study of old Norse religion – they're one of the first to go.

So in a way you could say it's the fault of academics. But it's not Simon's fault that heathens aren't being educated in this. He's a victim of the publication system. He's a victim of politicians who are cutting down on the state-run institutions like universities, that are axing these departments.

Yeah, it's really frustrating and that is one of the reasons why you have someone like H. R Ellis Davidson's books still being in circulation, because during that period, even post-war, you had money going to departments that were researching Germanic religion, at a British university, and British publishers putting money on Germanic religion. Whereas in the last ten or fifteen years, things have really taken a nosedive like that. It's really difficult to get stuff published now.

31:46 Rich

I think with one or two notable exceptions I would absolutely agree, I think. You've got Neil Price's massive tomes, but how long is there between the first and second edition? It's been, what, a decade? Was it longer?



31:59 Ross

And you're right, I mean there are always exceptions, and he's a really good exception because he, I mean he was given ten million... Was it ten million kronor or was it something ridiculous, was it... couldn't have been ten million euro... Maybe it was Swedish kronor then. You can Google it; if you Google "ten million" and "Neil Price" and it'll come up and tell you. But he was given a fuck-tonne of money to do that second version, I believe, of the book – not even the first. And to be honest he, in the study of old Norse religion, he's not considered academically rigorous. I mean his book *The Children of Ash and Elm*, which was his last... his latest book... I mean there's a hell of a lot of mistakes in there.

32:41 Rich

Yeah, there was some criticism, I saw that. I think from J. Stanley, actually.

32:47 Ross

J. Stanley Hopkins, yeah, I mean he's quite outspoken when it comes to stuff like that. But yeah, I mean, Mathias Nordvig – he's a heathen and academic; he runs the Nordic Mythology podcast... I think he wrote in public – I'm not sure if it was on his blog, or if it actually got published in a semi-academic blog or online magazine – but he wrote a really good review of it, which was fairly balanced, but for my taste it was a little bit too supportive.

But the problem with that specific case, with Neil Price, is that he is a good scholar, there's no doubt about it. – I mean he's far senior to me, so for me to say this is almost arrogant, you know. – But I'll tell you the way it looks like from a student point of view is that he'd been given too much money. Money that should've been spread out to the different departments, and to other, better scholars. Like the Swedish scholar Stefan Brink, from Aberdeen, I think he's just retired now. He's published some really good books, but he hadn't been given the money to publish semi-popular books like Neil Price has.

And because Neil Price is, you know, like a bit of a poster boy, he was given too much money and *The Children of Ash and Elm* was rushed through the peer review process. It wasn't properly peer reviewed. That creates problems for academia because then we missed an opportunity there. Where you've got a good academic who's published good academic books, which has had an interest by, amongst heathens, specifically like *The Viking Way*. And then the next book comes out from a bunch of publishers who have seen an opportunity here, give him the money to do a populist book, which is a dream for a professor because then you've got a wider audience... You simplify your language, use more pictures, and things like that, and people like heathens love those books.

But we missed an opportunity there, with *The Children of Ash and Elm*, because a lot of it is wrong. A lot of the assertions there have been missed in peer review and were incorrect statements. Which is a real shame. I think heathens are unaware of the complications of academia in the way it works and doesn't work. So that you will have an argument online, so I've been arguing for years, saying "You've got to refer to modern university books"; and then they'll say, "Well here you go, it says in *The Children of Ash and Elm* this" – and, like, okay, but not that one. You know, you've got to kind of eat your words, or choose your battles carefully.

Yes, in some ways things are moving in the right direction. But there are a lot of problem with academia, and academia is responsible, ultimately responsible, for the lack of good knowledge, as



you say, good access to good materials; and it's also responsible for the legacy, the continued legacy of Victorian and frankly Völkisch era material in the modern heathen corpus.

So a classic one that does the rounds is *The Culture of the Teutons*, which is a two-part volume written by... is it Grønbech?

35:54 Rich

Yeah, Grønbech, yeah.

35:55 Ross

And he was Völkisch, you know, he was writing in the '20s and '30s; yeah, he was an academic, yeah, sure – but he was an academic during the 1920s during the German nationalist movement, and he was writing about all kinds of stuff. You know, he did not have the academic rigour that you have today. He didn't have access to the archaeological finds that have... You know this was before Sutton Hoo, he was writing a lot of his books, for a start, you know.

So you've got to put things in perspective as a heathen, and as heathens we do not have critical thinking, and that is one of... go back to symbols, that is one of the big problems that we have. It's not just the lack of education, but a lack of critical thinking. We are victims. So much of what modern heathenry is, they are symptoms of being victims of other ideologies.

It is really tragic to be a sociologist and to study contemporary heathenry and often, from my point of view, to be like a closet heathen, and to be asked by the police and say, you know, what is the problem with heathens? Why are there so many heathens that are doing this stuff with the far right? And I have to say, it's because they don't know better, because they're being infiltrated, and the dialogue, the narrative, in the heathen community is being constantly steered by the alt-right to denying the alt-right.

That's exactly what the alt-right and far-right want. It wants us to talk about what we are not. What it *doesn't* want is to talk about being constructive, and looking at historical material, and like I said, kind of philosophising on it, and trying to take life-changing and life-affirming information from the past – which is the claimed reason for heathenry. We claim, as heathens, that we are focused on nature, and that we celebrate the knowledge and wisdom of the past. But what we do is we spend most of our time saying what we aren't.

We are not a modern political movement. Okay, great. Can we then get back to reconstructing the old religion? Apparently we can't. Apparently we don't do that.

38:09 Rich

Well of course, I've seen in other sort of heathen circles where people are now deriding the term 'reconstructionist'. "You're not one of *those* people, who bangs on about the same old five sources – we have to go beyond that now." And I'm not quite sure where that ethos has come from – again, I mean I presume it's coming from a good place, but I don't think it's particularly helpful. I mean if we're not reconstructing then what are we doing? Are we just... I mean obviously there are gaps, but it's a difficult conversation to have.



38:37 Ross

Yeah, and I understand where that comes from, and one of the... It's a complex argument. I mean I would call myself a reconstructionist, but I would also call myself a feminist, and that's a similar term. A lot of women, young girls I've spoken to, said, "Ah, I'm not a *feminist*" – as if feminism is something, you know, like a 'feminazi', like, you know, these extreme women who are, you know, anti-man.

That's not what I was raised to believe a feminist was. And that's why I would call myself a feminist. But I understand that feminism means something else to certain other people. I get that, and you have to be careful: you can't just go around screaming "I'm a feminist! If you're not a feminist fuck you!" You know, you have to be nuanced about this and be aware of what symbols, what words symbolise, what words communicate, and it's the same with reconstructionism.

You know, in heathenry if you just go around screaming, "I'm a reconstructionist and if you don't like that then you're an idiot", you know, like, okay – but what do you *mean*? Because this other person might see reconstructionism as meaning something else.

So it's like with Odinism, you know, you get a lot of... well, not a lot but I've seen it several times where you have someone coming into a heathen group online saying, "I'm an Odinist – but I'm not an *Odinist*. I worship Odin as my main deity, and I'm not going to let Odinists and *völkisch* and far-right heathens take that word from me." Okay, but, if you go around telling people you're an Odinist in the heathen community, you know you're going to be misunderstood, right? And they're like, "Yeah, but that's their problem!" No, it's not. It's *your* problem, because you're, you know, you're not being sensitive to these things, and that's where we are with reconstructionism.

I definitely believe, from an insider and outsider, with heathenry it is a religion that claims to reconstruct an old religion. So I think, as you say, it's becoming more and more the doctrine in mainstream heathenry that we don't need to try to relive the old religion. We don't need to be, you know, dress up as Vikings, in chain mail. We don't need to focus on child sacrifice or something like that, you know? Or even animal sacrifice. It's like, yeah, that's a good point, but you're still fundamentally reviving or reconstructing a historical religion. You're not coming up with, you know, you're not inventing new deities. You know, you're still using old words, from old mythology.

You know, so in that respect heathenry is fundamentally a reconstruction or revival. It is. But sure, I accept that we are not *only* doing reconstruction. And how far you go to reconstruct the old religion is a really important dialogue to have, absolutely. It is an important dialogue to say, you know, do we need to do animal sacrifice, because that was a fundamental part of historical heathenry? That's just a fact. Do we need to do that now? I dunno. Do we? Let's talk about it.

41:52 Rich

I think one of the reasons perhaps – I don't know how you feel about this, Jochem – was the idea that reconstructionists were self-appointed gatekeepers about what is and isn't heathenry. I think that was, I think, so well if someone says, oh, well, I worship this deity – no evidence for that in the sources, so you can't. You're doing it wrong. That seems to be the ethos behind it.

42:16 Jochem

Well, when it comes to religion I think that is a personal thing. So no-one can dictate to anyone what they should or shouldn't believe.



I would like to thank you both for today. Our next episode will be Ross' Rant, part 2. In that episode our special guest Ross will rant some more and share some thoughts on the future of heathenry. Topics that we will discuss are: narratives vs reality, symbols & branding, real heathens & heathen-adjacent people, social media & young heathen girls on Instagram, prejudice, and the future. It promises to be another interesting episode, so please join us next time.

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