



Transcript Episode 22: Cult of the dead

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00:40 Jens

Welcome to the Wyrd Thing podcast episode 22. This is the last episode in our little 3-episode-series about ancestors. My name is Jens, I'm your host today. And I'm accompanied by two guests: Rich.

00:57 Rich

Hello.

00:59 Jens

And special guest again is Ulrike.

01:02 Ulrike

Hello.

01:03 Jens

So, Ulrike. You've joined us before in the episode about matronae, so we'll skip the introductions in detail here. And anyone wants to listen about that, just revert back to our matronae episode in season two. But today we're going to talk about ancestors a little bit about ancestors in ancient times, heathen times, but then coming to modern times and to discuss what they mean for us these days and what we know about them, how we approach them, what they mean to us, and so on. And to get us started into the topic, Ulrike, could you please explain to us where the German word for ancestors, the „Ahnen“, comes from?

01:46 Ulrike

Yeah, sure I can. The modern German word *Ahne* is an Old High German word *ano*, A - N - O, and it's supposed to be a derivation from a Proto-Germanic term, *ano*, *ana*. And it's not sure these Proto-Germanic words are reconstructed, so we don't have any documented usage. But the Old High German word is *ano*. And there's also an interesting term for grandchild, „Enkel“ in modern High German, which is the Old High German „Eneclin“, which means something like 'small ancestor' or 'small grandfather', something in the way. So there is an Old High German route for this modern High German word, *Ahne*.

02:45 Jens

And there is a link between the grandparents and the grandchildren.

02:50 Ulrike

It's supposed link. Yes. Yeah, it's a link, which is understandable. But, you know, semantics are not always certain proof for something. So just by this link alone, we cannot say: oh, people thought that they would return in their grandchildren or something like that. But maybe it's a hint to the idea



that there was some connection, maybe also to the fact that people remembered their ancestors or their predecessors.

03:21 Jens

Thank you, Ulrike. Rich, could you give us a bit of an English point of view onto that?

03:24 Rich

Well, on just on the mentioning of the word *Inkling*, I was incredibly intrigued to just come across some very fascinating older derivations of that word which mention it. Going back to the idea of having an idea of something was what it means now. But in older forms, *Inkling* meant to there's a Middle English word „inklin“ to mention in the low voice to tell the truth. And even further back in the Proto Germanic „Inca“. It's 'grief' or 'regret', perhaps 'to miss', which is an interesting connection.

But in terms of ancestor it seems to have a different derivation. Etymological root, if you will. So it comes from Old French, which again comes from Latin those who have gone before. So there's ancestor in English but goes, so you get sort of antecedent to go before to seed. And so it seems to follow a very different route, even though they end up as a similar place perhaps. Which is fascinating.

04:24 Ulrike

The interesting thing is when you said *inkling*, I would translate *inkling* to German with something like „Ahnung“. So there is a similarity in the words, but you know, linguistics, it's such a complex field and I'm not very firm in this. So I can just have a yeah, just, just about an *inkling* or an idea or I can be fascinated by it, but I can't really explain it, which is a pity, by the way.

04:53 Jens

So we're on quite thin ice, but I think it's nice to have a look at the words in the very beginning and then proceed to the meanings. So what do we know about ancestor cult really back in history as far as we can grasp it? And so that's basically Roman times and a bit later.

05:15 Ulrike

Shall I start?

05:16 Jens

Oh yes. Please.

05:21 Ulrike

In terms of Roman religion, we have a lot of ancestor cult going on. I don't know if it's interesting to go into detail here, but let's just say that ancestor cult was mostly done by the elite who used ancestor cult to represent their status. But it was also a religious thing. And later there we have the *parentalia*. Actually, I don't know how old they are, but the Romans had a festival for their death, the *parentalia*, which took place in February from 13 to 22nd of February. And there they had meals on the graves. If they had graves, and it was the time to remember your ancestors or your family predecessors. It was generally an important thing for elite Roman people to have children and to have sons because they were supposed to.. to remember you. That was especially



important not only to have an heir, but also to have someone to remember you. And that was the purpose of the parentalia.

It's possible that this tradition was transported to the regions the Romans controlled and colonised. We have no certain proof that the Germanic tribes did some form of ancestor cult. We know there is a cult of the dead, but ancestor cult as such is not documented clearly. Again, we have ideas and we can say: okay, this hints to the idea of an ancestor cult, but there is, as far as I know, at least on the continent, there is no certain proof of an ancestor cult. Sure, there was a cult of the dead, but no ancestor cult. But maybe we have to talk about the difference between ancestral cult and cult of the dead.

07:41 Jens

I think it's important that you explain to us what you mean by 'cult of the dead'. Because I have this suspicion you don't mean what I might naively understand by that.

07:53 Ulrike

I don't mean death cult. I mean..

07:57 Jens

I know. But I think it requires some explanation.

08:02 Ulrike

Well, I would say that ancestral cult or cult of the ancestors. You know, every ancestor is a dead person. But not all dead persons are ancestors. And not every ritual or not every cult you have for the dead is ancestral cults. So if you have a small community and someone dies, then you have rituals which are part of a cult of the dead. So you look after the dead, you hold rituals, you tend to them, you give them a grave, you look after the grave, you do certain things. This is cult of the dead.

And an ancestral cult means that you have a very, maybe biological, but also other very strong relationship to the dead person. And that you think that this dead person has some sort of influence over your life. So how you deal with this person has a direct influence on your life and your wellness. So ancestral cult has a very individual ring to it. In my opinion. It does not have to be biological relationship, which you have to the dead person, but some sort of more intense relationship. And there has to be the idea that the relationship to the ancestor has an impact on your life, and you have to do the cult regularly after the usual or regular cult of the dead rituals. So ancestral cult is more intense than cult of the dead. Does that make sense?

09:57 Jens

Yes. So I understand some differences there. The one thing is cult of the dead means to me, we cope with the fact that people around us die to whom we have a relationship, die, and keep remembering them. We do things about this death. We cope with this and these are people from our community. Whereas ancestors are people who have influenced us personally on a more direct level.

10:27 Ulrike

Yes. And also ancestral culture. It's lasting, you know. You do it year after year after year. And cult of the dead. These are rituals. They come to an end at some point. That one is in his grave. And



you know, you have some remembrance days or memorial days, like 30 days after the death. But then at some point the rituals are done and life resumes as normal. But ancestral cult means you resume the rituals again and again, with the hope of strengthening the relationship to the ancestor in order to have a better life or get a better harvest. Or I don't know what people hoped for in these days, or do hope for in modern times.

11:17 Jens

Which also means that may be passed on over generations. Whereas you can't really pass on the cult of the dead over the generations, because for the younger people who didn't meet this person, it doesn't have this meaning. This was someone who I knew in our community.

11:35 Ulrike

Yes, yes. And this is why the idea of divine ancestors might come from. Like there was this chieftain or this king, or this queen or this lady who was very important. And then she died. But people thought, oh, maybe she can help us get better harvests. Or maybe when they have died, this illness went away. And so it was their help which fought the illness, and then they go on offering to them after their death. And then these ancestors get a sort of divine status. There are scholars who think that we can ask questions about the way of making dead humans to gods. I think it was Saxo, or Adam from Bremen who did this. And there are ideas about gods who have been humans and were turned into deities by the people. And this was a process which happened through ancestral cult. This, of course, only refers to elite persons. It's not your auntie who can, or your dead grandma who is to be turned into a goddess or something like that. These were very political processes.

13:02 Rich

I'm struck by a similarity to people claim to be sons of Ragnar Lodbrok, even though he didn't exist.

13:09 Ulrike

Yeah, yeah.

13:09 Rich

Yeah, but but. Or they weren't even related to each other. The people who claimed to be his sons. They might have meant it in a different way. They didn't mean they were biologically descended from him, but they were embodying his spirit of this mythical cool guy for I want.

13:25 Ulrike

Yeah. It's a bit sad because you think: okay, why can't you be your own person? But I have no idea why people, yeah, need to do that. But people have idols and people have role models. I don't know, maybe this is a similar thing.

13:40 Rich

Yeah, yeah. Or in the same way that people think of, um, film stars or this film star is the Marlon Brando of today, but it doesn't mean he's actually descended from Marlon Brando or anything like that. So that might be. Or when we project back over and we say: oh, well, this person was famous in the stage in the 16th century. They were the, you know, they were the Brad Pitt of their day.



Yeah. Clearly weren't. Well, no, but I mean, it's a very simplistic example, but. You imagine that extending into a religious perspective, it adds a lot more weight to it.

14:13 Ulrike

Yeah. Look at, for example, the Ynglinga saga where they say: okay, Odin is the father of this family or this dynasty. So they're using I'm not sure whether it's simply a political thing to legitimate leadership or if it's actually, you know, some form of, yeah, divine ancestor, an ancestor who, you know, was so revered and was so important that he, like ancient hero got a semi-divine or divine status.

14:50 Jens

So it worked both ways. So the ancestors were made into deities, and on the other hand, the dynasties tried to trace back their roots back to the gods.

15:03 Ulrike

Yeah, they legitimated the leadership with this trace back to one god. So it was not someone who said: oh, I want to be king, and I need to legitimate my leadership. So I need to invent an ancestor who was a god or deity. But I think it was a very processual thing. And also it was a very rare thing. Of course, it was not what Farmer John would have done, but it was an elite phenomenon.

15:33 Jens

Yes, absolutely. We understand that this very long lasting ancestor lines were a thing of the nobility. Do we have any idea about how common people thought about their ancestry?

15:46 Ulrike

Well on the continent, sadly, we only have sources which have been written by clerics. So we just see, you know, like the negative side on it, but they don't. And it's about the cult of the dead, not the ancestor code. But clerics call it, for example, the offers to the dead people. „Sacrificia mortuorum“, so offerings for the dead. And we have reason to believe that it was not only a cult of the dead thing, but also an ancestor cult thing. But again, this is just a theory.

So. These clerics, they had nothing against cult of the dead rituals as such. If they are in a Christian context and canonised, and if they have a liturgical aspect as well, then it's okay. So clerics said it's not the idea of doing rituals for your dead people. It's you just have to do it the right way. So I think we can say that people commemorated their dead, which of course have been their parents or their grandparents or their children or their brothers and sisters. So in those very small communities, of course, this was family. It was a family duty to do these rituals well and to do it in the right way, also in the old way, for a very long time.

Up to modern times, there were two ways of commemorating the dead and doing death rituals.

There was the Christian, the church, the liturgical way, and there were familiar or familial celebrations, and those were not always the same. And the church regarded those familial festivities with some sort of chagrin because they could not prohibit it. And it didn't get rooted out. But people remember their dead family, they remember their grandparents and their parents, and the church did not try to prohibit that because I think it's, is it a human thing to remember those or think of those who have died?



18:14 Jens

And I think it is. We see it basically all over the world. If you look at different cultures, it's not our focus of today, but you find similar things I would say on all continents.

18:26 Rich

Definitely. I've just come across a little note here where it says, um, as heathens were converted to Christianity and the church had to be quite strict with some things about them. Yes, you can have a ceremony for your dead, but you must not regard the dead indiscriminately as holy. It was a particular thing, and there's some suspicion that some of the offerings to the dead were at former heathen worship places. So there was a little bit of blurring of the lines. We're still Christian, but obviously we'll give offerings to our dead in the church. No, no, that's you've got to stop that. And there were also people told to, certainly in the early church, they were not supposed to offer to saints as some kind of like lower tier of God. Although power of intercession in the church, it gets a lot more blurry later on. But that's interesting to note that that kind of blurring between worship and veneration and I think is something we're going to come on to very shortly. It's a fascinating sort of areas where it blurs the line between the dead. And are you worshipping them? Are you offering to them or offering to that to them to take a message to the gods for you? There's that again.

19:39 Jens

We will come back to that, Rich, I promise to you. But before that I would speak very shortly about the matronae as well, because I know that this is just one of the topics which is very dear to Ulrike, and I think it does fit in here. So how do you see the matronae in relationship to the ancestors and to the gods?

20:02 Ulrike

Uh, yes. This is a very good question. And I think no one can really answer that from what we know of the Ubian matronae, which is the phenomenon which is most talked about in my circles. We know what people thought of their function by their bynames. They're always the matronae, and they have byname, which tells us something about how people saw them or what they needed from them. There are lots and lots of bynames for the matronae. And some of them make us think that they have been ancestral figures, and the term matronae, it means something like noble ladies.

But of course there is the „Mater“ thing, which does not only mean biological mother, but which is also a title. For example, the Latin term 'Terra Mater' as mean goddess of that land or of that region, non-Roman goddess of that region. So *Mater* is a title, but it also has this aspect of motherhood. So yes, a few of the matronae bynames can be interpreted as ancestral figures or kinship names. You know, like these are the mothers of the people who lived there and there. But a lot of the matronae also have different bynames which are interpreted in a functional way. So they do this and that. They protect us from from evil magic, or they are the mothers of this river or something like that. So some matronae can be interpreted as ancestral figures, and they are, of course, divine.

I am not a big fan of divine hierarchies. Some this is a semi god, or this is a full god or something like that, or this is a high god or, uh, I'm not sure what to make of it because people believe that you have divine powers, then this is a divine person or divine figure. So I'm not competent enough to decide when is a person or a figure a deity, and when it's, when it is, when are they only divine? So yeah, matronae, some of them are ancestral figures. They are certainly regarded as divine. So



is the matronae cult proof for ancestor cult in the Ubian regions, or with some Germanic or Celtic tribes, maybe. It doesn't put a stop to this sentence.

22:48 Jens

A very definite maybe. We can't tell for absolutely sure. But what we can tell is that, ancestors and gods are not excluding categories, that there are connections, that there are overlaps. There are separate terms, of course, but they can also mix up in various ways.

23:06 Ulrike

That they can in certain cases. I wouldn't say that this is a regular thing that ancestors get a divine status.

23:18 Jens

The other summary about ancestor cult in old times is that we assume it was a prestige thing for nobility, that they've done it for very long lines. We assume that common people did some kind of ancestor cult for a few generations. So they probably didn't do this really long lines of ancestry back then, but those who they knew or who people knew they knew were still remembered. And they had this kind of ancestor cult there in the past times. And I think this is the time when I would like to switch back to the present. To discuss the topic, what the term 'ancestor' means for us as modern heathens. Rich, would you like to give us a few ideas of yours about that?

24:08 Rich

Sure. I think there seems to be two different schools of thought, at least in modern history, in my experience, where people when they say when they talk about the ancestors, they often have this romantic idea of the distant past and the Ur-heathens before Christianity. They genuinely believe that they're making offerings to. That's more like a naive early new entrant into heathen research perspective.

I've seen other people talk about their much more recent ancestors, grandparents or deceased people who were meaningful to them and crucially, not always saying biological ancestors, but ancestors of blood and ancestors of spirit. Because there may be somebody who had a profound influence on your life, who you're not physically related to, but you would want to remember them. And I think that's a really crucial point. At least that's how I've seen it. I've seen people with some pictures of revered sort of ancestors, recent ancestors, in the last hundred years, with pictures on their altars, for example. But that is quite common with many moderns. At least ones that I've seen. Would that bear out your experience, Ulrike?

25:25 Ulrike

Yeah, I have made a similar experiences. Like people - adopting is not the right term there - but people choose ancestors, or dead persons as ancestors because they had an impact on their lives. And they want to remember them because they are important for their lives or for what they became. I think this is an interesting parallel to the idea of special dead or important dead in the past when you said: oh, this was a good leader, we will remember him and he's good for our community, so let's give him offerings so he'll keep on doing good things for our community even after death. And it's a bit of a parallel thing to remember persons who have been important for you. Ancestor cult also means giving offerings or, you know, doing cultic stuff. You know, it wouldn't be a cult if you wouldn't be doing cultic stuff.



So just remember a person does not make it a cult in my experience. But if you have a picture of them on your altar and you offer them a glass of beer or mead or, I don't know, their favourite food or something like that, then this is definitely an ancestor cult. And I think this is important because this is a very deliberate step to saying it's not only blood connection which is important to us and which makes us to the persons that we are.

But there's also cultural influence. There are also people we meet or we hear from or where people get their idols. If that's people who are musicians or artists or just teachers they had. It's not only the blood connection, maybe not the blood connection at all. You can have an ancestor altar just with people who are important to you, who you are not biologically related to. This is completely okay because it comes down to having a relationship to your dead. And whether your dead are your grandparents or not, it's not really relevant.

27:48 Jens

While we were preparing for this podcast, I was reading a book by the Swiss-German author Kim de l'Horizon, which is basically in Swiss-German. But funny enough, in the end it switches to English. In this book, the narrator explores their relationship to their biological female ancestors, mainly the mother and the grandmother, but also other female ancestors. And I just want to quote these two sentences here. It's not a heathen book, but it was surprisingly fitting to this context. And the quote is: „Writing this I have come into resignation with my languages, our bodies, and all the ancestors that made both bodies and languages. And of course, I don't mean ancestors in a biological way. Virginia Woolf is as much my mother as you are.“ It was quite surprising to read this and thinking: oh yes.

28:51 Rich

I think it's a really good point though. I think it is vital when I, you know, when people talk about, um, people who have had profound influence on you, whether they are people you idolised or attempted to model your behaviour of, you could certainly make a very strong case to broaden the context of ancestors. Those who came before, because ancestor doesn't say blood relation, it just says those who came before. That's the actual etymology. I think that's really, really key.

29:19 Ulrike

People seem to need roots and I think this is a legitimate wish to say I'm not without roots. And I have people who came before me, who made me who I am or who influenced me so that I became who I am. This is the wish to connect to your ancestors in modern times. And the religious aspect of that would be dead people, they are not dead and gone. They are still somewhere and they have an influence on our lives. So we'd better offer them so we can have a good life, or have a good harvest, or have peace or something like that.

The religious aspect would be we offer those dead people so they're not angry with us, and if they're well-meaning, this will be good for us. And there's also the wish to have roots and to know there are people who root for me, even if they are dead, because they made me who I am, or they helped me become who I am. These are two motives for ancestor cults.

30:26 Rich

It's interesting your choice of words there, because I've used almost exactly those words that you've said there in the opening to rituals. Particularly if it's an event at the welcoming sort of ritual as a, you know, think about the reason you're stood at this heathen gathering or whatever, and all



the people who helped you to be at this point. Be it family, teachers or whatever. And I literally say that to think about all the people who made you who you are and why you're here now, standing in this ritual space. That'll be something different for everyone. But you can say that. And people always get that. And I try to stress that it's not just your parents. It's all those many, many people who may have assisted you along your path to this particular time and place. Yeah.

31:12 Ulrike

That's interesting. So maybe we have the same aspect on some things here.

31:19 Rich

Absolutely. But I'm sure we're going to disagree on a few others. Yeah, probably as Jens has hinted at already.

31:27 Jens

Yeah. You had a question there, Rich. And I think that was a good time to go deeper into this one.

31:33 Rich

Into the difference between veneration and worship.

31:38 Jens

Exactly. And especially for those who are not native English speakers, I think it helps us if you explain to us the difference in meaning. Because I tend to use them quite interchangeably, I have to admit.

31:51 Rich

Well, I was looking at this last night and a bit this morning. Yes, in dictionary English they are almost interchangeable. But looking deeper into it, I'm going to unfortunately have to rely on Christian terminology. The difference between the two: worship is only for gods, whereas veneration can be almost anything.

32:12 Jens

Which of course requires you to have that very same hierarchy, which Ulrike said before she doesn't want to establish.

32:22 Rich

Well, true. But also you have to understand, where do we draw the line with God? Do we say that is he a Vanir? That's easy. But, um, some within heathen they venerate or worship Fenrir or Loki, and others would say, well, no, they are not a god, or they're this or that. So it gets into quite complex details straight away.

32:46 Jens

Oh, it's quite simple. They are doing it wrong, Rich.

32:52 Rich

Well, everyone's doing it wrong. That's. Which is what makes it wonderful.



32:55 Jens

But in our pre-chat, you gave me an explanation, which I have to admit, I found much easier to understand. And that was that you explained if you worship someone, you have the expectation that this, let's just say neutrally, this entity you're worshipping is able to interact back into your life to make changes there. Whereas veneration would be to pay respects, to remember, to honour them, but not to have the expectation that this entity somehow changes things in this reality. Or did I misunderstand you there?

33:32 Rich

Yes. Now, this is more my own personal thing I can't really prove. So we're heavily into. If you want to sound the UPG-claxon, feel free. So my view is that you worship. Sometimes people call it the gift cycle and that kind of thing. Or worship those entities that have the power of intercession, which is the word. They can intercede in this reality in some way, whereas you would venerate, sort of, and give offerings to without any expectation, but just because you felt it was right to do so, sort of ancestors and things like that.

I put it down to the point of intercession because are you worshipping grandpa? Are you praying to him that he will do something for you in your life? Or would you pray to a god in the hope that they might help you in your struggles in life, or whatever? So that brings it into a sharp contrast there. You might talk to or perhaps seek guidance, maybe. But I don't think in my personal theology that ancestors, in whatever way you want to frame that, have the power of intercession, if that would, is, um, clear enough for non-English speakers.

34:46 Jens

It's clear enough for me, as you explained it to me, yes. And I feel the urge to break the news to you that I know of several heathens who don't think that the gods have this power of intercession. So in your terms they only venerate the gods, but don't worship the gods. And in the groups where I am active, we simply don't care who thinks what about that. We just do it together. And it's very up to the people how they expect the action from the other side.

35:18 Rich

I will say that I'm not prescriptive. If other people have different perspectives on heathenry, I don't say: well, you're doing it wrong. I actually don't, because I know that I'm actually in the minority on this. Many people do, from their own perspective, in their own words, worship the ancestors. And feel that their ancestors near or far, have much more interest in them and are more likely to intercede than any god or gods.

35:41 Jens

In our pre-chat, Ulrike, we had a short talk about your personal experiences with ancestral healing. And I would like you to tell us a little bit about that.

35:53 Ulrike

Yeah. Ancestral healing is a procedure or a process which is about coming into relationship with your ancestors. First and foremost to your blood ancestors. In their specific lines, you know, mother, mother's mother, mother's mother's mother and so on, and with the other lines as well, in order to reconnect and heal certain things which are not perceived to be in order in that line. So this is a highly psychological and I wouldn't say esoteric, but spiritual practice.



Which is not religious in that sense. You don't have to be of a certain religion. You just have to have the wish to reconnect with all your ancestors. And to help those ancestors who are not at peace to get into that state of peace. Of course, this requires that you believe that first of all, there is a life or some sort of existence after death, and that some people who don't die a good death or for some reasons, don't get into this ancestral state after their death, need help, and can be helped by those ancestors who are at peace and who have the kind of power to do that. So this is a very complex idea of relation to your ancestors.

You do it in a trance and with regular offerings, and if you're not a religious person, you can say it's some sort of self-empowerment. You know, you feel like there is some intergenerational trauma or something like that. And you can maybe help yourself with this idea of helping those ancestors who are not at peace. It can be a very powerful instrument if there really is intergenerational trauma. Or if you are a person with trauma, then I'm not sure if it's a good thing to do on your own. Maybe it would be better to seek professional help first. That's just a precautionary sentence to say. I did one of those ancestral healing workshops which has been conducted by an US American, and it was a very interesting and very moving experience. And I also did these rituals at home with other lines, ancestral lines.

And for me it was a very liberating and very moving experience. But I don't think it can be put into a religious context. I wouldn't advise that. So it's very much an individual experience, which I made on a certain view of that people, and I wouldn't generalise that, and I'm not sure if it's advisable just to do it on a whim. So I'm not sure if it's relevant to this context in the end. If you're interested in that kind of thing, maybe the person who did this workshop, his name is Daniel Foor, and he has a book "Ancestral Medicine", I think also as a website with some free lectures or something like that. You can listen to it, but I wouldn't put it into a religious context.

39:32 Jens

I think it's highly relevant. That's why I asked, actually, because we spoke about that before. Yeah. The one thing I take from that is that some people are convinced that there is interaction in both ways. It's not only the ancestors interceding with our reality. But also as having an effect back on the ancestors. Which was completely news to me at some point, but I very soon discovered that there are some heathens who integrate that into their religious practice.

40:06 Ulrike

Yes. And for example, Rich talked about, you know, getting guidance or something like that from your ancestors. This might be something of that sort. If you have a problem or questions, who can you turn to? Your powerful and well-meaning ancestors are interested in your well-being, so it's a good idea to ask them for guidance or for help or something like that.

This means that you also have to invest in this relationship. And you can do this in different ways, like having an ancestor altar or, you know, doing regular trance sessions in order to contact those. There are many ways in which you can connect with your ancestors. It does not necessarily include offerings. But personally I think offerings always help with everything. It's always good to give a gift or to, to give something, if you want a relationship. Whether it's thoughts or a glass of beer or a meal or just a chat, you know relation always relies on giving and taking.

41:22 Jens

Absolutely. And I would also like to add to your disclaimer when you said intergenerational trauma, because it reminds me of trauma and things like shamanic journeys or however you call it. And they may have the side effect of breaking up such trauma. So always be careful. Don't try this



alone at home for the very first time. And if there is a big trauma. Get professional help. Yeah. Next to this, you have also done some ancestry research in your life, Ulrike.

42:00 Ulrike

Yes, I have, I have done family research or genealogy. I just try again. Yes. Genealogical research since I was a teenager because I come from a very large family and I always had a very deep interest in local history. So I started with connecting my family history with local history. This is highly interesting. And there's a never ending line of questions which come up, and it's very interesting to follow your ancestors down the centuries. It's very entertaining and very interesting. And as someone who is very, very interested in history, the fascination never ends. Also this is not done in a religious context. I do not try to legitimate my existence with these ancestors or something like that. It's just that I'm interested in how people lived in history.

And if I have this connection that I know these are my forebears, then it's even more interesting to me because I think I can better relate if I know there is some other connection to those people. Of course, people had interesting lives in the past, and people had lives of which we know nothing. And I have found a very few very, very interesting and moving things. For example, I have an ancestor from the 17th century who died without children and who was very rich, and he bequeathed a very vast amount of money to children of his siblings. And he made a foundation. And he said, the money from this foundation is to go to the children and children's children of his siblings in order to get them an education.

This foundation is actually still intact. And when I found this connection to this ancestors and found about this foundation, my eldest daughter started at university and she did her education in the Netherlands. And of course that was not very cheap. So I applied to that foundation and we actually got help with educating our eldest daughter in the Netherlands. And I thought that was a very moving experience to get this connection to someone who has been dead for 350 years and who is still helping us to raise our daughter. That was very moving for me, and also very practical, because, you know, it's not easy to raise three kids and get them university education. But there you are. So not a religious thing, but very moving and emotional experience for me.

44:57 Jens

I have a very few practical questions about that. The one is, how far do you manage to trace the lines back into the past?

45:07 Ulrike

This is very different. According to the lines, I have a few lines who I cannot trace back further than the 17th century, because I have no way of proving connections to their parents by ways of documents. So at some point everyone will come to a stop because they can't prove who their ancestors father was because no one wrote that down.

So I think most or a lot of people, if they do the research, will get to the early modern age. You know, like 17th, 18th century. It is very probable that you get there. But I also traced a few lines of my husband's family back to very early times. And of course, this is not exact science. Very often you rely on documents which are not always reliable. And of course, in genealogy there's a phrase which is like „Mater semper certum est“ mist, which means the mother is always certain. But of course, you never know for sure: is the father who is documented here? Is he the father in earnest, or was that someone else? So it's not exact science, genealogy.

And you can get back quite far if you have, like nobility and your ancestry or very infamous or famous people. But if that's not the case, if your forebears just were like farmers in some place



somewhere, then it's not very plausible to go back to, you know, I don't know, Frankish times or for example, if they say, well, my ancestor is Karl der Große. Okay. I think Karl der Große he had many kids. And so it's probable that a lot of people living today are his descendants. But can you prove it? And once again, is this relevant? Why is it so important to have Karl der Große as your ancestor, or Widukind, for that matter.

47:27 Jens

To finally reach back into heathen times, you would need to get that far, at least in North Germany. In England you need to reach back even a bit further. And so from the 1200 years, more or less, you need to span the first three hundreds kind of well documented. And then the documentation becomes very scarce. In Germany, the 30 Years' War destroyed quite a lot of church books. And of course, local churches which burned down, were flooded where the rats eat the paper or whatever. And I think in England it's kind of similar with the Civil War at a similar period.

48:07 Ulrike

Exactly.

48:08 Jens

Also the usual dangers to documents. So you just get about these 300 years and then you maybe can do some cherry picking on some lines. I've done a little bit of preparation about this. I would have assumed that the generation span, so the the time you say this is an average generation, would be 25 years. But it seems that it's more 30 years, which the internet told me. So to get back to Charlemagne times, heathen times in North Germany, it's 40 generations. Which means in terms of potential biological ancestors, that we have 10 trillion 99 billion 511 million 727 thousand and 766 ancestors.

48:57 Ulrike

Yeah. Which we of course don't have. Yeah.

48:59 Rich

Some of those are the same people, though, aren't they?

49:03 Jens

With the same world population of maybe 300 million at that time. And they were not really connected because I think at that time there was not really interchange between, for example, the Americas and Europe, Africa, Asia. So for the average European, probably the question is not: is Charlemagne your ancestor? The question is: how many times is he your ancestor and which ratio is healthy there?

49:29 Ulrike

Yes.

49:31 Rich

Well, yes. There's the thing. I think it's called the isopoint as a particular sort of bottleneck in terms of the European population, where everybody in Europe is in some way a descendant of



Charlemagne, in the same way that everybody in Europe is in some way a descendant of everybody from the ninth century or thereabouts.

49:51 Jens

My experience with some people do ancestry research is that they do a lot of cherry picking. So this is the one line I'm proud of. I try to trace back sometimes it's the all male line. But if you go for your complete biological ancestors, it's almost impossible to know all of them for more than a few generations.

50:13 Ulrike

Yes.

50:14 Rich

Well, I think with genealogy and tracing your family tree, you have to pick a thread. Otherwise, as you say, it becomes impossible. A great uncle of mine, he, he picked a particular thread that was easy to follow because it has a very distinctive surname, which he found it was easy to trace that particular surname through the church records. I think he suspected he traced it back to the 13th century because it was quite a distinctive name, but that was as far back as he could go.

50:41 Ulrike

I mean, I have been doing this for almost 40 years now, so I think I would be able to put up a family tree with all the lines for about 9 or 10 generations, with names or first names. I could do that, but it took a lot of research, and I have to say it has become a lot easier with the internet. But there are also more traps to fall into and a lot of research, which is not well done. So you have to be very careful if you do ancestral family research on the internet. But that's an aside. Yeah.

The question is: why do we want to trace back our ancestry to a certain person? This is like, why do we have to be proud on one family line and not proud on the other? I think it's a very simple question. Can we be proud of something that we did nothing for? I mean, that I was born in this family, I did not plan that, and I had nothing to do with that, to say it plainly. So there's nothing to be proud of. I can only be proud of what I did myself.

So I think the problem many people have with ancestor cult in modern heathenry is that there are people who want to legitimate their way of heathens with their ancestry, like: oh, my ancestors were Vikings. So Odin is the godhed, which I pray. I never understood that, but maybe I wasn't able to understand it because I never felt the need to legitimate my way of heathenry. But I think this is the problem which some people have with ancestral cult. They say ancestry does not make you a better person, or does not legitimate anyone to be a heathen. And of course not. Anyone who chooses to be can be heathen.

52:53 Jens

And to reach back with your ancestry lines into heathen times, you need to cross a lot of people who were probably Christian. But I think it's a good point to switch back to what ancestor cult means for modern, inclusive heathenry. And the one question I have there is, is it obligatory for a modern heathen to do ancestor cult?

53:19 Ulrike

I'd say no.



53:20 Jens

Ulrike says no. Rich, something from you?

53:24 Rich

I wouldn't say so. Yeah. I don't think it is essential to do it. There is no canonical thing that makes you a heathen. So, you know, I think a lot of people who are heathen think, well, you must read runes. You must do seidhr, you must do magic. No, you don't have to do any of those things. If you look at the actual historical, most people didn't do those things.

And even at the most simple level, you could say, well, I don't want to have an ancestor cult, but you want to remember your parents or whoever's passed away and died. You can certainly do that. And when you explain it in terms of after a funeral where people raise a glass of beer or whatever to someone to remember them, I don't think anybody of any religious or non-religious persuasion would have an issue with that at all to say: well, remember so-and-so, they were great.

54:10 Ulrike

Yeah. And this is a cult of the dead ritual. It is not an ancestral cult. Yeah, I'd say no, it is not obligatory, because why should it be? I think the idea of ancestry, biological, non-biological, whatever is so diverse and people are so diverse, maybe they don't feel the need to relate to their dead. For me personally, it's a very important part of my heathenry, but I'm not in a place where I can say, you should do that or else you're not a heathen. This is not a.. this is not something anyone can say.

54:54 Jens

But we have a common form of ritual where we typically do three sumbles. The first is on the gods. The second is on the ancestors, and the third is a free one. So in a way, it does feel as if it's obligatory to do that. I mean, you can pass on the horn if you're completely lost for words in the sumble, and usually nobody will object that and say: no, no, you must say something now. But, still, you're standing in the circle and you're participating in this sumble on the ancestors.

55:26 Ulrike

Yes, but, the question is, is the sumble an essential part of ancestral cult, or is the sumble a ritual which establishes community with the participants? So if you raise the horn and say: I want to toast my old school friend who passed away and with whom I had a great time, then this is not necessarily ancestor cult, even if it passes in that sense in the sumble.

But I think the idea of sumble is to create community with the participants and with the persons to which you toast in sumble. So, okay, in a way it could pass as ancestral cult. But I think there is some kind of fluid. How to say. Did you say a definite maybe? Is this ancestral cult if you toast to a dead person in sumble? Yes, maybe. Maybe it is. But maybe it's just a way to participate in a ritual which establishes community, which puts you in a wider context with all kinds of entities. Because if other people in sumble toast to their ancestors, then of course you drink also if they toast but do not necessarily worship their ancestors. Does that make sense?

57:01 Jens

That makes a lot of sense to me. So it comes back to me on one point to the question of how do we understand the term ancestor? And we said before, it's people who influenced us. It doesn't necessarily need to be biological ancestors, and that makes it much easier to be there in the circle.



And the other thing about biological ancestors also is not all of them have been really nice people. And you said before the well-meaning ancestors which included for me, some of our ancestors are maybe not well meaning to us. Some of them may not approve of our way of life.

57:42 Ulrike

Yeah, or not all of our ancestors have been good people in life.

57:47 Jens

Definitely not. No.

57:51 Rich

I did just want to raise one final point. One of the reasons why some academic heathens I've spoken to are wary about too much focus on ancestors is that that approach is abused by, should we say, non-inclusive heathens to say that: well, you must have white ancestors. Therefore we worship the white ancestors. They don't say that, but that is sort of implied by that. And that is a very easy, low brow theological approach to take. You will see that on the social media sites, which have very little theology, but lots of pictures and memes of nine foot Vikings with huge muscles. "And we worship the ancestors. We don't kneel to the gods." Almost adjacent to heathenry. Really, it's, it's only heathenry within sort of name. But that sort of very simplistic theology is very easy prey for, should we say, the less inclusive aspects of heathen? Yes. And I think it was one quote I remember reading where some said: "They say they're worshipping the ancestors, but really they're just worshipping Vikings." And that's not to say that anything you've discussed is anything like that, but I think some people do take it in the wrong direction.

59:04 Ulrike

Yeah, that's true. And I understand that some people are cautious because of this and say: let's not do this lest we give more stuff to non-inclusive people who want to use religion for their racism. On the other hand, I think that connecting with your ancestors and have a relationship to your dead is a very understandable wish many people have. So I think it's not a good idea to just put that aside and say: oh, this is Nazi stuff, and we don't want „Blut und Boden“ ideology in heathenry. Of course not. But can we just refuse the wish people have, to have a connection to their dead, whether they are blood or not blood related. I don't think it's wise to ignore it.

01:01:03 Rich

I absolutely agree. I don't want to say that anybody who does ancestor worship is, is a Nazi or anything like that. That's not what I'm saying, but I'm saying that some people have taken that in a in an incorrect direction. And I think which is why anything talk about ancestor worship or veneration or whatever perspective you had has to be phrased carefully and clearly.

01:01:29 Jens

I would like to add, Rich, to what you said about the Vikings, that those people are not actually worshipping Vikings. They're worshipping their personal ideal picture of Vikings.

01:01:40 Rich

Yes, I agree.



01:01:42 Jens

One of these interesting things with modern research that in some cases, Vikings were quite different to what these people think they were.

01:01:51 Rich

And some of the Vikings were Christian, which really upset some people. [Laughter] It's true.

01:00:58 Jens

Absolutely. Viking era until 1066. Yeah, and that is definitely past the conversion of most of the Viking areas. Yes.

01:01:08 Ulrike

I read the interesting idea that Viking raids started as a reaction to the Saxon Wars of Karl der Große. And I think I want to look further into that, because I'm not sure whether the Viking raids were in any way strategically planned or something like that. But I think it's an interesting idea to think that people in Scandinavia heard from the Saxon Wars and thought: oh, now, now we have to make sure that he does not get to us as well. I have no idea why are Vikings such a broad theme in heathenry. Sometimes it makes me just wonder, because it was a rather short time if you look through the centuries and why those guys? I have no idea.

01:02:09 Rich

I think it's just down to that they have a certain aesthetic that people like, so simply. I will say that as heathenry, certainly as I've experienced, it has gone on, that aesthetic has evolved and changed, and people are more interested in what did people actually do then? And the actual, even if they do like to wear period clothing, they want, they don't want to wear armour and huge sort of back scabbards. If I'm going to wear period clothing for a ritual, fine. What did people actually wear? What kind of clothing did they wear? And so, so more realistic. So I've seen that and people getting very seriously interested in. And this is why you get people coming in from heathenry actually from the re-enactment community as well as people who just like Viking.

01:02:53 Jens

Okay, I will not proceed this thread because I think we're moving away from our original topic.

01:03:00 Rich

Do we want to draw close to it there, Jens?

01:03:01 Jens

Yeah. So I understand that for a modern, inclusive heathen ancestor cult or ancestor veneration or worship means that we acknowledge that we didn't come into existence out of nothing. But that there were people before us who influenced us. And we try to embrace the good influences and acknowledge them and respect them. And maybe we want to do some more with that. But for me, that's the baseline of what ancestor cult means for modern, inclusive heathenry.

01:03:35 Ulrike

Yeah. And I think if we go one step back, we can also say ancestral cult is a way of creating a relationship to your dead, and you have this whole ancestor and blood thing out of the way. So how



do we relate to our dead? Do we do it in a, in a cultic way, or do we just remember them or what do we do? And this is also the way that you can put it in a broader context, not only in heathenry, but also in other religions. How do people relate to their dead? How do they create their rituals? How do they think about them? And then we can see that it's a very basic human wish to have a connection to those who are dead.

01:04:32 Jens

Yes. Thank you. Rich, any final comments?

01:04:36 Rich

No. I think we seem to have reached almost an agreement, which is unheard of in heathenry. But that we have a, and uh, but no, although we may disagree on many other things, I do think we all agree that ancestor veneration or worship or cult of the dead does seem to form some part of heathenry, however one frames that. So I think it is certainly something that perhaps merits even further discussion of things, particularly with inclusive heathenry, when people feel that they've been rejected by their family. And that's a whole other conversation. But I know that, that is something that some people do work on. And that's, uh, yeah, I look forward to further exploration of that.

01:05:17 Jens

Okay, Rich. Ulrike, thank you for being our guest at this podcast.

01:05:22 Ulrike

You're welcome.

01:05:23 Rich

And thank you for hosting.

01:05:25 Jens

Thank you to all those listeners to this episode. You can find us at TheWyrthing.com and on the usual social media. Bye bye.

01:05:34 Ulrike

Goodbye.

01:05:35 Rich

Farewell to the dead. Hail the dead.

[end tune]