

To Rust Metallic Gods

An Anarcho-Primitivist Critique of Paganism

Autumn Leaves Cascade

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Most green anarchists of European ancestry have vehemently rejected the Abrahamic faiths of the Iron Age (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), for their divine hierarchies, their dominion theologies. And most as well the Axial Age faiths, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism from India, Confucianism and Taoism from China, Zoroastrianism from Persia, or Platonism from Greece, all of which arose under a period of increasing ascendancy for urbanization and the State, under the division of life between market and temple¹. Many, unable to swallow various New Age spiritual farces, nonetheless valorize Greco-Roman pagan religions or idealize various European pagan religions. Some champion modern neo-pagan notions. I examine these each in turn, arguing that if we really wish to rekindle deep bonds to the vital wildness of the Earth, then we must dig deeper.

I examine paganism primarily as a constellation of non-Abrahamic faiths, chiefly polytheist or henotheist—and purportedly earth-centered—which arose from Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Iron Age pastoral-agrarian societies. I focus on the Indo-European trajectory because of its historical importance, and because of the contemporary Greco-Roman and European pagan revitalizations.²

The Neolithic Background

The Neolithic Revolution inaugurated domestication, the transition from foraging to farming, from hunting to herding, with many cultures mixing subsistence strategies in this period. Neolithic peoples on the European continent initially appear to have had minimal material hierarchy. They often crafted ceramics and female figurines, and practiced megalithic stonework: markers and monuments, chambers and circles. But they had already begun to live sedentary lives in permanent towns, and worship deities of domestication. With agriculture they grew swiftly, leading to a large-scale population crash by 5000 BCE. The copper phase of the early Bronze Age intensified a trajectory toward specialization and social inequalities, toward hilltop fortifications and metallurgical workshops, toward royalty and war. The Bronze Age succeeded the Neolithic, here starting in the Caucasus region ~3700 BCE (Maykop culture) and the Aegean region ~3200 BCE.

Archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests that a singular Neolithic-era proto-culture split in the Ancient Near East, which influenced the rise of Persian and Hindu cultures (Proto-Indo-Iranian), and passed through either the Pontic-Caspian steppe or Anatolia, giving rise to Greek culture, followed by Italic and Latin, Celtic, Nordic and Germanic, Slavic and Baltic cultures in continental Europe. I focus here on Indo-European culture, with origins likely in the Yamna or Sredny Stog cultures. Proto-Indo-European society had patrilineal kinship, basic textiles, hand-ceramics, animal husbandry (especially horse domestication), the plow, and the wheel,

¹See John Zerzan's *The Iron Grip of Civilization: the Axial Age*, or, David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. In Taoism and Jainism however we can see a backlash against the new order, whereas rulers readily put the rest to work during that crucial era of social reconstruction.

²Why not elsewhere? I have more familiarity with the Middle Eastern and European context. I know less about the Arab pagans Christianity and Islam conquered. I don't know enough to comment about Afro-Caribbean vodun, voodoo, hoodoo, or obeah, but I believe similar criticism would apply to at least the African pastoral-agrarian pagan traditions. Spirituality in the Americas many have explored elsewhere in depth. The Axial Age critiques better suit the Asian context (esp. India & China). And animism of course still exists in Korea, in Mongolia, and in South-East Asia (i.e. Vietnam, Laos, Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, the Malay Peninsula).

advancing through some mix of conquest and cultural diffusion. Historians debate whether the Proto-Indo-European cultural spread began during the 4th-5th millennium BCE, or the middle or early Neolithic. Either way, the Proto-Indo-European ur-pantheon and its social organization profoundly shaped both Greco-Roman and European paganism up through the Iron Age, and through Christendom as well.

Greco-Roman Paganism

Pastoral-agrarian subsistence arrived in the Mediterranean at the earliest ~7000 BCE. Austere but sufficient, it entailed grainfields, vineyards, pasture, herb and vegetable gardens, fruit and nut orchards. It emphasized barley, olives, grapes. Pre-Aegean peoples existed on these islands, such as the Pelasgians and Leleges.

In Archaic Greece, the Aegean civilizations (Minoan Crete, Cycladic culture, and Helladic society) brought the Bronze Age to the Aegean-Mediterranean region. The Minoans preferred commerce, and worshiped principally Rhea, a shield-bearing Mother Goddess responsible for agricultural fertility and the birth and death of the animals. Greece demonstrates a marriage between sedentary domestication and religion, mirroring the rest of the pagan situation. In the Archaic Period, tyrants often seized power from hereditary monarchs in the cities. Tyrants such as Peisistratus gained legitimacy through temples and festivals. Secretive traditions such as the Eleusinian Mysteries grew popular, offering the underclasses a series of initiation rites promising afterlife benefits, contrasted with the dreary Olympian afterlife. Also in that mythic cycle, Hades, lord of the underworld, captures Demeter's daughter, and Demeter causes a drought to force Zeus to allow her return. Afterward, Demeter teaches the Greeks agriculture.

As bronze metallurgy emerged, social stratification, monumental architecture, and fortifications all proliferated. A warrior-aristocracy solidified with Mycenaean Greece (the Pylos and Knossos Kingdoms) toward the Bronze Age's climax, which popularized slavery. The militaristic Mycenaeans progressed the Olympic pantheon, which superseded the Titans, ruled by the sky-judge and thunder-god Zeus. It also featured Hestia, goddess of the hearth, architecture, domesticity, the family, and the State. Just as the fickle gods of Mount Olympus ruled from a distance, ancient Greek States shaped religious direction in palaces from afar. The Athenian and Spartan city-state transitions before Classical Greece preserved the earlier urban dominance over spirituality. Classical Greek mythology held that the Titans had rebelled against the primordial elemental deities, such as Gaia (Mother Earth), Uranus (Father Sky), and Eros (Chaos), and ushered in a Golden Age of primitive communism where foragers and pastoralists lived easy lives: healthy, merry, and free. It held that agriculture, private property, and metallurgy ruined that earlier, better way, condemning Greeks to civilized indignities. The mythic death of Pan, phallic faun-deity of hunting and herding popular among peasants, symbolized this transition. It implied finality, as only one other Greek god had ever died.

Proto-Roman Bronze Age culture arose with fortified pastoral settlements associated with the Proto-Villanovan Urnfield culture, near warrior-mariner and other pastoral cultures. The Italic Peninsula held many cultures at the time. Roman society proper arose from the Latin tribe (who traced their ancestry to the mythological King Latinus) migrating to the Italic Peninsula³, and

³Their Latial culture, a subset of Iron Age Villanovan culture, arose from the earlier Apennine culture.

founding city-states during the 8th century BCE (Iron Age).⁴ This included Rome, which gained hegemony over the other Old Latium city-states after a few centuries, and established a royal palace tradition. Roman society displayed particular cruelty with practices like the gladiator tradition (developed from their Etruscan rivals), and crucifying its runaway slaves. Slavery formed the backbone of the Roman economy, Rome's population often half slaves. As most know, Rome became the most powerful empire of the time, building a proto-industrial apparatus featuring complex artificial waterways, concrete architecture, and intensive underground extraction with the first hydraulic mining and drainage wheels. Early Roman religion revered the Vestal Virgins, who tended the sacred fire in the Temple of Vesta, in the Roman Forum. It originated with Romulus and Remus, and the founding of Rome. Roman religion emphasized patron divinities for personal and domestic worship, alongside State religious practices where whoever had the highest social rank conducted services, often a quite self-serving tool for the educated, male, land-owning military aristocracy. Various Roman rulers claimed divine ancestry. As Rome conquered, it absorbed various domestic cults and traditions.

In Greece's Hellenistic Period, cultural intermixing prevailed; religion continued to reflect increasing distance from primal forces, as it had done at each successive phase. Outsiders brought Isis from Egypt, and Hathor, patron goddess of miners. From Syria: Atargatis, and Hadad/Ba'al, a sky-warrior god. Some welcomed Cybele, a protecting Mother Goddess of healing, fertility, and wild nature. However, even before her arrival in Greece, Phrygians in Anatolia depicted Cybele as a protector of cities, symbolized by her Mural Crown. Imperial Rome re-branded Cybele as a protector of warships as well. Ptolemy I devised the god Serapis to unify Greco-Egyptian culture under his rule. With significant Egyptian and pharaonic influence, Greek ruler cults developed, with Alexander the Great demanding his worship as god-king. Rome proper had already practiced deification of deceased emperors, and sacred monarchy with Julius Caesar. After Alexander's death, Rome Hellenized; its supreme deity, Jupiter, a sky-judge god who controlled the harvest with weather, and ensured oaths, incorporated Zeus' legends.

Late Roman paganism in Greece continued an urban legacy. Monotheist mystery cults competed with Christianity in the cities, including Mithraism (an exclusively male religion, chiefly depicted with Mithra's bull slaughter), Gnosticism (espousing dualism, asceticism, and rejection of the material world), Manichaeism (believing in a war between God and Satan), and the Cult of Dionysus/Bacchus (a festive tradition of fertility, and intoxication by wine, associated with plebeian freedom). All of these religions existed estranged from connection to any actual living landscape or uncontrolled terrain, purporting universality precisely because they functioned as rootless archetypes. The brief Roman sun-worship tendency via Elagabalus largely functioned as a means for the emperor to legitimize his dictatorship through feasts. Neo-Platonist mysticism continued the Platonic tradition of rejecting the material world available to the senses, instead embracing the world of abstract "Forms".

Traditional pagan polytheism in Greece and Rome, the foreign polytheist traditions it absorbed, its various mystery traditions and imperial cults, and the alternative religions in Rome, all advanced theologies of domestication or the city-state. In every age, and even the oppositional currents. Governing divinities continually channeled spirituality toward imperial ambitions. Imperial Rome eventually installed Christendom, concluding the Greco-Roman pagan progression.

⁴The Roman Iron Age succeeded the non-Proto-Indo-European Etruscan Iron Age.

European Paganism

Proto-Indo-European culture likely spread from the Balkans to the Italic Peninsula and Eastern Europe ~6000 BCE, to Southern and Central Europe ~ 5000 BCE, to Western Europe spanning 6500-4000 BCE, and to the Baltic ~3500 BCE. It arrived to regions already full of myriad cultures, including Paleolithic and Mesolithic foragers, and Neolithic herders and farmers. Neolithic pagans of the Bronze and Iron Age assimilated, displaced, or exterminated the animistic foraging peoples of the continent. Celtic, Nordic and Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, as well as Slavic and Baltic pagans of the Iron Age—the main traditions romanticized today—proved particularly war-oriented.

Celtic

Atlantic Bronze Age Proto-Celts adopted bronze axes and swords, status markers of social elites. Definite early Iron Age Proto-Celts, like the Hallstatt and La Tène material cultures, following the Urnfield material culture, lived in martial chiefdoms based on cattle transhumance. Hallstatt culture had chariot burials, and La Tène had fortified towns. Celtic chieftains had towering hillforts. Celtic mythology included Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Cornish, Breton, and Manx traditions, with Gaulish and Brythonic, Welsh, Gaelic, Celtiberian, and Gallo-Roman mythologies. Celtic peoples of Gaul, Britain, Wales, and Ireland all practiced druidry.

The Celtic Druids of Iron Age Gaul, a secretive order and professional priest class, combined an animistic oral tradition with agrarian and judicial responsibilities. Gauls practiced kingship or elected magistrates, and waged notable campaigns against Rome in the 4th century BCE, and against Greece in the 3rd century BCE. Rome equated the Gaulish/Brythonic deity Camulus, god of war, to Mars, their war god, guardian of agriculture. Welsh deities included Amaethon, an agricultural god. Gaelic Celts, as well as Gauls and Britons, had the solar-warrior Lugh, and thunder-warrior Taranis. Iron Age Celtiberians had a hereditary elite born from military aristocracy, and their fortified towns largely replaced clan life. Candamius served as thunder-god, and Carioceus served as god of war. Many non-Celtic tribes had also lived on the Iberian Peninsula, such as the Aquitanians and Iberians. In Gallo-Roman religion, Ambisagrus acted as thunder-god, Sucellus served agriculture and war, and Epona served equids and fertility. Celtic chiefdoms and kingdoms expanded from Central Europe to Iberia, the British Isles, and also the Balkans (Dacia, Thrace, Illyria), and Anatolia, in many cases building cities. Christianisation began heavily from the 5th century onward.

Nordic & Germanic

Proto-Nordic history began with the patriarchal Battle Axe and Boat Axe material cultures of Northern Europe, more pastoral than agrarian. They overran pre-Scandinavian foragers in the Neolithic, and flourished in the Bronze Age. Germanic paganism gained prominence with the Norse religion in the Bronze Age, notable for the Viking-era expansion by Nordic raiders and colonists, merchants and mercenaries. As the Norse intensified their dependency on crops and livestock, the deity Freyr became central, a god of sacred kingship, virility, prosperity, and weather control. They also revered Gefjon, goddess of virginity, fertility, and the plow. The Slave Trade fueled the Norse economy from the 6th-11th centuries CE, including forcing many Franks,

Anglo-Saxons, Celts, Germans, Balts, Slavs, and Latins into thralldom. Likely a mix of overpopulation, agricultural scarcity, and regional politics and displacements led to Norman invasions starting around the 9th century CE, using their iconic longships and widsheips. They voyaged from Scandinavia to various parts of Northwestern Europe and the North Atlantic, to Normandy, to the Iberian Peninsula and Portugal, to the Mediterranean, to North Africa and Asia Minor, and to the Arctic and North America. Christendom replaced Norse paganism in the early 11th century CE.

Germanic paganism we can trace back to the Nordic Bronze Age ca. 1700 BCE and Central European Urnfield material culture ca. 1300 BCE. They had both open settlements and hilltop fortifications. Battle implements included bronze swords, axes, and chariots. One noteworthy myth included that of Nerthus, the fertility goddess, who traveled by ceremonial wagon and brought peace and celebration as the tribes locked away their iron goods. Germanic societies practiced sacred elective kingship, where free men who could trace their ancestry back to their tribe's divine founder would choose a king, functioning as military leader, high priest, lawmaker, and judge. Free men held estates or swore fealty to landed lords. Restitution prices for conflicts differed by class, and serfs had no inherent value. Cattle ownership largely measured wealth, though Germanic tribes also used the plow, farmhouses, and granaries. They generally practiced raids but not occupations, organized by a chieftain and his retinue. In the 2nd century BCE, Germanic chieftoms invaded Gaul and the Italic and Iberian Peninsulas. Following the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the Germanic Visigoths conquered southwestern France and the Iberian Peninsula, the Vandals conquered parts of Hispania and North Africa, and the Ostrogoths conquered part of the Italian peninsula. All had converted to Arian Christianity by that time however. The Franks and Lombards became Catholic with the Byzantine Roman Empire.

Anglo-Saxon

Anglo-Saxon history follows after Roman Britain in the Iron Age, with emergent warrior-priest judge-kings, and oaths between lords and retainers. Historians disagree some, but Anglo-Saxon England likely formed during the Migration Period (~300-700 CE) when Germanic peoples (e.g. Angles, Saxons, Frisians, and Jutes) either displaced or dominated the mostly Christian Sub-Roman Britons⁵. They came as immigrants, settlers, raiders, and mercenaries, with both acculturation and war taking place. Elites formed through claiming divine ancestry. Seven main Anglo-Saxon kingdoms solidified out of earlier tribal formations with temporary war-chiefs. The Anglo-Saxons had "wandering settlements" under tenure of low-ranking freemen with support of arms and law. They had a system of townships and tax-collecting sheriffs, of fealty oaths and collective responsibility within kinship groups for bringing related fugitives to court for suspected crime. They inherited the Roman villa system of organizational infrastructure whereby subsidiary settlements dependent upon an administrative center. Anglo-Saxons also continued slavery, and the Saxons forbade marriage across caste lines.

This pagan period only really spans ~450-600 CE, til Christianization recommenced with the baptism of Æthelberht, King of Kent, in 597 CE, and gained command anew with the 11th century Norman conquest. Arwald, the final pagan king of Anglo-Saxon England, died in 686 CE battling

⁵The Pictish tribal confederation existed in Scotland, enemies of Rome and the Anglo-Saxons alike. The Pictish kingdoms lived a pastoral-agrarian existence, practicing something resembling Celtic polytheism before their elites turned to Christianity. They built hilltop fortresses, and later enclosed farmsteads.

Christendom. Nordic, Germanic, and Anglo-Saxon pagans alike championed Odin/Wotan/Wōden and Thor/Donar/Thunor, sky-warrior god archetypes commonly paired in Indo-European mythology. Ingui Fréy (Freyr) also held central importance for the Anglo-Saxons, god of fertility and protection for crops, livestock, and commonfolk. Anglo-Saxons continued the Germanic pagan practice of “blót”, sacrificing cattle to the gods in November; the English word “bless” comes from this *blothisojan* (blot), “to smear with blood”.

Slavic & Baltic

The Komarov Bronze Age material culture spawned early Proto-Slavic culture, along with the Iron Age Przeworsk and Zarubintsy. Slavic ethnogenesis⁶ likely occurred in the massive area between the Dnieper, Danube, and Oder rivers, a vast but largely loose and decentralized formation of chiefdoms and clans. Historians debate Milograd, Chernoles, and Lusatian origins, and whether Slavic identity arose more toward 200 BCE or the 6th century CE. Regardless, local powers consolidated between the 6th-9th centuries CE, and princes with treasuries and soldiery emerged, along with class distinctions. Amongst West Slavs, strongholds replaced earlier open and shifting settlements. While the Slavic tribes did not enslave war prisoners, they did escalate from raids to permanent territorial occupations. Slavic paganism had a dualistic emphasis on spirits and demons. Early Slavs had more Iranian religious influence compared to other Indo-European peoples, and had pagan priests. Alongside the concentration of chiefdoms from expansion, diffusion, and war, came the henotheistic worship of Perun, a sky-warrior god. Jarilo served as deity of vegetation, fertility, and harvest.

The Balts⁷ arrived in the eastern Baltic and west-central Russia in the 3rd millennium BCE, pastoral-agrarians, with supposed Trzciniec and Sosnica cultural origins. We know of Baltic paganism primarily from remaining folklore from Latvia and Lithuania. In Latvian pagan mythology, Jumis protected the grain and Māra protected the livestock. It also featured the thundercross, similar to many Indo-European cultures’ swastikas. Slavs largely assimilated the Balts during the 4th–7th centuries. Christianization of the Southern Slavs came from the Franks in the late 9th century, and of the Eastern Slavs under the Kievan Rus tribal federation beginning in 988 CE.

Conquest of the Sky-Father & Thunder-Warrior

Though the Proto-Indo-European pagan cultures that came to dominate the Mediterranean and Continental Europe often warred with each other, they shared common social, economic, and technical developments. Metallurgy re-purposed from ornamental and minimal tool use, to war: battleaxes, swords, chariots. Pastoral and agrarian subsistence. Elite grave goods and treasure hoards, their weapons and livestock parts often buried too. Life in chiefdoms, city-states, kingdoms. Divine rulers, nobles, freeman, slaves. Priests governing spirituality.

Ancient Indo-European societies largely practiced tripartite class specialization between priests, warriors, and commoners (peasants or craftsmen). Their religions often reflected this division of sacral, martial, and economic spheres, with a patron deity for law, justice, or magic

⁶Ethnic Slavs include East Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians), South Slavs (Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Slovenes, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Bulgarians), and West Slavs (Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Wends).

⁷Ethnic Balts include Lithuanians, Latvians, and many extinct groups like Old Prussians.

(e.g. Lugh/Teutates; Odin/Týr; Veles), a thunder-warrior (e.g. Taranis; Thor; Perun), and a patron deity for farming, stockbreeding, or crafting (e.g. Esus, Trí Déa Dána; Freyr; Jarilo & Svarog). Often these duties mix or spread somewhat, such as between the Greek Zeus, Demeter, Pan, and Hephaestus, with the Roman Jupiter, Mars, and Vulcan, or seen with the Celtic Lugh. Indo-European deities for sovereignty, military, and productivity rarely formed a sacred trinity however, whereas gods ruling the heavens, earth, and underworld more often did.

Indo-European mythology chiefly worships a “Sky Father”, such as the Vedic “Dyaus Pitṛā”, the Greek “Zeus Pater”, the Latin “Ju Piter”, and the Thunder-Warrior. Symbols of the latter include the thundercross, suncross, sunwheel, and swastika, representing the thunderbolt, spoked chariot wheel, and solar chariot myth. Symbols of conquest. All of these pagan cultures, as products of the same Proto-Indo-European mythology tracing back to some of the original urban empires (i.e. Mesopotamia, Egypt), shared variations of a central conquest myth. The good, heavenly man-god⁸, usually representing affinities with thunder or lightning, sun or sky, war, royalty, law, masculinity, truth, and dominance, a bringer of civilization, subdues an evil, earthen serpent woman⁹, usually representing affinities with water or fire or underworld, nature, chaos, femininity, trickery, and rebellion. The latter a destroyer of civilization, who hides captured treasures in underground or undersea caves, who harms crops or livestock. The story echoes throughout Proto-Indo-European mythology and folklore, and that of its relatives.¹⁰

Can we reduce this purely to snake-hatred? No. Many of these religions actually had serpent cults. Most fundamentally, Indo-European religions’ primary myths often center around the moralism of civilized heroes fighting savage monsters. Sometimes the message communicates quite explicitly. In one Slavic myth, the Great Black Snake unleashes dark forces, but the heavenly blacksmith of law and fire, Svarog, seizes the serpent’s tongue and tames it into a plow for agriculture, banishing its minions to the underworld. In Celtic Irish lore, Balor, giant king of the indigenous Fomorians, and personification of blight and drought, seizes the cow of fruitfulness to lock away. The Smith God forges Lugh a thunderbolt to slay him. Lugh then extorts from Balor’s son, Bres, the knowledge of agriculture, for Irish colonization. The origin of agriculture. Domesticating weather, vanquishing wildness, erecting empires. Civilization’s tale.

⁸Sometimes a knight.

⁹Sometimes a giant.

¹⁰List includes: **Anatolian**: Tarhunt/Teshub v. Illuyanka. **Balkan**: Sabazios v. the chthonic serpent; Rostam v. the dragon; the Knight v. Zmeu. **Baltic**: Perkūnas v. velns/vels/velnias; the twelve brothers v. Žilvinas; possibly Jumal/Ukko & Ajatar. **Celtic**: Taranis v. Cernunnos; King Arthur v. the dragon; Sigurd v. Fafni; Lugh v. Balor. **Christian**: Michael v. Satan; Christ v. the sea dragon; Virgin Mary v. the serpent; Saint George v. the Dragon; Saint Patrick v. the snakes. **Egyptian**: Ra v. Apep, Nut v. Geb. **Greek**: Zeus v. Typhon; Zeus/Argus v. Echidna; Zeus v. Campe; Kronos v. Ophion; Apollo v. Python/Delphyne; Heracles v. the Hydra & Ladon; Cadmus v. the Iserian Dragon; Perseus v. Cetus & Medusa; Bellerophon v. the Chimera; Jason/Medea/Orpheus v. the Colchian Dragon; Coroebus & Eurybatus v. the Lamiae. **Islamic**: Allah v. the Serpent / Iblis / Shayṭān. **Judaic**: Yahweh or Gabriel v. Leviathan or Rahab or Tannin. **Levantine**: Baal or El v. Lotan or Yam-Nahar. **Mesopotamian**: Anu or Marduk v. Tiamat. **Nordic, Germanic, & Anglo-Saxon**: Thor & Odin v. Jörmungandr & Nidhogg; Sigurd v. Fáfnir; Beowulf v. the dragon; Woden v. the wyrm; Ragnar Lodbrok v. the serpent pair; Thidrek & Fasold v. the flying dragon; the prince v. the seven-headed serpent. **Persian**: Garshāsp/Fereydūn v. Aži Dahāka / Zahhāk, Aži Sruvara, Gandarəβa; Keyumars/Gayōmart v. Ahriman; Kāveh the Blacksmith v. Zahhak’s serpents. **Roman**: Hercules v. Cacus. **Slavic**: Perun v. Veles; Svarog v. the snake; Ivan / Dobrynya Nikitich v. Zmey Gorynych; Krakus v. the Wawel Dragon; Alyosha Popovich v. Tugarin Zmeyevich; the imperial eagle / lightning-dragon v. Ala; Ivan v. Baba Yaga. **Vedic**: Indra/Parjanya v. Vrtra & Vala; Krishna v. Kāliyā.

So what then of the historical pagan societies? As clerical religions, they atrophied participatory spiritualities rooted in place. Increased human domination of landscapes coincided with personification of natural forces as humanoid figures, with distancing from primeval elements and phenomena. These militaristic chiefdoms and kingdoms may have claimed to worship the land, but they owned the land as property. They mined the land for copper and tin and iron. The initial transition from gathering surface clay or salt or flint to gathering surface copper or tin or bog iron may have occurred gradually, but the additive consequences reveal an extractive orientation. They had class hierarchy, slavery, and conquest. Anti-authoritarians have no good reason to venerate or romanticize “heathen” conquerors. Do not worship gods of farm and forge, gods of tillage and grazing, palace gods. Do not idealize the pastoral-agrarian war myths of Bronze and Iron Age colonizers, do not worship metallic gods. And even the Neolithic peoples worshiped gods of domestication; they too lived to shepherd and slaughter, to plow and to reap, “Mother Goddess” or not.

Neo-Paganism & Wicca

Neo-Paganism’s Fascism Problem

Neo-paganism has a fascism problem. The first European pagan tradition revival culminated in Romantic nationalism, embodied in the Revolutions of 1848, a wave of attempts to upend feudal remnants and move toward folkish nation-states. Ethnic separatism and nationalism in paganism, as well as pagan land ownership, constructed a solid foundation for European Fascists to later harness pagan motifs under “Blood and Soil” rhetoric. Contemporary European neo-paganism often appears inseparable from right-wing nationalism, with neo-*völkisch* movements thoroughly appropriating pagan traditions. Kind of easy when Greco-Roman, Celtic, Germanic, Nordic, and Slavic pagans all used swastika or triskelion symbols, often connected to lightning-symbolized mobile chariot warfare, eerily foreshadowing the Nazi *blitzkrieg* (lightning-war). The Nazis rode a *völkisch* mysticism undercurrent, including a synthesis of Nazi and pagan symbols. It seems difficult to untangle Týr as both pagan deity of law and heroic battle, and Nazi leadership rune and SS battle sigil. And again, difficult to untangle pagan swastikas from Nazi swastikas. And although non-right-wing neo-paganisms certainly exist, all the various European neo-pagan reconstruction and revival tendencies¹¹ merely attempt to resurrect the Sky-Father and Thunder-Warrior legacy I’ve already critiqued. They champion a legacy with a strong affinity for a patriarch or set of patriarchs who unify spheres of authority: the elite warleader, high priest, law-master. The ancient basis of the State, and Führer-material, surely.

Let’s move on to another neo-pagan tendency: Wicca.

Wicca

Wicca, largely syncretic and eclectic, nevertheless has some commonalities, originating in the 1950s with Gerald Gardner, Father of Wicca, and supporter of the UK Tory Party. Wiccans adorn

¹¹Neo-paganisms include: **Balkan** — “Zalmoxianism”. **Baltic** — “Dievturi”, “Druwi”, “Romuva”, “Dievturība”, “Taaraism”. **Caucasus** — “Abkhaz”, “Adyghe Habze”, “Ætsæg Din”. **Celtic** — “Celtic Reconstructionism”, “Celtic Neo-Druidism”. **Finnic** — “Mari & Mordvin Neo-Paganism”, “Udmurt Vos”. **Germanic** — “Ásatrú”, “Odinism”, “Theodism”. **Greco-Roman** — “Hellenism”, “Italo-Roman Tradition”. **Slavic** — “Rodnoverý”.

themselves with the “Five Elements” pentacle. Ann-Marie Gallagher illustrates it through the tree symbol, composed of Earth (soil and plant matter), Water (sap and moisture), Fire (photosynthesis and internal warmth), Air (respiration), and Spirit (connection and life). Others employed the candle symbol, with its unmelted/solid aspect (Earth), melting/ liquid aspect (Water), lit/plasma aspect (Fire), releasing/gas aspect (Air), and phenomenon/magic aspect (Spirit). While I find some personal value in the Five Elements notion, many Wiccans allow it to emphasize abstraction and reductionism, disconnecting themselves from the multitude of real life elemental manifestations.

Wicca likely eschews sacrifices only as it maintains separation from any real connection to subsistence. It certainly holds pastoral-agrarian affinities. Along the Wheel of the Year, Wiccans typically celebrate three harvest celebrations, during Lammass (Loaf Mass), Mabon (Harvest Home), and Samhain (Summer’s End).

Some Wiccans consecrate royalty with the “Holly King” and “Oak King” folklore.

Wiccans typically worship the Triple Mother Goddess (Maiden, Mother, Crone), along with the Horned God (associated with wilderness, virility, the Wild Hunt). These heteronormative and gender essentialist symbols culminate in the Great Rite of many Wiccan traditions, where the High Priest and High Priestess perform sexual intercourse to raise magical energy for spells. Nowadays, this most often takes place symbolically, using the extremely disturbing symbol of the dagger for the phallus, and chalice for the womb. Even this goddess-centering religion succumbs to patriarchal depictions.

Wicca seems to emphasize the domestic, with candle replacing campfire. It appeals to earlier European traditions of witch covens, known for herbcraft and depicting natural spirits as helpful familiars. Appreciation for women’s contributions to earth-based spirituality of course holds importance, however, the notion of encounters or pacts with domesticated faeries, demons—replacing wild totems—appears telling. Also worth noting, cultural emphasis on witch curses emerges primarily with sedentism and domestication.¹²

Wicca has many sacred ritual implements, including broomsticks, candles, cauldrons, chalices, crystals, daggers, grimoire, incense, pentacles, and wands. Most of the rituals however continue the pagan legacy of separation, in that they have no bioregional root. If Wicca can perform its rituals on a space station, with no biosphere, does it really count as “nature worship” at all? We must acknowledge the spectacle of “invoking” or “summoning” elements, familiars, spirits, or deities in this way, versus direct and intimate relationship with the living wildness. Paganism, as a pastoral-agrarian phenomenon, meant subduing lands and subjugating species. Nature became abstract, alien, outside. Monstrous and threatening. Pagans ritualized from a sense of lost connection, while still maintaining separation. Paganism substituted the symbolic for the sensory. Neo-paganism and Wicca perpetuate these flaws.

Animism Before, Animism Anew

So where does this leave those of us of European descent, who wish to live a more “spiritual” and earth-centered existence? I invite pagans to deepen their bonds to wildness and vitality, to hone sensation more than honor symbols, to root into place. Rather than treating the elements as mystical and external, find your strand in life’s web of relations. Go back to the source. Toward wildness directly. Toward animism. Greco-Roman and European paganism all contained animist

¹²See: *The Domestication of the Human Species* by Peter J. Wilson, *The Witch and the Wildness* by Kevin Tucker.

aspects, since paganism arose from animist roots. Many folk tradition components may yet have redeeming value. Not necessarily the obsession with monstrous outsiders like dryads, dwarves, elves, giants, kobolds, nixies, nymphs, wyrms, or werewolves, but special connections to springs or stones or trees. Many accounts indicate Indo-European worship of sun, fire, and moon directly. Appreciation for lunar and solar cycles. Solstice and equinox celebrations. Reverence for rivers, forests, marshes, hills. Altars and shrines for local spirits. Feasts, bonfires, and revelry. Rites of passage. Sounds kinda nice without all the focus on crops, livestock, cities, royalty, and war. The animist aspects still prove viable.

Animists lived in Europe long before pagan cultures. Anatomically modern humans have populated Continental Europe for at least 40,000 years¹³. Ancient seafaring evidence suggests Middle Paleolithic humans lived in Crete as early as 128,000 BCE. Let us not forget ancient Europe's multitude of foraging cultural groups, animists of forgotten names and legacies¹⁴. Ever heard of any of them? Some indigenous animists still inhabit Europe actually: the pre-Russian Nenets peoples, and the pre-Scandinavian Sámi peoples, persisting against all odds.

Animism arises from empathy, intimacy, kinship, self-transcendence, sensuality. Animism means to approach a landbase with child-like wonder, to approach the world openly. Open to anomaly, not bounded to archetype. A non-dualistic approach to subject and object, matter and spirit. Each year civilization brings more precise control, more imposed order. Bind your heart to your landbase. Feel its pulse, bear its scars. To sanctify domestication means to renounce wildness. To sanctify the urban means to extinguish vitality.

I could point the reader to various writings on animism¹⁵—and I have my own in the works—but I'd just as soon advise: place your hands in moss and soil. Feel a river's flow. Watch the dance of dragonflies. Behold the wonder of thunder and lightning. Speak with birds, hear their song. Conjure fire by friction. Feel the movement of wind. Practice tracking and botany. Chant and sing and dance together around campfires! Forage! Climb a fucking tree!¹⁶ Whatever you do, do not adapt to the cage of the city with rituals of alienation. To rust metallic gods means to resist that which eradicates wildness and vitality. Free your feral heart, and find kinship among the bonfires. For ruins, not runes.

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—*Encyclopedia Britannica*.

—*Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture* by J.P. Mallory & Douglas Q. Adams.

¹³We could also consider 380,000-year-old wooden javelins of human predecessors in Germany...

¹⁴Such as the Aurignacian, the Gravettian (inc. Pavlovian), the Solutrean, the Magdalenian, the Hamburg, the Creswellian, the Azilian (inc. Federmesser, Tjongerian), the Lyngby (inc. Ahrensburg, Bromme), the Swiderian. And in the Mesolithic: the Fosna-Hensbacka (inc. the Komsa), the Sauveterrian & Tardenoisian, the Maglemosian, the Kunda, the Kongemose, the Microlithic-Macrolithic Nemans, the Ertebølle-Ellebek, the Nøstvet & Lihult, the Pit-Comb Ware (inc. the Narva & Sperrings), the Pitted Ware, the Fenni.

¹⁵'Animism' Revisited: *Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology* by Nurit Bird-David. | *Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought* by Tim Ingold. | *The Song of the Land: Bioregional Animism* by Sarah Anne Lawless. | *A Brief Summary of Animism* by Jason Godesky. | *The Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abram.

¹⁶Inspired by Comrade Black's essay, "Neo-Paganism is Not the Answer – Climb A Fucking Tree"

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—*Practical Campbell: Here Be Dragons!* by Joseph Campbell Foundation.

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