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# Til Valhall: The Formation of Nordic Neopagan Identity, Religiosity, and Community at a Norwegian Heavy Metal Festival

## Abstract

A major draw of Nordic Neopaganism is the great degree of personal freedom practitioners have in the construction and performance of their spiritual identity. Nordic Neopaganism has no central hierarchy or unifying dogmatic system to dictate such endeavors. Instead, practitioners draw from the tradition's body of "lore" – the historical accounts, archaeological records, pre-Christian myths, folklore, and folk traditions from the Nordic cultural area – to inform their religiosity. The works of visual artists, musicians, and scholar-practitioners inspired by elements of this body of lore serve to further constitute it. This lore provides the basis and inspiration for religious identity and ritual activity, and it reinforces the idea that divinity is imminent in the natural world.

As such, areas adjacent to or within nature can be considered sacred and are used as spaces for ritual performance. Additionally, historic sites dated to the Iron and Viking Ages in Europe such as burial mounds, standing stones, and sites of former temples such as Uppsala, Sweden, serve as gathering places for religious ceremony and discourse for European practitioners. This dissertation asserts that Midgardsblot, a Norwegian heavy metal festival, functions as a sacred space for adherents of this growing tradition. Utilizing religious materialism as a theoretical base, data collected via participant observation at the festival, and a survey disseminated on the festival's official community Facebook page, this dissertation argues that Midgardsblot is a coalescence point of Nordic Neopagan material culture: constituent elements of the established body of lore such as music, the landscape, and Nordic folk cultural symbolism. Furthermore, respected figures and contributors to the body of lore such as scholar practitioners and certain performers are present, providing lectures on Nordic history, folk tradition, ritual practice, and the role of Nordic Neopaganism in social and climate justice. This coalescence of Nordic Neopagan material culture, the act of traveling to the festival, the academic discourse and ritual performances, and the sense of community experienced by those in attendance solidify Midgardsblot as a sacred space for practitioners to constitute and refine Nordic Neopagan identity and community.

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at a Norwegian Heavy Metal Festival

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the Faculty of the University of Denver and  
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University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Padraic M. Fitzgerald

June 2023

Advisor: Trace Reddell

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## Introduction

On a brisk autumnal evening in 2018, I was privileged to attend a concert at the Red Rocks Amphitheater in Morrison Colorado. This concert was by the Norwegian band Wardruna, labeled by publications such as *The Guardian* as Dark Nordic Folk, a category of music characterized by melodies, instrumentality, and lyrical themes local to the Scandinavian cultural area.<sup>1</sup> Wardruna is but one of many bands emerging out of Scandinavia that explicitly identify as Nordic Neopagan, a growing religious tradition that is inspired by the folk cultures and pre-Christian histories of Scandinavia. They use their music as an avenue to not only explore their personal spiritual identities, but additionally to share their art and Nordic Neopagan religiosity with their fans. Much like other religiously aligned musical genres such as Christian rock bands, their performances attract people religiously identifying as Nordic Neopagan. Unlike Christian rock bands, or other instances of religious soundings such as the cassette sermons of the Muslim world, the specific characteristics of Nordic Neopagan music concerts suggest that they should be considered an addition to the established body of ritual practice within this growing religion and that festivals featuring Nordic Neopagan performers should be considered sacred spaces in this religious tradition.

I identify myself as a scholar practitioner who enjoys this and adjacent genres of music such as heavy metal yet was not of the mindset to treat this Wardruna concert as a

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<sup>1</sup> Dannii Leivers. "The Drum Needed a Blood Sacrifice: The Rise of Dark Nordic Folk." *The Guardian* (London, UK), Feb. 16, 2021.

religious event. Before the concert, I considered it more so an opportunity to enjoy good music while displaying a small token of my religious inclination, the Mjolnir pendant.<sup>2</sup> During the performance I noticed the visceral reactions the music and the natural environment were eliciting: the brisk, clear evening with the rising full moon worked with the haunting songs and led to a personal albeit small experience of the uncanny and drew my focus to Nordic folk religious symbolism such as gods and the spirits that inhabit the natural world. I noticed that others in attendance were more expressive with what I perceived as their religious identity and were having more pronounced experiences with the music: many were dressed in Viking Age or Viking Age inspired clothing and were very much feeling the sounds, some appearing as if in trance with closed eyes and rhythmic movements entrained to the thunderous percussion.

As a scholar of material religion, I am aware of the power that symbolism and material culture possess in a religious setting, yet this concert experience presented me with what has become my central research questions: in what ways do events such as concerts and better yet, music festivals such as Norway's Midgardsblot, which possesses many Nordic folk themes, function as sacred sites for this religion? What kinds of religious activities, including ritual activity, do they support? Finally, what kinds of religious identities do these festivals allow participants to express and cultivate? In the chapters that follow, I address these questions by way of a survey put out on Midgardsblot's official community page on Facebook. I would like to take the

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<sup>2</sup> Mjolnir, translated as Crusher, is the weapon of the popular Scandinavian storm god, Thor and is a popular piece of religious jewelry among those self-identifying as Nordic Neopagan

opportunity to discuss my choice of using the terms religion and spirituality in the survey. As I am utilizing material religion as a theoretical lens, I will be referring to Nordic Neopaganism as a religion, or rather, a vernacular folk religion as this term reflects the personal autonomy inherent to Nordic Neopaganism and the tradition's countercultural nature. This work also acknowledges that many adherents of Nordic Neopaganism, including some scholar practitioners, prefer the term spirituality to religion for the same reasons I favor the term vernacular folk religion. Nordic Neopaganism emphasizes individual experience. Because of this, some of my survey questions utilize the phrase spiritual to gather data on the profound and formative experiences at this festival.

These survey questions are supplemented by participant observation at both Midgardsblot and Fire in the Mountains, a North American, nature oriented heavy metal festival. Throughout, I braid together different research strands relating to material religion, music and religion, religion and the environment, and literature on pilgrimage into an analysis that argues festivals possessing overt Nordic Neopagan themes such as Midgardsblot serve as sites of pilgrimage and sacred space for those self-identifying as Nordic Neopagans. Before turning to that research, however, this introductory chapter offers an overview of relevant scholarship pertaining to my research methodology, and an overview of the forthcoming chapters.

My interest in these festivals as sites of contemporary Nordic Neopagan spiritual experience coincided with my introduction to the religious studies subfield of material religion. Academics such as Sonia Hazard, S. Brent Plate, Charles Hirschkind, and musicologist Robin Sylvan provided manifold religious materialist lenses through which

to view Midgardsblot as a sacred space established through the confluence of different aspects of Nordic Neopagan religious materiality: music, the natural environment, and the festival community. Inherent to the works of some of these scholars is reference to new materialist ideas, particularly the notion that the manifold things with which we share reality possess an agency that can mobilize and affect human subjects. Formations of these agentic things, such as a given religion's body of material culture, may be engaged by receptive subjects to form and refine religious identity. At Midgardsblot, subjects are engaging with music, the natural environment, perceived authoritative figures such as performers and speakers, and fellow attendees in formative experiences and are creating a countercultural bastion where they experience meaningful community and personal growth in a setting that represents a counterpoint to the hyper-individualized "real world" where such communities are difficult to maintain.

Midgardsblot provides what Robert Gardner labels as a portable community, a liminal space where likeminded people gather to experience a common enjoyment that functions as a response to their respective lives outside of the festival.<sup>3</sup> Midgardsblot, as a Nordic Folk and Neopagan inspired heavy metal festival, supports a distinct subculture centered on music from which a portable community may be constructed. Running parallel to Robert Gardner's idea of portable community are Christopher Partridge's broad notion of occulture dovetailing with Don Yoder's and Leonard Primiano's respective understandings of folk and vernacular religion. Partridge describes occulture

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Gardner, "The Portable Community: Mobility and Modernization in Bluegrass Festival Life," *Symbolic Interaction* 27, no. 2 (2004): 163.

as a bricolage of religious and popular countercultural movements such as Neopaganism and heavy metal as a response against a hyper-individualizing, secular society.<sup>4</sup> The religions sitting beneath Partridge's umbrella of occulture such as Nordic Neopaganism may be considered folk religions as described by Don Yoder due to their countercultural nature in opposition to more popularly accepted religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, religions such as Nordic Neopaganism, in the vein of Leonard Primiano, are not only folk but vernacular in that the religion is incredibly individualized. Nordic Neopaganism possesses its own distinct types of authority figures, but there is no hierarchical body or strict dogmatism mandating orthopraxy.<sup>6</sup> This allows Nordic Neopagans to greatly personalize their beliefs and opens the door for gatherings such as Midgardsblot to be accepted by Nordic Neopagan as a sacred site to make pilgrimage to.

While sacred spaces exist for Nordic Neopagans, one of the only established temples for the religion is currently under construction in Reykjavik. This does not pose a setback, as many practitioners are solitary, and along with those that make the choice to practice in a community, do so either in their own homes or in an accessible space in the natural world. Gatherings such as Norway's Midgardsblot represent temporary, affective sacred spaces for the Nordic Neopagan aligned subjects in attendance. This festival may be most effectively fleshed out through engagement with the subfield of material religion,

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West Volume 1: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 2005), 40.

<sup>5</sup> Don Yoder, "Towards a Definition of Folk Religion," *Western Folklore* 33, no. 1 (1974): 80.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Primiano, "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife," *Western Folklore* 54, no. 5 (1995): 50.

and as such, I will articulate the works of pertinent scholars within the subfield to establish my theoretical basis for this project.

### **Material Religion**

For quite some time, scholars have noted the presence and importance of material culture within a religious setting. I count myself among them, and the following review of scholarship will support my choice of material religion as a theoretical lens. At a fundamental level, the material religion lens observes that the “stuff” of religion, the manifold things that constitute it, from the bodies of believers to texts to songs to sacred spaces, all possess an agency that mobilizes adherents. This approach is informed by previous scholarly work concerning materiality, originating with Karl Marx’s work concerning materiality. Marx’s notion of kinetic materialism remains particularly compelling as it discusses the capacity of matter to be active and to move, flow, and be impacted by previous movements of matter.<sup>7</sup> This kinetic materialism has informed some of the religious studies scholars who I make recourse to in this section, such as David Chidester and Sonia Hazard. Chidester observes that religion as a general phenomenon can be understood as being enabled by and arising from a series of flows within an economy of the sacred that are “entwined within the social fields of meaning and power in which the sacred is produced, exchanged, circulated, owned, operated, and contested”.<sup>8</sup> One way to understand these flows is that they are constituted by religious materiality, a

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Nail, *Marx in Motion: A New Materialist Marxism* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2020), 13.

<sup>8</sup> David Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2018), 5.



catch all term encompassing the range of sacred objects such as jewelry, statuettes, sacred texts containing scriptural or cultural writings pertaining to sacred songs, and the bodies of religious adherents. Making recourse to Thomas Tweed's work with the Cuban community of Miami, Chidester expounds upon this notion while adding the caveat that these material flows, seen within the globalization phenomenon, are constantly shifting and changing as they move through space and time and encounter other flows of materiality.<sup>9</sup>

While Chidester focuses on viewing religions as flows of materiality, scholar S. Brent Plate in his article "The Skin of Religion", discusses the role of the human sensorium in the phenomenon of religion. Plate explains that all subjective reality is constructed at the level of the flesh, by the human sensorium, and he mentions that this reality is unique to each subject. Subjective reality, while constructed at the skin, is impacted by external elements of materiality and in turn these elements inform the ever-shifting personal reality of the subject.<sup>10</sup> In his edited work, *Key Terms in Material Religion*, Chidester locates religion at the bodily level, explaining that "religions, for whatever else we can say about them, are lived through the bodies of people. The body is the site of religious formation through engagement with materiality".<sup>11</sup> He continues:

"The body is the material realm that gives rise to thinking, and that beliefs are predicated on practices, spaces, objects, and bodies. It is not about a preexisting category of essence that then takes on material form, that is, becomes embodied, or,

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<sup>9</sup> Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> S. Brent Plate, "The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred," *CrossCurrents* 62, no. 2 (2012): 173.

<sup>11</sup> S. Brent Plate, *Key Terms in Material Religion* (London, Bloomsbury, 2015), 3.

put “into a body.” Nor is it about a body that is only useful as it produces some further meaning. Instead, ideas, beliefs, and doctrines begin in material reality”.<sup>12</sup>

Dedicated religious materialist David Morgan further espouses the relationship between the body and things in a religious context. His book, *The Thing about Religion*, presents an analysis of the relationship between the bodies of subjects and the culturally charged objects they engage both on a daily basis and in a religious context. He describes the material study of religion as follows:

“It is a means of investigating how the physical characteristics of things and bodily practices enable thought and feeling, how they perform the cognitive aspect of religions, and how ideas, beliefs, discourses, arguments, and ethical dilemmas are shaped by materiality”.<sup>13</sup>

Furthering Plate’s discussion of religion being experienced at the level of flesh, Morgan adds the role of the active human subject into this discussion of material religion. Like his material religion fellows, Morgan acknowledges the agentic nature of things but also includes that human engagement with these things is not a passive affair either. He explains:

A great deal of what people think and believe takes shape in what they do. Practice is not simply the expression of ideas but often their very origin. Belief often comes after practice, not only before it. The act of doing or performing religions creates reality for them, a perceived necessity around which human values take shape.<sup>14</sup>

Morgan’s point that human subjects actively shape religion through active engagement with things and the mobilization of bodies does not necessarily problematize the location

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<sup>12</sup> Plate, *Key Terms*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> David Morgan, *The Thing About Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religion* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 77.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

of religion inasmuch as it provides a new way of observing new religious movements based in old world folk cultural practices such as Nordic Neopaganism, especially when taken in stride with the elaborations of folk and vernacular religion provided by scholars Don Yoder and Leonard Primiano. Nordic Neopaganism may be understood as a contemporary vernacular folk religion; it is a belief system running counter-cultural to the Western status quo that is based in folk traditions, and it is a belief hinging on the personal interpretations and individual practices of adherents. Combined with the fact that Nordic Neopaganism is a non-dogmatic belief system privileging individual and groups of practitioners with a fair degree of ritual creativity, and with the fact that there is no spiritual hierarchy yet a growing body of spiritual authority figures, further onus is placed on the role of the individual to construct their faith and act upon their praxis, which in light of Morgan's observations cyclically reinforces belief and opens the door for expanding not only what traditionally is and is not considered religious as a whole, but expanding what can be considered sacred and spiritually constructive for growing new religious movements such as Nordic Neopaganism.

Chidester, Plate, and Morgan provide a collective religious material lens through which to observe heavy metal festivals as temporary materiality laden temples for Nordic Neopagan. This multivalent lens allows us to see that for Nordic Neopagans, these festivals may be understood as flows of distinctly Nordic Neopagan material culture that coalesce at a particular point in space and time. Furthermore, this is an affective coalescence, allowing those experiencing it to refine themselves through exposure to said affective materiality which further has the potential to occasion spiritual experience. Yet

this flow of affective materiality may be dissected further by consultation of the observances of Sonia Hazard and her recourse to the continuously growing field of new materialism, which itself provides a striking way to contemplate the affective nature of seemingly mundane objects, uncannily corresponding with such notions of immanent, uncanny power like Polynesian Mana, Afro-Caribbean Ashe, and the Nordic Megin, concepts concerning the immanence and power possessed in religious materiality.<sup>15</sup>

Within her article, “The Material Turn in the Study of Religion,” Sonia Hazard provides her own exploration of religious materiality in which she introduces the notion of new materialism and the concept of assemblages. Hazard begins her discussion by highlighting the extant “material disciplines” within religious studies, emphasizing phenomenology as an ideal approach but pointing towards the fact that within phenomenology, the experiences of the embodied subject are set to the fore while the nature of the materiality being engaged is ignored, analyses of which concern only how they make the human subject respond to them. She elaborates:

“Things retain analytical importance only in so far as they pass through the body’s interface as sensations and perceptions. They need never be studied as exterior to the human experience of them”.<sup>16</sup>

Hazard engages with phenomenology in order to introduce the reader to the concept of new materialism, explaining that to thinkers within the new materialism school, inert matter, regardless of the formation it takes, should be understood as “sensuous entities

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<sup>15</sup> Rune Rasmussen, “Megin, Mana, and Magic,” Nordic Animism, July 25, 2021, video, 19:32. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5OMLBS9hik>

<sup>16</sup> Sonia Hazard, “The Material Turn in the Study of Religion,” *Religion and Society* 4, no. 1 (New York, Bergham Books, 2013): 63.

that do cultural work in ways not reducible to signification”.<sup>17</sup> This understanding of formulations of matter possessing a sensuous character, in opposition to many new materialists who would insist that “this is not animism”, dovetails with the embrace of contemporary animistic ideas emerging within Nordic Neopaganism. While the term animism has a colonial past and has been used to denigrate indigenous traditions, ignoring their complexity with the assertion “everything has a soul,” there has been a reframing and re-embracing of the term in Nordic Neopagan circles. Spearheaded by historian of religion and scholar practitioner of Nordic Neopaganism Rune Rasmussen, Nordic Animism emphasizes building and maintaining relationality between the human and non-human informed by practices and ways of being in the world gleaned from Nordic folk culture and mythology.<sup>18</sup>

Following an elaboration of new materialism, Hazard references Deleuze and Guattari to draw attention to the agency of things in assemblage. Hazard explains that an assemblage is an amorphous field or “hybrid formation that does not cleave to the putative subject/object divide”.<sup>19</sup> In their discussion of the assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari encourage one to think of the subject/object dichotomy as dissolving and seeing the human subject as intertwined with its surroundings and being shaped by them:

“Assemblages are unruly tangles of heterogeneous things that we usually regard as discrete or dialectically opposed entities. They are comprised of entities that are both human and non-human, that is, they are both subjects and objects. They may

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<sup>17</sup> Hazard, “The Material Turn,” 67.

<sup>18</sup> Rune Rasmussen, “What is Animsim,” Nordic Animism, January 13, 2020, video, 14:26, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q\\_j9oPCE-Ns&t=17s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_j9oPCE-Ns&t=17s)

<sup>19</sup> Hazard, “The Material Turn,” 65.

also include both the things we associate as part of ‘nature’ and of ‘culture’. And they may include recognizable elements such as statues, trees, feet, brains, animals, and umbrellas, as well as things which may not be visible or spatially bound, but that still exert material effects or intensities such as radio waves, magnetic forces, vibrations from music, of pheromonal particulate matter. The key characteristic of assemblages is that each of their elements affects or modifies their other elements so that no secure relations of subordination or superordination can be maintained within them”.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of the assemblage ties neatly into established ideas of material religion such as those set forth by Chidester in which religious materiality is active, flows across time and space, coalesces around certain charged points, and intermingles with other flows of materiality, absorbing them and changing in response. Additionally, new materialism in unison with the idea of the assemblage allows one to observe religion as something everchanging and composed of multiple agentic elements that, when coalesced and experienced at the subjective level, allow for various forms of religious experience and identity formation. Hazard explains:

“As a method, new materialism attends not to the contours of the privileged human subject but to the materiality of reputed subjects and objects alike. It helps us to see how religions are buzzing imbroglis populated by things, both human and non-human, like Bibles, golden plates, transatlantic telegraph cables, radio waves, pheromones, and strands of DNA. Those things may assemble with shrines, sets of eyeballs, electric grids, carpeting, papal vestments, monastic robes, microbes, menorahs, flames, blood, dirt, chairs, and calligraphic panels. In turn they might come to connect with and amplify magnetic forces, the movements of planets, fax machines, the smells of home, tattoos, cables, photographs, postcards, medieval triptychs, and firing neurons. To trace religion through all of this, of course, we must pass around and through the human.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hazard, “The Material Turn,” 65.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

Hazards explanation of new materialist methodology allows for an appreciation of the manifold “stuff” of religion and highlights both its potential and power. The elements of a religion’s material culture have meaning, power, and agency on their own, but when multiple facets of a given religion’s material culture coalesce at certain points in time and space, they charge and sanctify those points in time and space and allow the human element to express and experience religiosity individually and communally.

The collective lenses of these scholars of material religion intermingle with ideas of new materialism, which observes the affective nature and the agency of “things” in addition to the co-constitutive relationship they have with the human subject. Further scholars of religion such as Charles Hirschkind may be introduced as his work with the Cairene Muslim community and his exploration of its engagement with cassette sermons serve to highlight the power and agency of “things” in a religious setting.<sup>22</sup> These lenses and the new materialist notion of the assemblage can further be applied to particular new religious movements such as Nordic Neopaganism. With the inclusion of new materialist thought and the idea of the assemblage, one may observe a Nordic folk culture themed heavy metal festival such as Midgardsblot and view the event as the result of distinctly Nordic Neopagan valued materiality that flows and coalesces into a particular emergent point that while temporary, functions as a multivalent sacred space that fosters the development of religious identity, praxis, and community. While its proponents decry the fact that it is “not animism”, new materialism allows a fresh way to look at the affective

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2006).

nature of the natural environment, which in a Neopagan context represents an element of religious materiality that is affective across multiple levels in the sense that it not only induces experiences of the other in the form of the uncanny, but also orients the spiritual lives of practitioners and serve as a repository of folk cultural memory.

### **Research Methodology**

To begin to answer the question of whether or not heavy metal festivals may be considered sacred spaces for adherents of Nordic Neopaganism, I engaged in participant-observer fieldwork at two heavy metal festivals: Fire in the Mountains, held in Wyoming in late July of 2022, and Midgardsblot, held in mid-August of 2022 in Horten, Norway. I selected these festivals as they both represent gatherings of what scholar Christopher Partridge would describe as “occultural” in nature, providing focal points that would attract not only fans of heavy metal music, but metalheads who were also adherents of Nordic and other cultural variants of Neopaganism. Through their respective social media pages, the festival organizers for both events advertised the nature of these events: in addition to hosting prominent bands and musicians, some of whom incorporated Nordic and nature oriented folk symbolism into their music, these festivals also advertised that they would be featuring academic lectures relating to contemporary nature spirituality, Nordic Neopaganism, and in the case of Fire in the Mountains, indigenous knowledge of the land and land stewardship. Additionally, both festivals were to take place on sites previously and currently considered sacred to certain groups. Fire in the Mountains takes place at Heart Six Ranch in Wyoming at the base of the Teton Mountains, land previously and currently inhabited by the Shoshone and Nez Perce nations. Midgardsblot



takes place in Horton, Norway, at the Borrehaugene national park. This park is home to the Borre burial mounds and an on-site museum containing artifacts from some of these mounds. The importance of the land is referenced both on the social media pages of these festivals and in-person at the lectures and workshops hosted at each.

In addition to my participant observation at these festival sites, I conducted an electronic survey of attendees of Midgardsblot, disseminating this on the festival's official Facebook community page, *Midgardsblot Official Community*. I attempted to disseminate this survey on Fire in the Mountains' social media pages but ultimately the festival organizers were not comfortable with me doing so. This survey disseminated over the two months immediately following the Midgardsblot festival in Norway and was posted on the festival's official community page on Facebook. I was in discussion with the festival organizers of Fire in the Mountains to post a survey on their social media pages and was met with enthusiasm, but over months of following up this endeavor did not come to fruition. Though data was not collected for Fire in the Mountains, the festival itself may be read as catering more towards themes of general nature spirituality and land connectedness. Whereas in contrast, Midgardsblot possesses these themes while simultaneously promoting a distinct Nordic cultural character that may be read as being more conducive to drawing practitioners of Nordic Neopaganism. In the hopes of capitalizing on the (hopefully) positive emotions following Midgardsblot, I posted the electronic survey to their official community page between September 1<sup>st</sup> and October 31<sup>st</sup> of 2022. This survey contained questions related to religious identification, the role of music in religious expression, the role of the natural environment on personal religious

experience, and the role of festivals such as Midgardsblot in formulating communal and religious identity among others.

At the time of this survey's dissemination, the page had a follower population of 9200 people, and over the course of September and October, I garnered 93 responses, roughly 1% of the page's population. In the months following this initial dissemination period, the page's following has increased by roughly 16% and now sits at 10,905 members as of March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2023. As I was processing the survey data, I came to find out that though 93 people responded to the survey, only 50 people out of this grouping completed it. Going through the Qualtrics records, it was made apparent that the 43 people who did not complete the survey stopped after the first two questions so no relevant data could be collected. For the purposes of this inquiry, this group of 50, roughly 0.5% of the page's previous population of 9,200 at the time of the survey, will be the primary data population. Despite this setback, those who took the time to fully complete the survey provided valuable information that points towards these festivals being sacred spaces for those identifying as Nordic Neopagan, broadly Neopagan, or possessing other, alternative modes of religiosity.

The findings of this survey will be discussed across the forthcoming chapters and will solidify the notion that festivals such as Midgardsblot serve as sacred spaces within Nordic Neopaganism. In Chapter 1, I will provide an introduction to the multivalent nature of Nordic Neopaganism as a non-dogmatic religion that empowers its adherents with a great degree of personal creativity when it comes to establishing praxis and worldview. Firstly, I will develop a brief history of Nordic Neopaganism and describe

how its nature as a non-dogmatic religious system enables adherents to not only construct individualized religiosities, but to have religious and communal experiences in alternative spaces such as the heavy metal festival. Here I will be making recourse to scholars Barbara Jane Davy, Michael Strmiska, Mathias Nordvig, and Rune Rasmussen among others whose collective works will be helpful in setting the scene for this steadily growing religious movement. I will flesh these notions out further by introducing the work of Don Yoder and Leonard Primiano to illustrate Nordic Neopaganism as a contemporary, vernacular folk religion. With this idea in place, I will then discuss the relationship between Nordic Neopaganism and the digital sphere to be followed by an explanation relating to alternative authority figures that have propagated due to the digital sphere, namely musicians belonging to the Nordic Folk and Heavy Metal genres. To conclude this chapter, I will provide relevant data points concerning the levels of religious identification with Nordic and other cultural iterations of Neopaganism in attendance at Midgardsblot to show that this festival may be interpreted as a focal point for those self-identifying as Nordic Neopagan, as a majority of respondents indicated this as their religious identity.

Chapter Two will serve to explore the natural environment as an example of religious materiality and its relevance to Nordic Neopaganism. Here I will briefly touch upon the ideas pertaining to religious materialism discussed in this introduction and will use these ideas as point of departure to explore the role of the landscape as an affective element of religious materiality. By making recourse to the works of Thomas Rickert, Jaimie Gunderson, Phillip Charles Lucas, and Helen Cornish, I will discuss the affective

power of the natural world and the symbiotic role human beings play in reinforcing this affective power present in the natural environment through discourse and action upon said environment, such as the delineation of valued space and the construction of temple complexes. I will further explore the affective nature of the landscape by discussing the landscape's role as a repository of memory by incorporating the work of Jon P. Mitchell and Slavica Rankovic. Following this I will synthesize the ideas of these scholars and present relevant data points and accounts of attendees concerning the role of the landscape in their festival experiences. The data and the personal accounts provided by the survey participants will show that Midgardsblot serves as a contemporary, affective ritual site that is empowered year upon year by human interaction and discourse but also functions as a site where contemporary Nordic Neopagan memory is created and kept, continually reinforcing the festival and the Borre mounds as a sacred site in Nordic Neopaganism.

Chapter Three continues my engagement with material religion as a theoretical lens, but here it will be used to focus on music as an important aspect of Nordic Neopagan religious materiality due to its capacity as a medium for storytelling, facilitating embodiment, and subjective conditioning. I begin by putting scholar practitioner of Nordic Neopaganism Rune Rasmussen and feminist scholar Donna Haraway in conversation concerning Nordic Animism, a growing subgroup within Nordic Neopaganism, and the process of storytelling in the religious context. Following, I will discuss the role that music plays as a preservative force for folk and ritual memory by exploring its role in contemporary Neopagan groups and what role niche musical

genres such as Pagan Metal and Folk Metal play in this endeavor. For this I will make recourse to scholars of Neopaganism and Neopagan music such as Michael Strmiska, Donna Weston, Deena Weinstein, and Christopher Chase. I segue from this to a discussion on the role of music within religions at large, paying special attention to music's affective power pertaining to embodiment and the construction of communal identity and what scholar Owen Coggins refers to as "imagined elsewheres," or what scholar Robin Sylvan refers to as virtual realities, domains of the imaginary informed by the symbolism received through the experience of music.

I will primarily be making recourse to scholars of sound and religion such as Guy L. Beck, Isaac Weiner, Robin Sylvan, Charles Hirschkind, and Owen Coggins, whose work identifies sound as a key component within religious performance in addition to a vehicle for religious embodiment, religious identity construction, and community binding. I will follow this discussion with an exploration of Derrida's concept of hauntology and how it relates to music being able to create an idealization of the past and how this coincides with music's engagement as religious materiality in contemporary Neopagan groups. Following this I engage with scholarship both on music and religion in addition to scholarship relating to sound theory, discussing music's role as a key component for facilitating religious experience and for allowing individuals to condition themselves into what Hirschkind would call "pious" subjects by way of exposure to a religiously valuated sonosphere, or the sonic component of reality. This section of the chapter will serve as a point of departure to discuss the pertinent data and discussion points of festival attendees, namely those related to the feelings of embodiment and

altered states of awareness brought upon by the music experience at *Midgardsblot* and how this impacts or does not impact their festival experience. This chapter locates music as one of the central features of a Nordic Neopagan body of materiality alongside the natural environment and leads to the following chapter's discussion of *Midgardsblot* as a contemporary pilgrimage site for Nordic Neopaganism because it is a gravitational point for so many elements of this body of materiality.

Chapter Four will feature a description of my participant observation at both *Fire in the Mountains* and *Midgardsblot* and a discussion of these festivals as pilgrimage sites. While I will discuss my experiences at both festivals and while I will make comparisons between the two, in this chapter I will primarily be focusing on the *Midgardsblot* festival since it is explicitly a celebration of Nordic folk culture and will draw more people self-identifying as Nordic Neopagan. The description of my participant observation experience will be accompanied by a discussion relating to the establishment of sacred space and the role that legitimizing dialogue plays in the establishment of such a space. For this, I will engage with the works of Yi Fu Tuan, Michael di Giovane, and Jaeyeon Choe who collectively reflect upon the role of language and discourse in legitimizing places as sacred and worthy of pilgrimage. Following, I will engage in a discussion relating to the *Midgardsblot* festival as a sacred space that is conducive to the formation of an alternative socio-religious community. For this task I will make recourse to the work of Christopher Partridge and Robert Gardner. Partridge's idea of occulture, a label he provides to discuss alternative, countercultural religious movements such as various forms of Neopaganism dovetails with Gardner's exploration of what he labels as a

portable community: alternative communities arising in response to such phenomenon as modernization, perceived secularization, and social isolation present in the Global North. This discussion will be followed by a presentation of data and accounts of festival attendees pertaining to their feelings relating to community and any perceived mental health benefits or feelings of wellbeing they experience during and after Midgardsblot.

I will conclude by addressing my guiding research questions with a summary of data points and accounts of fan experiences that support the understanding of Midgardsblot as a sacred event. I will then elaborate on this project's contributions to the field, primarily to the subfields of material religion and Neopagan studies and discuss the limitations of this study. Finally, I will offer recommendations pertaining to potential future research, namely towards the investigation of other, extant popular music festivals that feature Neopagan aligned bands and elements of folk symbolism that could serve as sites of Neopagan identity and religiosity construction

## **Chapter One: Contemporary Nordic Neopaganism**

Contemporary Nordic Neopaganism, while drawn from fragments of folk tradition and the bodies of myth that have persisted for hundreds of years, did not emerge in its current state until the mid-twentieth century. Since then, Nordic Neopaganism has enjoyed steady growth and continues to be attractive for spiritual seekers in a continually modernizing and shrinking world. Despite being a growing religious movement, currently there are no accurate population numbers to describe adherents of Nordic Neopaganism. When I attempted to research global population numbers for Nordic Neopaganism on the Pew Research Center website, I was directed to a 2012 survey that lists adherents of Wicca among the population of adherents to “other” religions such as Shintoism and Taoism, stating that the entirety of this combined population constitutes 1% of the global population, roughly 58 million people.<sup>23</sup> In addition to this, the Pew Research Center lists adherents of folk religions as 6% of the global population, though in the case of the Pew Center these religions are considered those beliefs of indigenous populations, and contemporary faiths drawing from European and Mediterranean folk traditions are not included in this percentage.<sup>24</sup> Despite this, there exists some data describing Nordic Neopaganism’s presence on the international stage.

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<sup>23</sup> “The Global Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, December 18, 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>.

<sup>24</sup> “Folk Religionists,” Pew Research Center, December 18, 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-folk/>.



In their 2021 report on international religious freedom, the U.S. State department provided data on the Nordic countries. Of these countries, it was reported that Iceland possessed a notable population of adherents, 1.4%, to Asatruarfelagid, a Nordic Neopagan organization that has enjoyed visibility in Icelandic culture for the past few decades.<sup>25</sup> One of many new religious movements emerging in the mid twentieth century in North America and Northern Europe, Nordic Neopaganism has consistently attracted believers dissatisfied with their religions of birth or the Western religious status quo. As this new religious movement has grown, it has developed noteworthy branches to the point where one could begin to label differences corresponding to geographic area. Scholars such as Michael Strmiska note differences in religiosity between the North American and Scandinavian groupings of Nordic Neopaganism, with the North American groups possessing a religiosity adjacent to Protestant Christianity or United States civil religion in that concepts of morality, social order, and gods such as Odin and Thor are deities with an inherent “strict father” morality.<sup>26</sup> While these sensibilities are not mutually exclusive to a North American context, Scandinavian Nordic Neopaganism emphasizes a religiosity that is based more on historical reconstruction, cultural preservation, and the re-establishment of a relationship between human beings, the gods, and vaettir (nature spirits) for personal and environmental well-being.<sup>27</sup> Similar to other Neopagan traditions such as Wicca, Nordic Neopaganism does not possess a strict,

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<sup>25</sup> “2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iceland,” U.S. Department of State, June 2, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iceland/>.

<sup>26</sup> George Lakoff, *Moral Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 67.

<sup>27</sup> Rasmussen, “What is Animism”

central hierarchy that delineates authoritative figures; as such, it is up to individual practitioners to consult works pertaining to Nordic folk tradition to flesh out their own religiosity.<sup>28</sup> This results in manifold ways in which adherents may practice and define this religion. This is magnified by the fact that many adherents come to Nordic Neopaganism out of not only an appreciation for Scandinavian and northern European folk culture and myth, but of dissatisfaction with popular religion.

### **Defining Nordic Neopaganism**

There are differing opinions in the scholarly community relating to defining this emergent tradition as a spirituality or a religion. Certain scholar-practitioners label this tradition as a spirituality due to its lack of strict authoritative hierarchy and emphasis on personal freedom relating to ritual practice.<sup>29</sup> To scholars outside of this tradition such as Christopher Partridge, Don Yoder, and Leonard Primiano, Neopaganisms are countercultural religious movements. They are rejections of mainstream religious tradition, and they both feature and embrace historically countercultural spiritual and folk practices related to occultism, witchcraft, as well as the mythologies and folk traditions of Nordic Europe.

For the purposes of this work, I take the formations of Nordic Neopaganism as vernacular folk religions, religious formations that are countercultural to the popular religious status quo and which are informed by the personal choices of adherents pertaining to worldview and ritual practice. Furthermore, vernacular folk religions are

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<sup>28</sup> Mathias Nordvig, *Asatru for Beginners: A Modern Heathen's Guide to the Ancient Northern Way* (Emeryville: Rockridge Press, 2020), 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

identified by their lack of strict central hierarchy or dogmatism, allowing for manifold expressions of the religion at the personal level. Though Nordic Neopaganisms do not possess a unifying dogma or central hierarchy of authority, there is an amorphous unifying body of materiality ranging from historical, folk, and mythological texts to music and visual art that serve to inform Nordic Neopagan practice and bind Nordic Neopagans. Additionally, there are emergent authority figures in the form of artists and academic content creators that, while not serving as a central hierarchy, are being drawn upon to inform practice and worldview at the individual and small group levels.<sup>30</sup>

Though it is common for like-minded, Nordic folk culture-oriented seekers to find one another and form fellowships or kindreds, a fair number of Nordic Neopagans are what scholars Barbara Jane Davy refers to as “solitaries”.<sup>31</sup> These solitaries usually practice ritual and refine their beliefs on their own and do not commonly convene with like-minded souls, though opportunities for solitaries to integrate with their fellow Neopagans are present. When possible, they engage with like-minded people digitally, participating in a global community that puts them in contact with one another in addition to noteworthy content creators with whom they can exchange ideas and flesh out their praxis.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Nordic Neopagans will engage in pilgrimage to events they deem valuable to their religious identity formation, such as traveling to attend regional

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<sup>30</sup> Ross Downing, “Hashtag Heathens: Contemporary Germanic Pagan Feminine Visuals on Instagram,” *The Pomegranate* 21, no. 2 (2019): 207.

<sup>31</sup> Barbara Jane Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies* (Plymouth, Altamira Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Downing, “Hashtag Heathens,” 207.

gatherings hosted by established Nordic Neopagan groups or social media personalities.<sup>33</sup> Often these gatherings will feature communal rituals such as *Symbel* and *Blot*, ritual toasting ceremonies described in saga, mythic, and historic literature.<sup>34</sup> Music festivals that possess Nordic folk cultural themes such as Midgardsblot represent an emergent pilgrimage destination for contemporary Nordic Neopagans, providing a setting in which adherents may engage with elements of Nordic Neopagan materiality to inform religiosity and identity.

Such an assertion led me to dwell on the following questions: are people attending Midgardsblot and having religious experiences or is it simply a gathering of like-minded people with a purely social element? Does the music featured facilitate religious experiences for those in attendance in different avenues of their lives or rather, does it enhance the festival experience altogether in a spiritual way? Furthermore, can Midgardsblot be understood as a sacred site for this emergent tradition? To begin addressing these questions, I will discuss the recent history of Nordic Neopaganism and explore its current state as a vernacular folk religion, one that allows for significant creativity regarding praxis at the individual and communal levels. Following, I will discuss pertinent sub-groups of Nordic Neopaganism and its place in global digital culture by touching upon the work of scholars such as Mathias Nordvig, Rune Hjarno Rasmussen, Jennifer Snook, Michael Strmiska, and Ross Downing. I will then briefly discuss Nordic Neopagan adjacent bands as authoritative figures and their capacity to

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<sup>33</sup> Jacob Toddson, "The Fall Gathering 2021 | The Wisdom of Odin," Jacob Toddson, September 27, 2021, video, 43:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8Syk4MLGDs>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

inform Nordic Neopagan practice. I will then set the stage to later argue that the Midgardsblot festival represents a sacred space in which this and other aspects of Nordic Neopagan materiality may be experienced.

### **The (Re)Emergence of European Folkways**

Interest in pre-Christian European folk cultures has steadily grown on both sides of the Atlantic for the past several decades. Prior to the emergence of Nordic Neopaganism, the elements of the pre-Christian European folk culture that would inform these traditions persisted strongly in rural areas of Northern Europe. Fragments of these traditions were preserved in place names, folk practices such as seasonal celebrations, popular mythologies of deities, and the practice of leaving offerings to the other than human entities inhabiting the natural environment such as elves, trolls, and nisse.<sup>35</sup>

The interaction between pre-Christian folk cultural praxis and urban centered politics eventually led to the appearance of European romantic nationalist movements. During the period of conquest, colonization, and consolidation of global power in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, Northern European state entities such as the Third Reich sought to focus on the question of “what unites and defines us as a people?” Certain attempts to flesh out this query came to a head in the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century European nationalist movements with Germany providing a notable, dire example in the form of the Third Reich.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Nordvig, *Asatru for Beginners*, ” 37.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Strmiska, “Pagan Politics in the 21st Century: ‘Peace and Love’ or ‘Blood and Soil?’” *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 20, no. 1 (2018): 17

Following the German defeat, the search for a romantic national lineage continued elsewhere in Europe, with one notable movement emerging in post-war Great Britain. Headed by Gerald Gardner, Wicca was constructed through his interest in, and study of Celtic Brittonic pre-Christian practices and English folklore preserved in England's rural areas.<sup>37</sup> Wicca along with other traditions popularized by the romantic explorations of European folk culture found themselves further popularized by the countercultural movements of the 1950's and 60's. The global countercultural exploration led to the development of the many Neopagan traditions we currently see circulating in addition to the growth of spiritual systems such as the New Age movement which utilizes elements of these cultural folk traditions along with elements of East and South Asian religious traditions.<sup>38</sup>

Contemporary Nordic Neopaganism emerged in the international social consciousness as a countercultural religious movement in the early to mid-twentieth century following the emergence of Wicca and the growing interest in alternative spiritual traditions visible in countercultural movement of the time. Scholar Michael Strmiska extrapolates in his article *Pagan Politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* that "modern Paganism may be said to be the child of an uneasy union between nineteenth century folk romanticism and twenty first century post-modernism".<sup>39</sup> The latter, whose "collapse of dominant authority structures and cultural narratives opened a new horizon of religious

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<sup>37</sup> Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies*, 125.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid* 7.

<sup>39</sup> Strmiska, "Pagan Politics," 9.

pluralism, multiculturalism, and a trend toward tolerance of “difference” in Western societies”.<sup>40</sup> The emergence of Wicca was closely followed by a popularization of European folk practices such as Italian Stregheria, Celtic Druidry, and Nordic Heathenry. Since then, these Neopagan practices have grown in popularity.

Scholars of Neopaganism, while recognizing the problematic nature of an essentialist framework, have sought to identify commonalities within these re-emergent traditions while paying respect to their birth cultures. Ethan Doyle Wright, explains as follows.

“The most accurate way of analytically defining and understanding the contemporary Neopagan milieu from a scholarly perspective is to view it as a ‘family’ of related religious, spiritual, magical, and esoteric movements, all of which are self-consciously inspired by those belief systems of Europe, North Africa, and the Near East which were not Abrahamic but which existed prior to the Abrahamic religions’ rise to dominance”.<sup>41</sup>

As such, Neopaganism is a term that encompasses many ethnically and geographically specific pre-Christian practices hailing from Europe that emphasize a personal and communal spiritual relationship with the human and other-than-human denizens of the natural world. Of note is that different subgroups of Nordic Neopaganism emphasize different levels of relationality: the emergent phenomenon of Nordic Animism features prominent academic adherents analyzing the Nordic historical and cultural record to highlight the similarities of Nordic folk practice and worldview with those of indigenous cultures in the northern hemisphere and the global south. The cross-cultural

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<sup>40</sup> Strmiska, “Pagan Politics,” 9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

dialogue that has emerged from this has resulted in a discussion that defines Neopagan practices such as Nordic Animism as ones of relation building between the individual, the surrounding community, and the seen and unseen relatives residing in the natural environment.<sup>42</sup>

### **Recent History**

The non-dogmatic and varied nature of Nordic Neopaganism allows it to be identified as what Leonard Primiano identifies as a vernacular religion, a practice that is informed by choices at the individual level that can look like cherry picking from established traditions.<sup>43</sup> For those interested in Nordic Neopaganism, this eclectic approach is not only valid but necessary, as a fair amount of Nordic cultural history has been lost with the growth of European Christianity. People have gone off of what remains in the historical and mythological record in addition to preserved rural folk practices to establish modernized versions of these traditions. Strmiska and Mathias Nordvig, scholar of Nordic Mythology, Folklore, and Language both locate the events that led to the nascence of Nordic Paganism as taking place in the 1950's with the emergence and popularization of Wicca in Britain while both locate Nordic Neopaganism as occurring in the early 1970's in both North America and Northern Europe.<sup>44</sup> The Icelandic group Asatruarfelagid and the North American group The Viking Brotherhood officially emerge in 1972.<sup>45</sup> Of these formations, Iceland's Asatruarfelagid has grown to international

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<sup>42</sup> Rasmussen, "What is Animism"

<sup>43</sup> Primiano, "Vernacular Religion," 50.

<sup>44</sup> Nordvig, *Asatru for Beginners*, 19.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid* 19.



prominence. Founded by farmer and poet Sveinbjorn Beinteinsson, it was intended as a society meant to be “a loose organization who believed in the old gods and other deities associated with the old Heathen times” that has since grown to the point where they are recognized as an Icelandic state religion.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile on the other side of the Atlantic, the Viking Brotherhood is established in Texas by Stephen McNallen and Robert Stine.<sup>47</sup> Strmiska notes that the Viking Brotherhood would change into the Asatru Folk Assembly, the first of many North American Nordic Neopagan umbrella organizations to establish a loose organizational hierarchy, distinctly Nordic cultural worldview, and ritual body gleaned from textual sources such as the *Prose Edda*, *Poetic Edda*, and *Heimskringla* by Icelandic bishop Snorri Sturluson and the Anglo-Saxon work *Beowulf* which provided a view into “Scandinavian warrior life”.<sup>48</sup> I would like to take this time to address the problematic nature of Stephen McNallen and the Asatru Folk Assembly. McNallen and the AFA possesses a “volkisch” ideology that assumes Nordic Neopaganism is an exclusive religion for people of ethnic European descent. As I will discuss later, this is not the norm, but it is present within the religion, and at events like Midgardsblot, performers and scholar-practitioners use their platform to counter this ideology and promote an inclusive festival environment and an inclusive Nordic Neopaganism.

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, ABC CLIO Press, 2005), 166.

<sup>47</sup> Strmiska, *Modern Paganism*, 129.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 139.

## Differentiations

Though practitioners of Nordic Neopaganism in both Europe and North America draw upon much of the same sources, there are regional and cultural differences in praxis that are visible between the North American and Scandinavian contexts. Strmiska notes key cultural differences between these regional groupings, particularly concerning religious fervor and ideas concerning the nature of the gods and how they should be worshipped. He locates these ideas in the inherent religious culture of the believers' respective geographic areas. He notes:

“An intriguing difference is that American Asatruar and Heathens tend toward a more devotional form of worship and a more emotional conception of the Nordic gods than do their Icelandic and Scandinavian counterparts, perhaps influenced by the highly emotional forms of Christianity that have become increasingly prevalent in the United States in recent decades. American Nordic Neopagans want to feel an intimate relationship with their gods, not unlike evangelical attitudes toward Jesus. Icelandic Asatruar by contrast are more focused on devotion to their past cultural heritage rather than to particular gods”.<sup>49</sup>

This is not to say that there aren't North American practitioners who share the view of Scandinavian practitioners and vice versa, as a non-dogmatic spiritual tradition, much is left up to the individual practitioner or the local community of practitioners regarding practice and interpretation. Though there are communally-appointed authorities at the local level, there is no firm hierarchy, and many adherents choose to take cues not only from established sources of “lore”, but also from fellow practitioners that have developed a form of authority through study or creative practice.

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<sup>49</sup> Strmiska, *Modern Paganism*, 165.

The body of lore represents a form of authority to adhere to and rally around for contemporary Nordic Pagans, particularly important as most are solitary practitioners. In an already non-dogmatic practice within a larger umbrella of beliefs that emphasize individual and micro-communal creativity, this body of lore serves as an anchor point.<sup>50</sup> Modern practitioners will also pay close attention to and take cues from archaeological finds such as runestones and settlements to further refine their belief.<sup>51</sup> Nordic Neopaganisms are actively being shaped by global trends and the sensibilities of their believers, depending on geographic area. Three prominent subgroups can be identified: Asatru, Heathenry, and Nordic Animism.

Nordic Neopaganism and the regionally oriented belief systems resting beneath its proverbial boughs have elicited contentions from both practitioners and scholars regarding their definitions as spiritualities or religions. While those in the larger religious studies community have been known to refer to various Neopaganisms as new religious movements or religions, some argue whether they are religions or spiritualities, arguments made pertinent by the fact that a fair number of adherents spurn organized religion due to negative past experiences.<sup>52</sup> Scholar of Nordic history Mathias Nordvig identifies subgroups of Nordic Neopagan spirituality which are loosely defined and said definition is usually self-applied relating to a given practitioner's sensibilities. While the varying

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<sup>50</sup> Strmiska, *Modern Paganism*, 25.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

<sup>52</sup> Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement*. (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2015), 28.

nomenclature can lead to confusion, one may view minor differentiations relating to worldview and practices amongst these groups.

Nordvig is hesitant to label Nordic Neopaganisms as religions, at least as the term is understood by the popular milieu. Instead, he argues that they should be understood as spiritualities, stating the following:

“Heathenry is a non-dogmatic community belief, there is no scripture that a member or believer must follow and there are no clergy and priests who hold authority. Every group has their own way – their own rules and their own leaders<sup>53</sup>. This non-dogmatic atmosphere allows for a large degree of spiritual creativity and synchronicity, leading to many adherents looking towards culturally adjacent Neopagan and indigenous traditions to round out their personal practices. Adherents engage in similar practice, with eclectic Neopagan individuals and groups selecting material relational practices and esoteric techniques from other established Neopagan practices or established religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism<sup>54</sup>.

While there are variants of Nordic Neopaganism such as Heathenry and Nordic Animism, there further variance at the small group and individual level that can be measured by the degree of borrowing that occurs by practitioners. Reconstructionist groups will attempt to adhere to the historical record while minimally engaging in cross-spirituality borrowing, whereas eclectic individuals and groups will bring in more external sources in their personal practices<sup>55</sup>.

### **Vernacular Folk Religion**

As a collective whole, the traditions under the Nordic Neopaganism umbrella represent a multifaceted re-emergent tradition that challenges preconceptions and

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<sup>53</sup> Nordvig, *Asatru for Beginners*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Strmiska, “Pagan Politics,” 8.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

consternates those seeking an essentializing definition. I feel it pertinent to identify Nordic Neopaganism and its variants as contemporary, vernacular folk spiritualities. In his article “Towards a Definition of Folk Religion”, Don Yoder extrapolates upon the term. His definition of folk religion is as follows:

“Folk religion is the ‘folk-cultural’ dimension of religion or the religious dimension of folk culture. This can include active/creative as well as passive survivalist elements, it also certainly can suggest the element of tension existing between folk and official levels of religion in a complex society.”<sup>56</sup>

He continues: “Folk religion is the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion.”<sup>57</sup> The folk traditions and related elements that people draw upon to constitute contemporary Nordic Neopagan formations survived on the fringes of Northern European society for centuries as practices that were countercultural to the major religions of the urbanized populations. After persisting on the margins these fragments have been gathered to formulate a religious tradition that continues to grow dendritically due to the myriad personal worldviews and practices incorporated by practitioners and enabled by the lack of strict hierarchy and dogmatism.

The insistence among practitioners that Nordic Neopaganism is non-dogmatic, without orthodoxy and orthopraxy, in addition to a myriad of local authorities and groups who inform individual praxis, means that Nordic Neopaganism can look different depending on who is practicing it and who is characterizing it. This non-dogmatic

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<sup>56</sup> Yoder, “Folk Religion,” 80.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

atmosphere allows for personal creativity, leading to many adherents looking towards major religious traditions, other Neopagan traditions, and certain indigenous traditions such as the Australian Aborigines, for inspiration.<sup>58</sup> This fluidity of belief fits Yoder's assertion that "the reinterpretations of the official religion are on the folk level" and his claim that folk religion includes "passive and active elements such as witchcraft and magic and the engagement with religious visual and sonic arts".<sup>59</sup> Yoder's definition is a valuable point of departure towards the theory of vernacular religion presented by Leonard Primiano in his 1995 article "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife." Primiano provides a crucial component to a definition of Nordic Neopaganism as a type of folk spirituality, that being the worldviews and praxis engaged in different forms and circumstances at the level of the individual practitioner. Primiano emphasizes the individual nature of religious belief and utilizes the term "vernacular" to emphasize that religion, regardless of its form, is ultimately a personal endeavor and will shift when the individual believer experiences new religious encounters and modifies their personal belief:

"Vernacular religious theory involves an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the religious lives of individuals with special attention to the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief involving a process of acquisition and formation by way of conscious and unconscious negotiations of and between believers."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Rune Rasmussen, "Aun 2023 4 – Yarn with Tyson Yunkaporta," Nordic Animism, March 25, 2022, video, 1:26:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yP1eKn91gII>

<sup>59</sup> Yoder, "Folk Religion," 82.

<sup>60</sup> Primiano, "Vernacular Religion," 44.

Primiano's vernacular religious theory is particularly useful when applied to recent religious movements such as Nordic Neopaganism. Those drawn to the religion are often solitary seekers and construct their religious identity through engagement with the continually growing body of lore, which consists not only of histories, sagas, and mythologies, but also of the works of emergent exemplary and authoritative figures in the tradition and who are active in social media spaces, where they provide elaborations on Nordic Neopagan worldview and ritual praxis through recorded informal discussions, lectures, and artistic pursuits such as music. Yoder's definition of folk religion as a belief sitting alongside and in contrast to mainstream belief systems describes Nordic Neopaganism's countercultural beginnings and present condition alongside a Protestant influenced Western social culture. Primiano's theory of vernacular religion may be applied to Nordic Neopaganism as well because the individual adherents personally shape their beliefs and allow their beliefs to be shaped through constructive interaction with other believers, whether they be "everyday" practitioners or those occupying places of spiritual authority. With this in mind, I consider Nordic Neopaganism and its variants instances of contemporary, vernacular folk religion. The nature of Nordic Neopaganism and its variants, that being a spiritual system primarily constructed and refined by the additions made at the individual and small group levels, is further compounded by the digital realm.

### **Authoritative Figures (in the Digital Realm)**

The digital realm is a fruitful area to observe the growth and alteration of established religious traditions and new religious or spiritual movements. Nordic Neopaganism and its variants such as Asatru, Heathenry, and Nordic Animism are just

such examples of spiritual traditions experiencing growth because of this realm. A fair number of Nordic Neopagans practice on their own, trusting their intuition when engaging with the body of Nordic myth to develop their spiritual practice and identity. Some practice in small groups led by communally elected ritual specialists selected for their knowledge of cosmology and historic ritual praxis, and who fulfill the role of Gothi or Gythja, ritual officiants described in historical sources. With the prevalence and accessibility of the digital medium, alternative and wide-reaching authority figures have emerged. Such figures range from established academics to musicians and artists to media savvy content creators.

Followers of Nordic Neopaganism and its variants often perform their own research into pre-Christian Nordic culture in an effort to construct their individual worldview and praxis.<sup>61</sup> The established but growing body of lore consulted by Nordic Neopagans was in the past composed of Nordic mythology, historic accounts pertaining to the Nordic cultural area, and archaeological findings. With the emergence of the internet, the body of lore has expanded and has even allowed certain academic figures to be more accessible. Rune Rasmussen, historian of religion and practitioner of emerging branch of Nordic Neopaganism, Nordic Animism, utilizes YouTube as a platform to reach interested parties. His channel, Nordic Animism, reinvigorates the concept of animism and emphasize the fact that the pre-Christian folk practices that are drawn upon to construct Nordic Neopaganism were probably more akin to extant practices of indigenous groups and that both exploration and adherence to the idea of Nordic

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<sup>61</sup> Snook, *American Heathens*, 12.



Animism can ultimately be helpful facing the approaching climate catastrophe in addition to promoting inclusivity, social justice, and opposing eco-fascism, which certain problematic Neopagan groups such as the AFA and Operation Werewolf, discussed later, promote.<sup>62</sup> The Nordic Animist movement is explicitly anti-racist, anti-fascist, and ultimately inclusive.<sup>63</sup> Rasmussen is an example of an academic digital personality informing the practice of contemporary Neopagans, yet there are those outside the realm of academia such as visual artists, musicians, and content creators sharing their work on Instagram and YouTube that can be considered as not only providing additions to the body of lore, but establishing themselves as alternative, accessible authoritative figures to whom practitioners may turn when refining their understanding and practice of Nordic Neopaganism.

Ross Downing explores the relevance and reach of certain Instagram accounts to the Nordic Neopagan digital sphere. Downing interviews a group of largely female content creators he terms “Alphas” that he selected to correspond with on the basis that they had at least 500 followers and that they explicitly identified as being Nordic Neopagan.<sup>64</sup> These “Alpha Accounts” work through their understanding of Nordic Neopagan concepts through artistic photography accompanied by lengthy discussions of their thoughts and interpretations of the aspect of Nordic myth they are portraying. One of the artists Downing spoke with portrayed herself as a feminine version of the god Odin

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<sup>62</sup> Rune Rasmussen, “Ragnarok,” Nordic Animism, July 18, 2021, video, 19:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xj0GBGj6QeE>

<sup>63</sup> “Nordic Animism,” Nordic Animism, accessed May, 20, 2023, <https://nordicanimism.com/>

<sup>64</sup> Downing, “Hashtag Heathens,” 186.

and accompanied her self-portrait with a discussion on said god and specific hashtags such as #heathen and #pagan to draw the attention of kindred spirits.<sup>65</sup> This creative outlet combined with sincere personal interpretation has led these alpha accounts to accrue a fair number of followers who actively engage with them in the form of likes, comments, and discussion. Because of this popular engagement with their photography, their interaction with followers, and their accessibility on the Instagram platform, Downing argues that these alpha accounts are non-traditional figures of Nordic Neopagan authority.

Downing's exploration provides one example of how the digital realm serves practitioners as a platform through which to refine their praxis and worldview through engagement with relevant content creators. Unfortunately, there are problematic Neopagans propagating hate and fringe, far-right ideologies on digital platforms. One example is Operation Werewolf. On the surface, this group appears to be concerned with athletic training, appreciating heavy metal, and exploring both Indo-European and Nordic ritual practice and worldview for utilization in a lonely, globalized world.<sup>66</sup> After a perusal of the group's history, however, one finds that the group is an offshoot of the "Wolves of Vinland", an organization labeled as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center due to their white supremacist leanings.<sup>67</sup> Nordic folk musical groups such as

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<sup>65</sup> Downing, "Hashtag Heathens," 197.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Waggoner, "Welcome Back," Operation Werewolf, June 21, 2022, <https://operationwerewolf.com/war-journal/2022/06/21/welcome-back/>

<sup>67</sup> Cari Wade Gervin, "Vengeance Strength Kvlt Gym in East Nashville has ties to Alt-Right," Nashville Scene, July 20, 2017, <https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/pith-in-the-wind/article/20868176/strength-cult-gym-in-east-nashville-has-ties-to-altright>

Denmark's Heilung and Norway's Wardruna may also be classified as non-traditional authoritative entities. They too are quite active on social media and provide musings on Nordic mythology, insights into their personal ritual and creative practices, and direct their followers to their respective YouTube and Spotify accounts to experience their distinctly Nordic Neopagan music.

### **Alternative Authorities and Sacred Spaces**

With Nordic Neopaganism defined as a vernacular folk religion emphasizing personal choice and lacking a strict, central hierarchy, Nordic Neopagan identifying bands and performers such as Wardruna and Heilung solidify themselves as contemporary authority figures due to their accessibility and self-narration on social media. The bands' self-narration is wide ranging, and beyond Instagram posts includes written and recorded interviews with pop-cultural publications and academics curating social media accounts. Across these outlets the groups explain their personal histories with Nordic Neopaganism, their intent for their musical projects, and the ritual technologies utilized in their respective composition processes.<sup>68</sup> Speaking on behalf of Wardruna in an interview with VICE Magazine, lead vocalist Einar Selvik narrates that he and his contemporaries actively seek to empower their sound through a consciously ritualistic creative process that involves the construction and performance of traditional Nordic instruments, the use of Old Norse as a composition language, the use of traditional melodies, and the use of elements from the natural world such as the ambience

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<sup>68</sup> Mathias Nordvig, "Heilung – Interview with Kai Faust," YouTube. August 18, 2019, video, 15:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jB4VtvGZrks>.

of a flowing river or the sounds of colliding glacial ice cores.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Heilung narrate their ritualized creative process through interviews and via social media. In an interview with *The Guardian*, members of the band explain how they ritually craft their instruments and costumes in accordance with historical records and with specific natural materials, the most notorious of which are human bones and blood. When asked about the usage of human bones, Kai Faust was states:

“It adds a ritualistic touch. In Tibetan ritual music, you have a drum made from two human skull caps, you have a flute made from a human thigh bone. In certain African cultures, there are records of instruments being made with human skin. For people from older cultures, it’s important for them to have good connections to their ancestors”.<sup>70</sup>

To their credit, members of Heilung have quite literally given part of themselves to sanctifying their chosen instruments. Using their own blood, professionally extracted by a friend of the band who is a nurse, they have ritually blessed their instruments, most notably their large drum they have named “Blod” (blood) that is still stained red from the act.<sup>71</sup>

These bands are not only considered authoritative for their self-narration and sharing of their ritual creative processes, they are noteworthy authority figures for their proliferation of a popular element of Nordic Neopagan lore, music and melody heavy with symbolism gleaned from an idealized Nordic past, performed by the bands simultaneously as a self-reflexive exploration of their own spiritual selves and as an art

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<sup>69</sup> Ben Handelman, “Wardruna is Sowing New Seeds and Strengthening Old Roots,” *Vice Magazine*, October 18, 2016. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qbvjqw/wardruna-is-sowing-new-seeds-and-strengthening-old-roots>.

<sup>70</sup> Leivers. “The Drum Needed a Blood Sacrifice”

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

form that can be engaged by adherents of Nordic Neopaganism in their day to day and spiritual lives. The popularity of their music among Nordic Neopagan aligned listeners has opened the door for the establishment of an alternative sacred space that adherents can make pilgrimage to: the music festival.

### **Religious Identification at Midgardsblot**

Because of their Nordic Neopagan identification and the respect given to them by fans, festivals possessing Nordic folk and nature-oriented performers, lectures, and workshops such as Midgardsblot may be seen as religious sites for Nordic Neopagans, temporary temples. In this space, these bands and their music occupy a central focal point. The bands and their music represent one facet of the Nordic Neopagan materiality present at these events: they and their craft amplify and are amplified by the non-musical performances and features such as historical reenactment, lectures, and public ritual. The striking natural landscape is also included in this bricolage, which in the case of Midgardsblot is home to burial mounds and an on-site museum containing artifacts from these burial sites. The coalescence of these elements of Nordic Neopagan materiality establish the Midgardsblot festival as a sacred space where the music and symbolic action reverberate with the souls of those gathered, making them hyperaware of the multivalent elements of lore surrounding them, leading to the establishment of *communitas* and the refinement of Nordic Neopagan subjectivity. As the following survey data reflects, a noticeable portion of the survey population profess belonging to Nordic Neopaganism or possessing an alternative, nature centered religiosity.

The first question of the survey asks: “Do you identify as belonging to or being interested in Nordic Neopaganism?” and corresponds to one of my key research

questions, that being “what kinds of religious identities does this festival allow participants to express and cultivate?”. From the data gathered, the festival represents a space where multiple, countercultural religious identities may be expressed, even vernacular forms of major traditions such as Christianity. Of the survey population, 98% responded as being unaffiliated with a major religion. Of this 98%, 30% responded as being Nordic Neopagans, another 30% identified as irreligious or atheist, 20% responded as belonging to another form of Neopaganism such as Wicca or Celtic Paganism, 18% responded as possessing an alternative spirituality, and 2% identified as possessing an affiliation with a major religion such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. With 30% of respondents identifying as explicitly Nordic Neopagan, 20% identifying as belonging to other Neopagan traditions, and 18% professing what they describe as an alternative spirituality, we see that Midgardsblot is certainly attracting people identifying as Nordic Neopagan. We also see that this festival is a draw for those of other Neopagan identification and those possessing a general, nature-oriented spirituality.

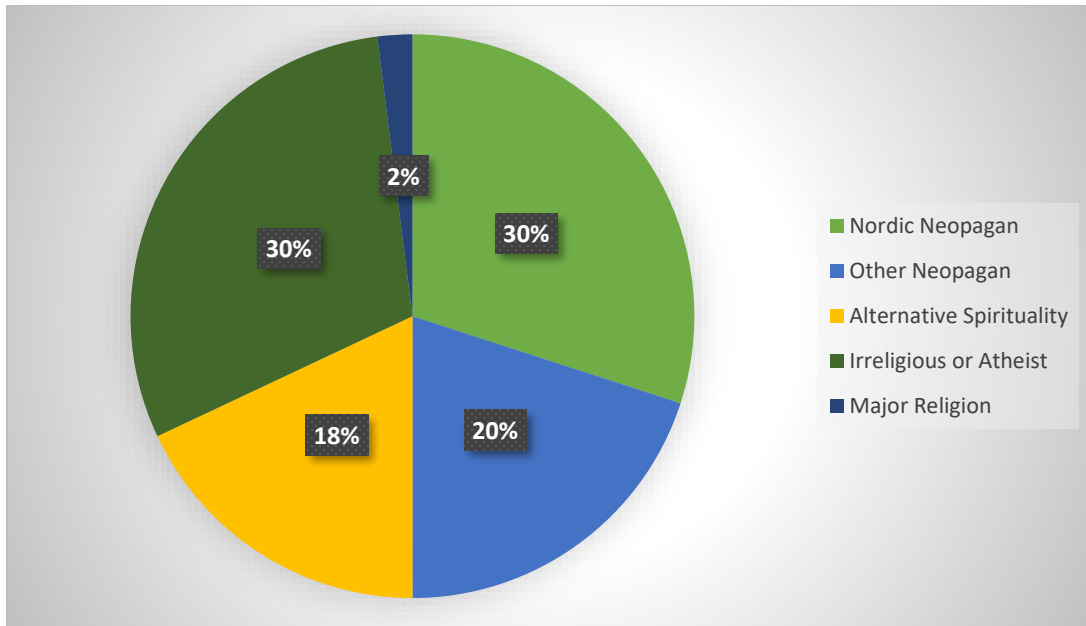


Figure 1: Religious Identification of Midgardsblot Attendees

Question Two provided respondents an opportunity to elaborate on their spiritual orientation, asking: “what does this spiritual identity mean to you and in what ways does it manifest in your life?”. Of the survey population, 18% chose not to elaborate, 20% answered as being atheist or generally non-spiritual, and 62% responded as possessing religious or spiritual convictions and elaborated upon how this manifested in day-to-day life. Of this latter group, many provided responses that their spirituality was centered around a connection with and respect for the natural world. Of note is that one of these respondents self-identified as Celtic Christian with an emphasis on respect for the natural world and its cycles. Another respondent explained:

“I take small moments to appreciate the world around me, talk with people who have passed on and ask them to watch over me. I try to live in an environment friendly way (no plastic etc.). My spiritual identity is vague, but I do believe that we are all connected”.

Other respondents took the opportunity to discuss their personal iteration of Neopaganism.

“I very loosely follow a Wiccan-based spiritual creed, mostly as a means to recognize and appreciate nature, the natural cycle of things, and my small place in it. My spiritual identity manifests in my observation of the 8 sabbats in the wheel of the year, and as a general reverence for the natural world in my everyday life.”

Other respondents self-identified as distinctly Nordic Neopagan in their spiritual outlook while simultaneously showing the vernacular and varied formations of Nordic Neopaganism.

“I try to live according to an idea that I will be coming back in some form. This means more trouble if I don’t tidy after myself. There is no planet B and I, not Jesus, is to blame for my doings. I believe in forefather spirits. They form a link all the way back to Odin, the first. He is the son of the sun.”

While this belief about Odin isn’t necessarily common, it belies Nordic Neopaganism as an internally diverse vernacular folk belief in line with elaborations provided by scholars Primiano, Yoder, Partridge, and Neopagan scholars such as Nordvig who discuss the varied nature of the religion and the great degree of freedom practitioners have in constructing their belief due to the lack of a central, dogmatic hierarchy.<sup>72</sup>

Further statements provided reflect the vernacular nature of those broadly identifying as Neopagan.

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<sup>72</sup> Nordvig, *Asatru for Beginners*, 5.



“I believe in many gods from many traditions including the Norse gods. I feel like because I am a pagan, it's a whole other lifestyle and it gives me always a unique point of view at every second of existing. I honor and celebrate nature much more than other religions in my opinion, I listen to omens from the universe and protecting living beings such as animals and the earth itself.”.

Another respondent provided a response aligning with the Nordic Neopagan formation of Heathenry. Heathenry is more of a Germanic rather than Scandinavian formation of Nordic Neopaganism, utilizing Germanic names of Nordic divinities and espousing “the nine noble virtues”, nine statements outlining what makes an ideal Heathen.<sup>73</sup> Regarding their personal spirituality, this respondent explained:

“It means honoring the gods by being a good person of good reputation, being independent, self-sufficient, and strong. I believe that my ancestors guide me, that there is a certain level of ancient, universal knowledge that can help us to function better. I feel the gentle push of these forces in my intuition and perception of things”.

Some of this group of thirty-one belied their engagement with cultural and spiritual materiality in constructing these identities. One person explained that they live their spirituality not only through their style of worship (which they did not explain) but through the practice of crafting and expression through clothing and hairstyle. “The way I worship, dress, braid my hair for purposes, I sew clothes myself and so on and on”. From what I experienced at Midgardsblot, this respondent is not alone in their expression,

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<sup>73</sup> Snook. *American Heathens*, 70.

many in attendance were adorned in historical clothing, hairstyles that have come to be associated with the “Viking” aesthetic, and elements of symbolism associated with Nordic folk culture such as runes and jewelry. While the respondent who provided this answer is not enough to conclude that these other attendees wearing historical dress, jewelry, and hairstyles were doing so to refine their spiritual practice, it is not entirely out of the question to entertain the idea, as scholars of material religion have pointed out that engagement with aesthetic elements such as these are an avenue for people to embody their spiritual inclinations.<sup>74</sup>

The data and responses from survey questions one and two reveals that Midgardsblot is an event that draws those identifying not only as Nordic Neopagan but also those of other Neopagan inclinations and those that adhere to a form of individualized, alternative, nature centered religiosity. This festival represents a space where individuals are encouraged to express their identities, Nordic Neopagan or not, as they see fit. In the following chapters, I will analyze the role of music in a religious setting, particularly its capacity as a medium for conveying a religious “acoustemology”, or a sonic way of knowing through the establishment of a sonosphere, a layer of sonic reality that affects subjects immersed within it. In the subsequent chapter, I will describe the landscape of Midgardsblot and explore landscape as an aspect of religious materiality. This section will be followed by an analysis of pilgrimage and the role that dialogue and communal experience play in the establishment of sacred space. Following these chapters, I will elucidate a conclusion solidifying Midgardsblot as a sacred space for

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<sup>74</sup> Annelies Moors, “Dress,” *Key Terms in Material Religion*, ed. S. Brent Plate (London, Bloomsbury, 2015), 75.

those identifying as Nordic Neopagan. The subsequent data points and participant accounts provided by my survey and the accounts from my participant observation will invariably show that when understood as a coalescence point for the body of Nordic Neopagan materiality ranging from music, ritual, garb, discourse, and the landscape, Midgardsblot represents a temporary sacred space that encourages the formation and refinement of Nordic Neopagan identity, religiosity, and community.

## Chapter Two: Nordic Neopagan Sonic Cultures

Though religious studies scholars have analyzed the presence of music in religious settings for quite some time, only relatively recently, within the past twenty years, have academics begun to identify music as an aspect of religious materiality, an aspect of religious life that affects and helps to embody those that engage with it. Yet in a sub-field focusing on the *material* aspects of religion, how does a putatively ethereal phenomenon such as sound fit in? In his anthological piece, *Key Terms in Material Religion*, S. Brent Plate elucidates a definition of material religion that makes space for music because it is felt by human beings and serves as a force of embodiment:

Material Religion refers to (1) an investigation of the interactions between human bodies and physical objects both natural and human-made; (2) with much of the interaction taking place through sense perception; (3) in special and specified spaces and times; (4) in order to orient, and sometimes disorient, communities and individuals; (5) toward the formal strictures and structures of religious traditions.<sup>75</sup>

Music is not traditionally understood as a “physical object”, yet the sound that is arranged into music is physically felt by human bodies, and by interacting with this music in specific settings, listeners orient themselves in particular ways and are afforded distinct embodied experiences and states of perception through the physical interaction between human body, melody, and beat.

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<sup>75</sup> Plate, *Key Terms*, 4.

Scholars of sound such as Robin Sylvan have attested to the power of the beat and rhythm in sacred settings, describing subjects' bodily rhythms becoming synchronized to the beat and physical reactions such as hair standing on end in response to music being experienced. Such factors attune receptive listeners in such a way as to heighten their collective awareness and allow for the experience of trance-like states.<sup>76</sup> Scholars such as Charles Hirschkind analyze the role sonic fields play in the formation of religious subjectivity. In his exploration of subculture based around sermons recorded on cassettes in the Cairene Muslim community, he shows that through frequently playing these recorded sermons, individuals are constructing what sound theorist R. Murray Schafer refers to as a soundscape, a culturally coded sonic field, and in doing so, they are shaping their religious identity.<sup>77</sup>

Phenomenologically oriented scholars of religion note the power of music to not only embody and orient receptive subjects in a specific time and space but also the capacity for this music to physiologically, psychologically, and spiritually affect these subjects, leading them to experience what scholar Owen Coggins labels "imagined elsewhere" or what Robin Sylvan would label as "virtual reality". Music, they suggest, occupies an important place in the development of religious subjects and the defining of religious culture. As an aspect of religious material culture, it is a medium of considerable affective power that shapes practitioners, conditioning them as religious subjects and granting them a refined sense of religious self and worldview.

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<sup>76</sup> Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (New York, New York University Press, 2002), 33.

<sup>77</sup> Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 27.

By utilizing the collective lenses of these scholars, in this chapter I argue that Nordic Neopagan aligned music represents a facet of Nordic Neopagan religious materiality. To accomplish this, I will explore the role music plays in a religious context, paying special attention to the physical changes music can elicit in the human body ranging from a synchronization of bodily systems to the experience of altered states of perception. I will pay close attention to scholars concerning themselves with the relationship between religion and music, particularly its role in affecting and orienting the bodies of subjects through sonic immersion and how it influences the imagining of religious symbolism. I will be exploring scholars situated in the field of sound theory whose collective work views sound as an aspect of reality that may condition human subjects and orient their worldview. Following, I will discuss the role of music in contemporary Neopagan traditions external to Nordic Neopaganism, from here I will transition to a discussion of the role music plays in Nordic Neopaganism and provide to examples of bands that perform distinctly Nordic Neopagan music. Finally, I will share the results from my survey pertaining to the role this type of music plays in the lives of attendees to Midgardsblot, showing that this music is engaged with for religious purposes and actively informs certain attendees' worldviews outside of the festival setting.

### **Music as Material**

As an aspect of religious materiality, music has the capacity to construct worlds, shape identities, and lead to the experience of the other, particularly when performed in a charged or sanctified space such as a temple, sacred grove, or in the case of Midgardsblot, music festivals possessing nature and folk cultural themes and featuring prominent Nordic Neopagan identifying bands such as Norway's Wardruna and

Denmark's Heilung. Understood by such scholars of religion and sound as Guy L. Beck and Robin Sylvan, these Nordic Neopagan aligned bands are producing culturally and religiously coded music with the capacity to elicit physical responses and a feeling of embodiment in receptive listeners, allowing them to become part of a unified field in which a spiritual dimension is directly experienced".<sup>78</sup> Through immersion in the Nordic Neopagan sonosphere created by these bands, receptive subjects to viscerally feel the stories of gods, spirits, ancestors, ways of being, and ways of relating to the world woven into the lyrics and melody.

### **Music in Religion**

While the Nordic Neopagan body of lore is replete with texts concerning and interpreting myth and history, the medium of sound trumps these visual sources as it gives practitioners an opportunity to "feel" Nordic folk cultural symbolism. This borrowing allows for the refining of personal worldviews and spirituality for a growing new religious movement outside of its originating locality. When Nordic Neopagans engage with the growing body of lore to inform their practice, they interact with various cultural symbols that inform a specific Nordic Neopagan way of listening. In *Sonic Liturgy*, Guy L. Beck references scholar Steven Feld's discussion of a specific way of listening informed by culture: "acoustemology". "Acoustemology", or acoustic epistemology, refers to a tradition or culture's sonic way of knowing: "how subjects know the world in and through sound."<sup>79</sup> In a religious context, acoustemology can refer

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<sup>78</sup> Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit*, 215.

<sup>79</sup> Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Liturgy: Ritual and Music in Hindu Tradition* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 13.

to melodies and rhythms played throughout a given ritual, keeping time and accentuating the ritual action occurring. Acoustemology also refers to hymns and songs that impart the stories of deities and heroes of a given tradition. With this in mind, the music of Nordic Neopagan aligned bands constitutes a Nordic Neopagan Acoustemology in that the music features Nordic folk and mythological themes in addition to historic Nordic folk melodies, singing styles, and instrumentality.

Isaac Wiener in his chapter, “Sound,” in S. Brent Plate’s *Key Terms in Material Religion*, explores how hearing and listening are learned at the cultural level and how certain religious sentiments are associated with soundings. He explains that “one learns to hear properly, to make sense of a particular sound, from within a particular community or tradition, and different listening audiences may understand and interpret the meaning of sounds in different ways”.<sup>80</sup> Nordic Neopaganism is represented in specific musical communities, namely heavy metal and Nordic Folk. Certain artists within these genres utilize melodies, traditional instruments, specific sounds from both the natural world and animals, and lyrical content directly referencing extant fragments of Nordic folk culture that can be physically experienced through exposure to music containing them.

Robin Sylvan provides an explanation as to why music is such an efficacious tool for occasioning embodiment and subsequent spiritual experience by observing the affective nature of sound in secular popular musical settings. In his piece *Traces of the Spirit*, he conducts an analysis of five popular musical genres, their associated

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<sup>80</sup> Isaac Wiener, “Sound,” in *Key Terms of Material Religion*, ed. S. Brent Plate (London, Bloomsbury, 2015), 217.



subcultures, and the manifold reports of spiritual experiences occurring within each. He traces these genres' origin in West African possession religions, the common denominator among all being the intense beat driven nature of West African religious and cultural music, which disseminated and transformed due to the slave trade. In his analysis, Sylvan describes that beat driven music such as that found in heavy metal, rock n'roll, the jam band scene, hip hop, and EDM is an ideal medium for religious experience as sound and music affect the human subject on multiple levels of reality, those being the physiological, the psychological, the semiological, the virtual, and the spiritual.<sup>81</sup>

### **Music and Physiology**

Citing Andrew Neher, Sylvan describes that when the body experiences sound, it is not simply through the ears; at high enough volumes, the whole body registers it, but even when heard through high quality headphones, sounds elicit physical reactions and affect human physiology:

“Experiencing music causes a synchronization of cortical rhythms”; “musical rhythms have the effect of ‘tuning’ the body and its various subsystems, including circadian rhythms, heartbeat, breathing rate, and muscular activity”.<sup>82</sup>

Not only does this prove efficacious for “synchronizing the body and its various subsystems,” or embedding and embodying a subject in a given moment, this synchronization by way of subjection to music represents what Gilbert Rouget identifies as “a nearly universal cross-cultural technique in bringing about trance and possession states.”<sup>83</sup> Such thought is echoed in Owen Coggins’ exploration of drone metal in which

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<sup>81</sup> Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit*, 6.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

he describes the visceral power of heavy, monotonous sound to catalyze physical reactions in the human body.<sup>84</sup>

Sylvan further discusses how the experience of music elicits a strong emotional response understood to “temporarily restructure the psyche”.<sup>85</sup> When music that elicits a strong subjective emotional response is experienced, “the ego is temporarily relieved of its dominant position, and other parts of the self, such as emotions and feelings, can come to the surface to be experienced”.<sup>86</sup> Sylvan correlates this psychological restructuring with the phenomenon of possession, citing West African traditions as being intimately tied with specific melodies and rhythms that are ideal to bring about this state and to experience certain spirits. He explains: “particular songs, or sets of songs, as well as particular rhythms, are associated with particular deities and it is during his or her songs or rhythms that the deity possesses someone”.<sup>87</sup>

Sylvan’s discussion of the semiological possesses ramifications for contemporary Nordic Neopaganisms. He argues that when music is experienced it imparts symbolic cultural meaning through tone, rhythm, and melody that is interpreted bodily by the experiencing subjects. These musical qualities will cause bodies to respond in certain culturally moderated ways such as spontaneous movement and dancing, of which elevated states of consciousness may be a part. He elaborates that “structured musical

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<sup>84</sup> Owen Coggins, *Mysticism, Ritual, and Religion in Drone Metal* (London, Bloomsbury, 2018), 116.

<sup>85</sup> Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit*, 25.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

patterns become associated with particularly resonant meanings”, such as certain rhythms and melodies being associated with particular gods and spirits and further as either summoning or banishing these entities.<sup>88</sup>

To Sylvan, certain “musical phrases are both signs and signifiers” and that “a particular piece of music may signify joy for one whereas another subject may interpret this phrase to represent a person or place which in turn may not even match up to what the composer intended”.<sup>89</sup> With these statements it is no stretch of the imagination to see how music and sound can refer to many different places, things, and phenomena regardless of whether or not the composer intended it to be so. This is further complicated by the fact that “through formal repetition in proscribed ritual settings”, music can take on different meanings and come to be associated with particular ritual activities and the effects and affects produced by their experience, such as possession or altered states of consciousness as found in EDM but also appearing in the ritualized solitary and communal experiences of Nordic Folk.<sup>90</sup>

Sylvan’s multifaceted work on the capacity of sound as a spiritual medium in a secular setting may easily be applied to the study of sound and music within a growing and non-dogmatic religion such as Nordic Neopaganism.. The capacity for sound and music to allow the subject entry into a state of hyperawareness of themselves and their surroundings can be understood to not only occasion spiritual experience but also to

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<sup>88</sup> Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit*, 29.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

occasion sacrality. Scholar of religion S. Brent Plate discusses scents as ideal in the sacralization of a given space such as a church, it is no stretch of the imagination that sound can serve the same function, as it too interacts with the portion of the human brain that governs memory and combined with the visceral sensations of sonic experience, provides an instance of what could be called personal sacralization. This sonic hyperawareness provides an instance of subjective hyperawareness that allows for spaces such as music festivals to become temporary temples, liminal and temporary spaces of spiritual experience, growth, and identity formation.

### **Sonic Reality**

Sound and its capability of viscerally affecting human subjects can be seen elsewhere in the study of sound and religion. With the lenses provided by Sylvan and religious studies scholar Charles Hirschkind, the latter utilizing ideas gleaned from sound theorists R. Murray Schafer and composer Pauline Oliveros, we can entertain the idea that Nordic Neopagan themed music constructs a distinctly Nordic Neopagan soundscape for adherent and secular listeners that helps subjects imagine and embody elements of pre-Christian Nordic folk cosmology and way of being in the world. Performers of this brand of music have explicitly stated that their compositions can and should be engaged to explore Nordic folk tradition and Neopaganism. The capacity for this Nordic Neopagan music to create a sonosphere that can embody receptive listeners and construct a distinct virtual reality for them reinforces such music as a vital component of the body of Nordic Neopagan lore.

Hirschkind explores these facets of sound and weds them with the work of sound theorist R. Murray Schafer, a scholar who introduces the idea of sonic reality known as

the soundscape. Within “The Music of the Environment”, Schafer introduces the idea of hi-fi and lo-fi soundscapes, the quiet and bucolic versus the noisy and urban sonic landscapes that we dwell within.<sup>91</sup> Presenting a corresponding idea relating to a sonic environment is Pauline Oliveros, who discusses her idea of the sonosphere, “the sonic envelope surrounding the earth” which humans subtly interact with and gain information from via our sensorium.<sup>92</sup> Schafer’s notion of soundscape exists as part of Oliveros’ sonosphere, which she describes as a “sonic strata” emanating from within the earth and beyond which is in turn affected by the soundings of the universe such as cosmic vibrations and frequencies normally inaudible to the human ear which nonetheless are picked up by the human body and orient the human form.<sup>93</sup> While Schafer’s and Oliveros’ respective works do not directly concern the realm of religion, their ideas may be applied to the soundings within religious systems such as music and the manifold sounds of ritual activity that serve to generate temporary soundscapes.

In *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, Charles Hirschkind provides a fascinating exploration of embodiment through engagement with religious sonic materiality. Hirschkind analyzes the phenomenon of cassette sermons played with incredible frequency on the streets of Cairo. Through his analysis, he describes a robust soundscape and explains that it shapes the religious

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<sup>91</sup> R. Murray Schafer, “The Music of the Environment,” in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 34.

<sup>92</sup> Pauline Oliveros, “Auralizing the Sonosphere: A Vocabulary for Inner Sound and Sounding,” in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 113.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 114.

identity of the subjects within it. Recordings of popular preachers circulated among friends and families are the foundation of this pious soundscape.<sup>94</sup> The sermons recorded and preserved on these tapes range widely in topic and style with some of the most popular being sermons of morality that relate to the punishments of hell and the justice of the grave. Interestingly, the macabre cover art of these tapes that would not be out of place on a death metal album betrays the grave subject matter of the sermons.

Hirschkind argues that the continual engagement with these sermons “animates and sustains the substrate of sensory knowledges and embodied aptitudes undergirding a broad revival movement within contemporary Islam”<sup>95</sup>. He explains that listening is an embodied practice and, particularly in the Islamic context, allows for the molding of a religious identity through the conscious creation of Islamic soundscapes.<sup>96</sup>

“The style of listening I am specifically concerned with in this book, sermon listening, recruits the body in its entirety, requiring one to pay attention to the ways in which repertoires of bodily responsiveness articulate with the narrative forms of contemporary sermon rhetoric”.<sup>97</sup>

These soundscapes contribute to the conditioning of an ideal form of piety by creating the sensory conditions for an emerging ethical lifeworld.<sup>98</sup>

Hirschkind brings to light the idea of culturally and spiritually significant sonic material being used to craft a specific soundscape for the benefit of adherents of Islam,

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<sup>94</sup> Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 12

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

yet this affective capacity of sound is not localized to the Islamic tradition, it is present in other religious and cultural formations such as Nordic Neopaganism..

### **A Countercultural Experience: Heavy Metal**

In his exploration of religion, spirituality and mysticism within the heavy metal subgenre of drone metal, Owen Coggins sheds light on the capacity of sound and music to construct and transport subjects to myriad “imagined elsewheres”, observations that are relevant to Nordic Neopagan music as religious materiality.<sup>99</sup> His findings within his book, *Mysticism, Ritual, and Religion in Drone Metal*, reveal that this heavy metal subgenre is possessed of its own mystical, ritualistic, and spiritual tendencies that arise out of the cyclical relationship between fans and the music. In the context of this subgenre of popular music, the sonic medium and the fans continually refine and define one another, most notably in the dialogue that occurs between fans attributing their visceral and reality warping experiences to exposure to the thick, heavy riffs processed across the entire body.

Drone Metal is characterized by its quality of immersive, sheer sonic force, which is often experienced through over-ear headphones or emitted from monolithic towers of bass amps. Experience of the sound combined with the visual and sonic imagery used by the bands catalyzes the experience of virtual sonic realities described amongst the adherent populace in a dialogue of mysticism in which the fans use coded language to describe the sonic experience causing altered states of consciousness and manifestations of “imagined elsewheres” that the sound spirits the fans away too. This dialogue is

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<sup>99</sup> Coggins, *Drone Metal*, 12.

informed by the bands themselves by way of their instrumentality, song names, lyricism, and album art, all of which coalesce in the experienced sound which forcefully embeds subjects in the now and opens the opportunity for them to self-construct imagined elsewheres and achieve altered states of consciousness.<sup>100</sup>

This subgenre possesses a distinct symbolic repertoire that draws inspiration from science fiction and pulp fantasy in addition to many real albeit embellished depictions of mysticism and spiritual practice in the waking world. This distinct semiological body is woven into the sound itself, when people experience certain songs, they are taken somewhere else, they are led to a visceral, embodied experience, a “heightened state of awareness relating to the here and now and a heightened sense of being in/of one’s own body”.<sup>101</sup> The discourse woven into music is potent and life altering, affecting experiencing subjects and embodying them in a given time and place. The same may be said of Nordic Neopagan music. Music performed by certain bands that narrate themselves as Nordic Neopagan and compose their work utilizing historic Scandinavian folk musicology, the “imagined elsewheres” listeners are taken to correspond with Nordic folk tradition: the nine realms, the gods, and the spirits come alive in the imagination of receptive listeners when they hear this music. With enough immersion in this Nordic Neopagan soundscape, these concepts and beings may reveal themselves to listeners in the waking world.

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<sup>100</sup> Coggins, *Drone Metal*, 85.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 84.



### Music in Neopagan Contexts

Like many other religions, music is important for not just Nordic Neopaganism but for Neopaganisms at large, helping cement sub-cultural identity. Donna Weston explores the power of a presently imagined cultural memory in the shaping of Neopagan beliefs. She examines Neopaganism as an umbrella term for nature reverence with differing cultural flavorings and points towards a Neopagan “cultural memory of sacredness” towards the land and nature which finds expression via popular music.<sup>102</sup> Weston makes recourse to sound theorist George Lipsitz, whom she cites as saying that through the realm of electronic media, “audiences can experience a common heritage with people they’ve never seen” and further, experience a shared cultural memory that transcends boundaries and differentiations.<sup>103</sup> Weston further cites Lipsitz’ work, using his explanation that specific cultural expressions such as music “speak to residual memories of the past and emergent hopes for the future”.<sup>104</sup> Though taking inspiration from fragments and historic popular accounts of folk beliefs and practices, Neopagan music can provide a direct link to a partially remembered past for receptive practitioners engaging with it, allowing for what Weston labels “a memory of a past linked with the land and a future in which this land will be revered”.<sup>105</sup> Folk music promoting land

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<sup>102</sup> Donna Weston, “Rememberings of a Pagan Past,” in *Pop Pagans: Paganism and Popular Music*, ed. Donna Weston and Andy Bennett (Durham, Acumen Publishing, 2013), 43.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

connectedness may be found in many parts of the world, but in certain parts of Europe these songs are being engaged for religious purposes.

The ideas of music connecting those in the present with ideas of a golden past and land connectedness are particularly strong in the Baltic region as a response to the cultural oppression of the Soviet regime. In *Music of the Past in Baltic Paganism*, Strmiska explores the utilization of music as a spiritual tool by followers of Dievturi and Romuva, Neopagan expressions of Latvian and Lithuanian pre-Christian folk belief. While music is an important component of religious material culture the world over, it is central to the reconstruction of these beliefs, as Baltic pre-Christian folk culture possessed a distinct body of oral tradition that was preserved through song. Strmiska explains that “songs are central in Dievturi and Romuva” and that a key feature of religious gatherings is the recitation of “dainas”, songs of praise to the central godhead Dievs and his consorts Mara and Laima.<sup>106</sup>

Dievturi and Romuva draw from a well-established and enduring body of Baltic folklore, in addition to the Baltic historic and archaeological records. Due to Baltic oral culture, naturally emphasis is placed on the historical accuracy of musical performance. Equal emphasis is placed on appropriate instrumentality. Strmiska explains that for adherents of these traditions, the usage of traditional instruments “enhances the sense of a living connection to the ancestral past”.<sup>107</sup> For adherents of Dievturi and Romuva, the

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<sup>106</sup> Michael Strmiska, “Music of the Past in Baltic Paganism,” *Novo Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 8, no.3 (2005): 42.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

music itself is central because of its ability to conjure virtual realities and embed practitioners in the timeframe the performance experience references. Strmiska elaborates: “religions are built upon idealized visions of the past that provide the basis for self-congratulatory constructs of communal identity, in this case the identity held by practitioners of these Baltic traditions”.<sup>108</sup> Interestingly enough, the population of practitioners experiencing and gaining meaning from these songs do not understand the dialect in which they are performed, but something about the distinctly Baltic melody and rhythm used is able to evoke ideas of a Baltic Pagan past.

Religiously oriented music can convey symbolism, feelings, and worldviews to those receptive to it. Christopher Chase explores this phenomenon of music in a similar vein to Sylvan, Coggins, and Hirschkind, treating music as a capable medium for instilling and embodying religious and spiritual sentiment. He describes it as a “bearer, a transmitter and means of inculcating doctrine”.<sup>109</sup> In terms of Nordic Neopaganism, which is non-dogmatic and non-doctrinal, there is the accepted body of lore which includes cosmologic views of ancestors, deities, nature, the other than human entities within nature, as well as guides for how to interact with these phenomena. Along the lines of Sylvan, who discusses the rhythms and chants associated with certain gods and spirits in west African possession traditions, Chase identifies that “certain songs have

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<sup>108</sup> Strmiska, “Music of the Past,” 49.

<sup>109</sup> Christopher Chase, “Sacramental Song: Theological Imagination in the Religious Music of American Pagans,” in *Pop Pagans: Paganism and Popular Music*, ed. Donna Weston and Andy Bennett (Durham, Acumen Publishing, 2013), 163.

become shorthand for concepts of divinity, gender, organizational identity”, and critical jabs at non-Neopagan traditions identified as previously hostile such as Christianity.<sup>110</sup>

Much of the music and artists present at Midgardsblot such as Wardruna and Heilung represent specifically coded Neopagan music and serves as a “distinct rhythmic audial culture that is either appropriated from without or developed within a given Neopagan community for any number of purposes”.<sup>111</sup> Wardruna, with their usage of historically accurate instruments, melodies, and lyricism performed in skaldic meter, represent such coded music. Heilung, with their ritualized live performances, striking regalia, and songs featuring themes gleaned from Nordic myth and the Nordic Iron Age also represent this phenomenon. Distinctly Nordic Neopagan music is not limited to the Nordic Folk genre: different types of musical styles may be appropriate depending on a given adherent. Nordic Folk and certain subgenres of Heavy Metal can be understood as aspects constituting Nordic Neopagan sonic culture, mainly those that use Nordic historic, mythological, and folk themes in their music. For instance, the band Amon Amarth, popularly labeled as Melodic Death Metal or Viking Metal may be understood as Nordic Neopagan music in the sense that much of their catalogue features lyrical themes from Nordic mythology.<sup>112</sup> The songs possess and impart specific folk symbolism that conjures visions of an idealized Nordic folk past and mythological concepts that

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<sup>110</sup> Chase, “Sacramental Song,” 163.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

<sup>112</sup> Amon Amarth, “Twilight of the Thunder God,” Metal Blade Records, September 22, 2008, video, 4:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edBYB1VCV0k>.

provide receptive listeners with countercultural tools to refine a nature-centric belief oriented around Nordic myth and folk history.

The Heavy Metal genre is home to subgenres that resonate with practitioners of Neopaganism due to folk culture influenced stylistic choices and lyrical content. Of the myriad subgenres that make up the body of Heavy Metal, Folk and Pagan Metal are those subgenres frequently enjoyed by those adjacent to Neopagan movements. Scholar Deena Weinstein notes that Pagan Metal can be divided into three subgroups that roughly correspond to different branches and sensibilities of the various Neopaganisms. The first of these subgroups is concerned with general ideas related to Neopaganism such as broad reverence for nature, while the second grouping Weinstein refers to as “Roots Paganism,” which is concerned with a specific cultural area’s folk tradition and musicology such as Scandinavia or Ireland.<sup>113</sup> Unfortunately adjacent to what Weinstein has labeled as “Roots Paganism”-oriented Pagan Metal is what she identifies as “Chauvinistic Paganism”-focused Pagan Metal. Bands related to this subgroup are those “who scapegoat and demonize those seen to be, or who have been, a threat to one’s ethnic heritage” .<sup>114</sup> While not bound to this subgroup of “chauvinists”, a unifying factor that is nonetheless related to this subgroup is anti-Christian sentiment. While not calling for violence against churches like the originators of Black Metal, many bands compose songs

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<sup>113</sup> Deena Weinstein, “Pagan Metal,” in *Pop Pagans: Paganism and Popular Music*, ed. Donna Weston and Andy Bennett (Durham, Acumen Publishing, 2013), 58.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

pertaining to Christianity being an enemy of the nature-centered practices that preceded its coming to Europe and an enemy of a modern nature-centric way of being.<sup>115</sup>

Furthermore, bands located under the umbrella of Pagan Metal take their local folk culture and mythology as inspiration and utilize compositional elements from their respective local musical cultures to create a distinct sound that enhances the myths and tales being sung. For instance, the band Finntroll mixes black and death metal traits with lyrical content concerning Scando-Finnic folklore and Finnish folk music called *hummpa*, notable for a beat signature similar to polka.<sup>116</sup> Another pertinent identifying stylistic choice of many Pagan or Folk Metal groups is the choice to perform in their native language or in older dialects of their native tongue such as the Norwegian dialect of Nynorsk favored by the bands Asmegin and the Swedish favored by Finntroll due to their opinion that it sounds “damn trollish”.<sup>117</sup>

### **Nordic Neopagan Music**

Engagement with music and the artists that create it represents an emergent phenomenon in the realm of Nordic Neopagan praxis: the ritualized personal and communal engagement with Nordic themed musical acts such as Wardruna and Heilung. The bands’ self-narration is wide ranging, and beyond Instagram posts includes written and recorded interviews with pop-cultural publications and academics curating social media accounts. Across these outlets the groups explain their personal histories with

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<sup>115</sup> Weinstein, “Pagan Metal,” 70.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

Nordic Neopaganism, their intent for their musical projects, and the ritual technologies utilized in their respective composition processes.<sup>118</sup> Speaking on behalf of Wardruna in an interview with VICE Magazine, lead vocalist Einar Selvik narrates that he and his contemporaries actively seek to empower their sound through a consciously ritualistic creative process that involves the construction and performance of traditional Nordic instruments, the use of Old Norse as a composition language, the use of traditional melodies, and the use of elements from the natural world such as the ambience of a flowing river or the sounds of colliding glacial ice cores.<sup>119</sup>

Wardruna further reinforce their position as Nordic Neopagan authority figures by both narrating and sharing the conscious and occasionally ritual effort they put into their creative process. Speaking in his interview with VICE, Selvik recalls the tale of how during the recording of their song “Isa”, named after the runic letter associated with snow and ice, the group worked with the Norwegian national park service to access ice cores from a local glacier to use for percussion.<sup>120</sup> Another instance of this engagement with natural forces occurred during the recording process of their song “Laukr”, named after the runic letter associated with flowing water. Selvik relayed that he insisted on recording himself delivering the Old Norse lyrics whilst partially submerged in a river.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Nordvig, “Heilung”

<sup>119</sup> Handelman, “Wardruna”

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Leivers. “The Drum Needed a Blood Sacrifice”

In a manner similar to Wardruna, members of Heilung explain that they too utilize musical composition and performance as a methodology to explore past Nordic folk culture and to bring these past elements to the present.<sup>122</sup> In an interview with popular heavy metal magazine *Revolver* one of Heilung's vocalists, Kai Uwe Faust, explains: "We try to give a little spark of that emotion: to make people feel how it is to be surrounded by nature, to slaughter their own cattle, to build their own drum, to live from the Earth and feel a part of a universal tribal spirit".<sup>123</sup> One way they accomplish this is through the use of elaborate ritual garb meant to portray the band members as seers and warriors of the Nordic Iron-Age. The costumes of Kai Faust and fellow vocalist Maria Franz are particularly striking. Heilung's choice of garb, their ritualized creative process, social media presence, their use of historically accurate instrumentation, and the choice to compose in both Old Norse and Proto-Germanic come together to form a narrative that reinforces their authoritative position as a spiritual project exploring concepts from the Nordic past.

The self-narration of both bands is strengthened through their ritualistic live performances. While Wardruna are content to not label their performances, Heilung label and treat theirs as rituals. Following their singular United States performance of 2021 at nearby Red Rocks amphitheater, a picture was posted to Instagram of Kai Faust bedecked in ritual garb holding a verdant bundle of herbs in one hand and a billowing censer in the

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<sup>122</sup> Reed, Ryan. "How Denmark's Heilung are Creating "Amplified History" With Human Bones, Throat Singing," *Revolver Magazine*, February 15, 2018  
<https://www.revolvermag.com/music/how-denmarks-heilung-are-creating-amplified-history-human-bones-throat-singing>.

<sup>123</sup> Handelman, "Wardruna"



other with the smoke wafting across his person and through the antlers of his head dress.<sup>124</sup> Beneath this photograph is a statement reinforcing Heilung’s ongoing self-narration: “each of our rituals starts with a smudging, a blessing, and the calling of local spirits. After each performance, the ritual is also closed accordingly”.<sup>125</sup>

The blessing they refer to has become a staple of their performances: “Remember that we are all brothers; all people, beasts, trees and stones and wind. We all descended from the one great being that was always there before people lived and named it, before the first seed sprouted”.<sup>126</sup> This recitation along with brief talks and explanations that punctuate the spaces between their songs reinforces their narrative and the ritualistic character of their performances. Heilung’s legitimacy as perceived spiritual authority figures is further reinforced by their proclivity to invite ritual specialists hailing from first nations and indigenous groups to perform with them. At their Red Rocks performance, the band extended an invitation to medicine specialists hailing from the Plains and Rocky Mountains first nations to be involved with the opening and closing ritual sequences as well as providing additional percussion with their personal drums.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> amplifiedhistory, “Each of our rituals starts with a smudging, a blessing and calling of and upon local spirits”. Instagram, social media, 10/14/21, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CVA5YHzty6G/?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CVA5YHzty6G/?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>125</sup> amplifiedhistory, “rituals”.

<sup>126</sup> Heilung, *Heilung / Lifa – Full Show*, YouTube Video, 1:16:40. November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1BsKIP4uYM&t=456s>

<sup>127</sup> amplifiedhistory. “We were honored to share the stage with...”, Instagram, social media, 10/6/21, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CUtZgsrLWGg/?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CUtZgsrLWGg/?utm_medium=copy_link)

Notably, Heilung also extend this invitation when appropriate at select concerts in Europe. Recounting the first time the group performed in Russia, Heilung's producer Christopher Juul explained in an interview with The Guardian that news of their arrival brought a handful of Siberian shamans to their show who were invited on stage to join in the performance.<sup>128</sup> Juul elaborates that the shamans "just showed up in full gear, drumming along with us. They got it. We cried".<sup>129</sup> While in certain contexts this could be seen as problematic due to the history of indigenous and first nations practices being co-opted and exploited by non-indigenous parties, in their social media narrative Heilung appear to be doing their best to be respectful in their inclusion of these ritual specialists in their performances.

### **Music and Affect**

The music of these Nordic folk culturally aligned bands represents a readily available, affective component of the body of lore. In our current age of digital hyperconnectivity, it can be accessed anywhere quickly, potentially transforming any space into a sacred soundscape or sonosphere for personal subjective refinement as seen in other religious contexts. The ritualistic creative efforts and performances, in addition to their self-narration locating themselves within a pre-Christian Nordic religious context, serve to not only legitimize these bands as Nordic Neopagan authority figures but also to charge their songs with spiritual meaning that affects receptive bodies, a quality of sound and music that makes it a vital component of ritual.

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<sup>128</sup> Leivers. "The Drum Needed a Blood Sacrifice".

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

Affect, described by sound theorist Donovan Schaefer as “the flow of forces through bodies outside of, prior to, and underneath language”<sup>130</sup>, may serve as a point of departure when exploring music’s power in a religious space. Schaefer explains affect as a “thing of the senses” and invites readers to envision a power “outside of a symbol system, something enfolding and exceeding language in the ways it plays across bodies”.<sup>131</sup> Scholars of religious studies have noted sound and music’s affective capacities and capability to evoke visceral emotions, conceptions, and perceptions in non-traditionally religious spaces. Sylvan elucidates that music is an ideal religious medium because it affects subjects across multiple levels of the sensorium, the sensing elements of human physiology.<sup>132</sup> Sylvan explains that when the body experiences sound, the sound elicits physical reactions and across multiple levels of human physiology. He discusses Neher’s observation that the experience of music causes a “synchronization of cortical rhythms”, “rhythms that ‘tune’ the body and its various subsystems, including circadian rhythms, heartbeat, breathing rate, and muscular activity”.<sup>133</sup> This multi-layered corporeal synchronization represents what musicologist Gilbert Rouget identifies as “a nearly universal cross-cultural technique in bringing about trance and possession

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<sup>130</sup> Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2015), 4.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>132</sup> Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit*, 6.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

states”.<sup>134</sup> This quality of music to affect the body in such a way reinforces it as an accessible medium for the construction of Nordic Neopagan religiosity and identity.

The experience of sound and music is multivalent and affects subjects across multiple levels of their being physically, psychologically, and spiritually, which allows for embodiment and hyperawareness in a given place and time, opening up subjects to experiences of the Other.<sup>135</sup> This hyperawareness and embodiment allows for the visceral transmission and experience of religious knowledge and symbolism within both the music being experienced and in some cases, the surrounding natural environment. These elements of Nordic Neopagan materiality work in concert with other elements of this materiality spectrum to inform and develop distinct religious identities and ways of being in the world.

### **Nordic Neopagan Acoustemology**

Within religious studies, analysis of sound and religion falls under the umbrella of material religion. A putatively ethereal phenomena like sound can be understood to be an element of a larger body of valuated spiritual materiality. Certainly, sound has a material source such as a musical instrument, a musicking body, or a rock striking a surface. With this in mind, one can see the sound itself being produced from these things is visceral, felt across multiple layers of the human body. Sound affects these bodies and elicits physical responses, the human sensorium reacts appropriately to these physical stimuli, causing the subject to construct a reality from the information being received. The realities

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<sup>134</sup> Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit*, 22.

<sup>135</sup> Beck, *Sonic Liturgy*, 4.

constructed from sound, particularly spiritually and culturally valued sound, are both visceral and vivid, and the analysis of this sound through both a religious and sonic materialist lens will show that sound in general may be re-understood as it maintains its myriad capacities valuable to spiritual and religious experience in specific, culturally coded environs such as music festivals with Nordic folk cultural themes.

To scholars such as Sylvan and Beck, music is an important element of religion due to its capacity to elicit physical responses from the human body and to impart forms of cultural knowledge. The capacity of music to affect the body is empowered through a culturally learned acoustemology. In the case of Nordic Neopaganism acoustemology is learned through individual and group engagement with the body of lore in the form of text, ritual, and the emergent sonic canon featuring Nordic Neopagan aligned Folk and Heavy Metal. This acoustemology is further learned through engagement with authoritative figures in the digital sphere such as Nordic Neopagan Content creators like academics and musicians. When musical sound penetrates a subject it conveys a body of cultural symbols across different aspects of the human sensory system, viscerally affecting and refining subjects. Melodies, rhythms, and languages whether intelligible to the subject or not serve to create an affective sonosphere that can condition those within it, embodying subjects in the present moment and simultaneously transporting them to a symbolically influenced “imagined elsewhere,” which in the case of Nordic Neopaganism is an idealized and imagined realm of Nordic gods, ancestors, and spirits of the landscape.

### **Engagement with Nordic Neopagan Music by Attendees at Midgardsblot**

The discussion of music in religion thus far and the proceeding analysis of pertinent survey questions will partially frame Midgardsblot as a sacred space for Nordic Neopaganism, particularly in light of one of my guiding research questions, “how does a festival such as Midgardsblot function as a sacred site?” As a festival featuring self-described Nordic Neopagan artists such as Heilung and Wardruna, who ritually compose their music in line with traditional elements of Nordic symbolism, musicology, and instrumentality, a distinctly Nordic Neopagan sonosphere is constructed over the course of this festival. This Nordic Neopagan sonosphere is further enhanced by the landscape, the community, public ritual performance, and supplementary lectures pertaining to Nordic Neopagan worldview and praxis. Furthermore, this sonosphere affects those immersed in it, embodying them and allowing receptive subjects to viscerally feel the Nordic folk symbolism present in the music. This and the explicit narration of Midgardsblot as a sacred event by performers and speakers further solidifies this notion.

The following survey questions concern the relationship between Nordic themed music and the exploration of Nordic folk culture. Question Three asks, “How often do you listen to Heavy Metal, Nordic Folk, or other types of music that could be considered as ‘Nordic Neopagan aligned’ (pertaining to or taking inspiration from Nordic history and folk culture?” Most of the respondents answered that they engage with this type of music semi-regularly, with 54% of respondents stating that they listen to this type of music most of the time, and 9% stating that they “always” listen to it. “Always” can be understood many ways, but for the purposes of this survey it is understood that respondents answering in this fashion listen to this kind of music daily.

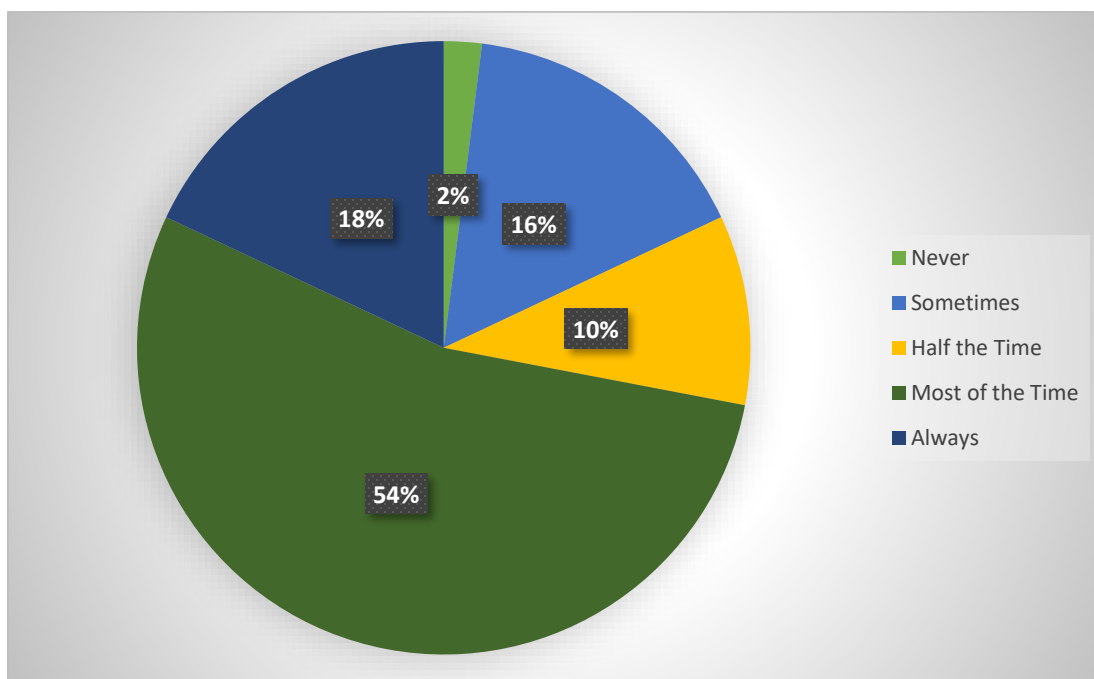


Figure 2: Frequency of Engagement with Nordic Neopagan Aligned Music

Question Four provided respondents an opportunity to explain the context in which they predominantly listen to this music, asking: “When you listen to these kinds of music, what’s the context? Where are you, what are you doing, who are you with, and how are you listening (e.g., earbuds while exercising or working, live music at an event, stereo or device with speakers at home, etc.)”. The respondents’ answers possessed many similarities. Many responded that they use music to prepare for the day, while on the way to work, while working, and while exercising. Interestingly, a few respondents described how they used the music to achieve an altered state or to accompany some type of ritual practice. “I have a morning Ritual which is a mixture of training, Yoga, Wim Hof breathing, cold exposure, all whilst having my eyes closed and listening to Pagan music”. One respondent reflected:

“When I’m listening to folk music, I’m mostly by myself, sometimes in the car, sometimes during ritual work, but mostly with my headphones on and eyes closed, just listening. When I’m listening to metal, it’s mostly in the car or when I’m programming for work, i.e. as an avenue for releasing a bit of anger”.

Another provided the following visceral anecdote:

“It can be anytime I feel a desire to connect to some more earthy/primitive vibes. Most notorious use has been for birthing home my child. But in general, can be for dancing, or just in the background. I prefer to listen to it on loudspeakers, to let the bass develop in the space”.

These answers directly reference ritual, yet others elucidated on the affective nature of the music and using it to regulate emotional states, such as the following answer:

“I listen to music almost constantly, it’s on in the car, when I’m home, doing housework. The different genres help me to focus myself in different ways. The metal helps me to expend energy, drive forward. The folk music helps smooth out the rough edges of my soul and retune my inner vibration”.

This type of engagement with music bears a similarity to what Charles Hirschkind observed in his work with the Cairene Muslim community and his exploration of cassette sermon culture. Hirschkind’s informants relayed to him that they played these sermons constantly in an effort to become more pious and construct a distinctly Cairene Muslim



sonosphere, an affective and formative sonic field.<sup>136</sup> While the survey population isn't engaging with this music in the same way as Hirschkind's research population, their answers betray similarities and a shared effort to use music to alter themselves and to charge a specific situation in day-to-day life. The quotations shared reflect the practice of engaging this music ritually, which for Neopaganism at large represents a broad statement reflecting an equally broad collection of vernacular ritual practices.

This type of music is affective and engaged with for ritual and personal practice and is subjectively formative, as it spurs some of those engaging with it to pursue research into Nordic folk tradition. Question five asks, "Has exposure to this music led you to explore certain things pertaining to pre-Christian Nordic culture such as history, folklore, or religion?" Of the survey population, an overwhelming 80% responded in the affirmative with 20% responding that they have not been spurred to undertake their own explorations of Nordic culture due to their music choices. Understood as a spiritual medium, this Nordic themed music is impacting a portion of this population and inspiring them to conduct personal research into Nordic folk culture.

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<sup>136</sup> Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 15.

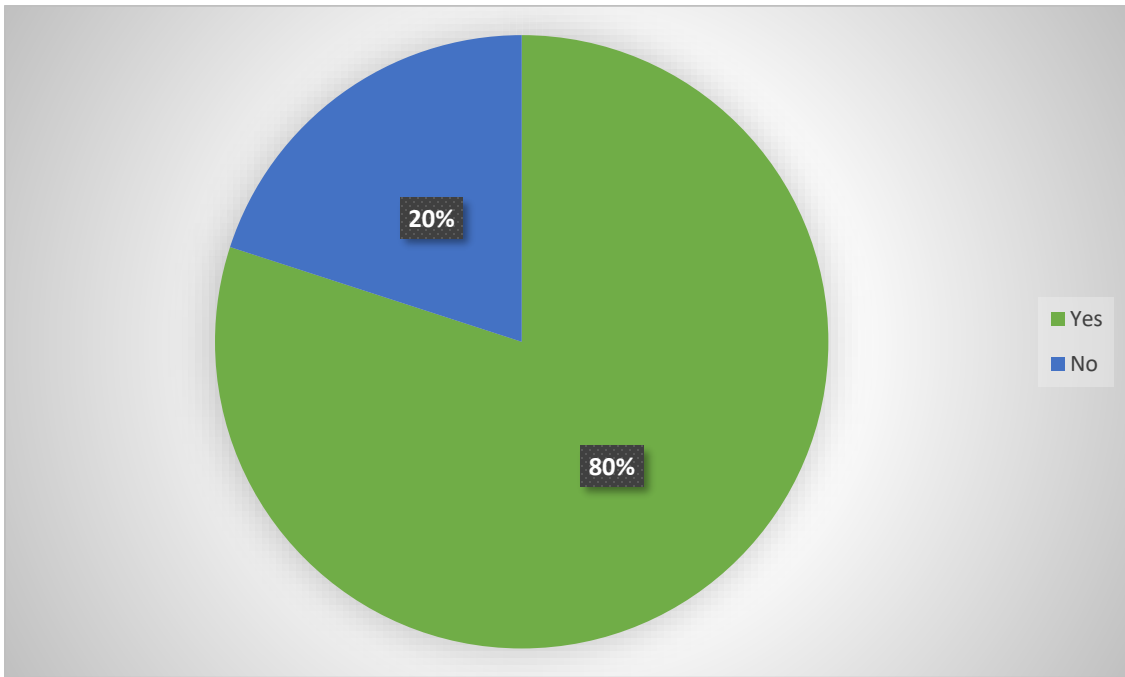


Figure 3: Rate of Musical Engagement leading to the exploration of pre-Christian Nordic Folk culture and religion among survey population.

The data shows that people are engaging with Nordic themed folk and heavy metal music in matters of personal enjoyment and spiritual pursuit, whether that be ritual or the regulation of emotional states. Engagement with this music is also shown to catalyze interest and research into Nordic folk culture and history, which may in turn inform spiritual identity. The Nordic Neopagan sonosphere at Midgardsblot is but one portion of the bricolage of Nordic Neopagan materiality, though a potent, affective one to be sure. The landscape of the festival populated by burial mounds, local flora and fauna, and fellow believers constitute other, potent elements of this assemblage and work together with the sonic canon to provide a multifaceted event where Nordic Neopagan religiosity and identity are shaped.

### Chapter Three: The Borre Landscape

In accordance with the body of pre-Christian Scandinavian history and folklore, sacred space in which to conduct ritual can be found in many places in the natural landscape. Across the Scandinavian cultural area, folk traditions acknowledging and propitiating land spirits are present and are observed by many within and without Nordic Neopaganism.<sup>137</sup> Contemporary Nordic Neopagan groups perpetuate these rituals dedicated to land spirits and in some cases this veneration is reflected in national laws such as those in Iceland mandating that building projects do not interfere with spaces the landvaettir spirits are understood to dwell.<sup>138</sup>

These historic and folk cultural ideas pertaining to the sacrality of the landscape are inherited by contemporary Nordic Neopagans and inform certain aspects of their ritual practices. Many solitary practitioners and small gatherings of Neopagans try to perform ritual in natural spaces.<sup>139</sup> In addition to venerated sites in the landscape, temples existed in the historical Nordic folk cultural area such as Uppsala in Sweden, though sites such as this have long been torn down or reappropriated. Contemporary Nordic Neopagan have begun to re-establish temple structures in the United States and in

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<sup>137</sup> Nordvig, *Asatru for Beginners*, 37.

<sup>138</sup> Michael Strmiska, "Asatru in Iceland: The Rebirth of Nordic Paganism?," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 4, no. 1 (2000): 126.

<sup>139</sup> Nordvig, *Asatru for Beginners*, 61.

Europe. Unfortunately, the highly problematic group, the Asatru Folk Assembly, has bought a church in Minnesota and has recently made headlines for excluding non-white people.<sup>140</sup> This group is thankfully small and not necessarily wide reaching, unlike the well-known (at least in Nordic Neopagan circles) group Asatruarfelagid of Iceland. The latter is in the process of finalizing construction plans for a temple to overlook the city of Reykjavik and will serve as the first governmentally recognized temple.<sup>141</sup>

The vernacular character of the tradition allows for the open interpretation of sacred space. As the responses have shown, Nordic Neopagans are utilizing music in their personal rituals to help sanctify the space they are in. The data will further show that Nordic Neopagans and those adjacent to the tradition consider the natural world and relevant historic sites to be religiously relevant places to either passively appreciate or act upon with ritual. With this information in mind one may assert that a heavy metal festival possessing Nordic Folk and Historic themes and workshops represents a meeting point of Nordic Neopagan music and a landscape historically and currently viewed as sacred, also serves as a temporary temple for this tradition, or perhaps a reincarnation of the multi-day Althing gathering on pre-Christian Scandinavia.

Festivals such as Norway's Midgardsblot represent temporary, affective sacred spaces in which the Nordic Neopagan aligned milieu in attendance can reinforce their

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<sup>140</sup> Tess Owen, "A Whites-Only Religious Group Just Got the Green Light to Set Up Shop in the Midwest," Vice Magazine, December 9, 2020. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgqje7/a-whites-only-religious-group-is-trying-to-move-into-a-small-midwestern-town>.

<sup>141</sup> Vilhelm Carlstrom, "Iceland's Fastest Growing Religion Will Soon Complete the First Temple to Thor and Odin in 1000 Years," Business Insider Nordic, July 4, 2018. <https://nordic.businessinsider.com/icelands-fastest-growing-religion-will-soon-complete-the-first-temple-to-thor-and-odin-in-a-1000-years-/>.

individual and communal religious identities and have preternatural experiences. In the following chapter, I will describe the Midgardsblot festival as it occurred in August 2022. I will describe the festival setting and the landscape upon which the festival takes place, the Borrehaugene national park. I will also discuss the Midgard Vikingsenter, the on-site museum housing artifacts excavated from some of the burial mounds and a nearby coastal field. I will then examine this site through the material religious lens provided by scholars concerning themselves with the relationship between religion, landscape, affect theory, and memory. This discussion will serve as a point of departure to discuss the relevant data points from my survey concerning concert attendees' perception of the natural world and the Borrehaugene national park in which Midgardsblot takes place. This chapter will serve to set the stage for a continued discussion of Midgardsblot, particularly as a ritual pilgrimage site and a space for community reinforcement via intercommunal discourse and public ritual performances.



Figure 4: Stone outside of the Midgard Vikingsenter. "Welcome to the Borre Park" is written in runic script.

## **Borrehaugene<sup>142</sup>**

Midgardsblot takes place in the small town of Horten, Norway. Horten is the home of the Borre mound park, or Borrehaugene, in the Bokmal dialect of Norwegian. Horten is a coastal community on the shores of the Oslofjord in the county of Vestfold og Telemark, only a brief train ride from the Norwegian capital followed by a short ride by bus from the Horten train station to the Borre national park. The park has two entrances from the small, main road going through Horten. The main entrance takes one past the Midgard Vikingsenter<sup>143</sup> museum, down a wooded path that forks. To the right, one enters the wooded field where the burial mounds, coastal campsite, and various nature trails lie. To the left, a path bordered by stone field walls takes one by a large field and briefly through the woods to the main festival grounds, which house a reconstructed Viking Age great hall in addition to a reconstructed crafters market, notably possessing a small, open-air blacksmith shop. Adjacent to this mighty hall are two small open fields which are occupied by a reenacted Viking war camp and market in one, and one of two main stages in the other during festival season. The second main stage and refreshment stands are in the “backyard” of the great hall.

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<sup>142</sup> The Borre Mounds in English

<sup>143</sup> Viking Center in English



Figure 5: Carved wooden “Guardians” surrounding the Midgard Vikingsenter.

In addition to the reconstructed Viking Age buildings and reenactor camp, what makes Midgardsblot unique is the fact that it takes place amidst a historically and folk culturally relevant landscape. The wooded burial mounds date back to the Viking Age and serve as the final resting place for pre-Christian rulers.<sup>144</sup> In addition to the deceased, artifacts ranging from weapons, armor, ritual implements, and crafting materials have been found within, some of which are kept on display in the Midgard Vikingsenter Museum. Furthermore, the museum reinforces the mounds’ presence in not only the historical record but the socio-cultural record, explaining the mounds have been attested

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<sup>144</sup> “About the Midgard Viking Center,” Vestfold Museene. Accessed October 21, 2022. <https://vestfoldmuseene.no/midgard-vikingsenter/om-midgard-vikingsenter>.



to by such figures as Snorre Sturluson, a famous historian, poet, and politician of 11<sup>th</sup> century Iceland and a key figure in the preservation of Nordic myth.<sup>145</sup> Throughout the year, including during the Midgardsblot festival, this museum serves as a touchstone to this folk cultural past not only due to the presence of artifacts, but due to workshops on Nordic folk cultural history and folk life replete with historical reenactments pertaining to historic community life and warfare practices.<sup>146</sup> The Borre mounds have experienced human ritual action for many centuries, and the Midgardsblot festival in addition to the Midgard Vikingsenter represent focal points for continued interaction and ritual action. To certain scholars, the land at Borre is akin to other sacred sites in that there is an inherent, uncanny quality to the landscape that has drawn human beings to act upon it, effectively sacralizing and re-sacralizing the site through continued engagement with it. In the following pages, I will explore select authors that explore this uncanny quality of the landscape and certain instances of how human beings have interacted with this quality of the natural world.

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<sup>145</sup> “About the Midgard Viking Center”

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*



Figure 6: Two of the foremost burial mounds in the Borre Park.

### **Power in The Landscape**

A pertinent starting point to the exploration of the affective power in and from the landscape is the work of critical theorist and scholar of rhetoric Thomas Rickert, who explores the presence of “ambience” in the natural environment and the cyclical, affective relationship existing between human subjects and their multivalent material surroundings. To Rickert, ambience is that quality which dissolves the boundaries between the subject and object and is possessed by manifold things such as sound and landscape. In his own work, Rickert emphasizes the ambience of the environment and describes it as having influenced the culture of humanity for much of our species’ history:

“Our earliest practices were ambient; the external environment was an integral aspect of ancient peoples’ practices. Ambience here refers to the active role that the material and informational environment takes in human development, dwelling, and culture”.<sup>147</sup>

Rickert further espouses that this ambience has been interacted with by humankind and attempts to “draw it out” of a given space go back to the paleolithic era.. Referencing cave based archaeological sites associated with early humanity, he explains that “places with cave or wall art indicate that such art was placed in such a way for aural accompaniment which would help to create an immersive and ambient environment”.<sup>148</sup> The brief analogy of cave paintings, the synesthetic environs they create for human subjects, and the ambience that reveals itself through them is further fleshed out in a chapter Rickert dedicates to the Heideggerian idea of dwelling as produced by a given natural environment, an idea that overlaps with new materialist ideas and religious materiality in nature centered new religious movements such as Nordic Neopaganism, and other cultural variants of the Neopagan religion.

Rickert’s mobilization of Heidegger’s concepts of dwelling and “Das Geviert” (the fourfold), dovetail uncannily well to ideas concerning the natural environment as a piece of affective religious materiality and associated concepts of new materialism. The concept of dwelling points to a felt realization of the interwoven character of lived reality, and it “indicates lived relations woven into complex ecologies of the world’s things and forces. This is not passive coexistence or simple adaptation to things; it is an

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<sup>147</sup> Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

active if conditioned comportment toward the world”.<sup>149</sup> When Rickert addresses Heidegger’s discussion of “building” and dwelling, we may understand ritual praxis as a way of acting on the environment and facilitating the feeling of dwelling.

“He (Heidegger) grounds human flourishing (dwelling) in constructive activity, that is, attunement to the world that characterizes dwelling is not passivity. Rather it is activity that works through and with things as they show up in the world alongside us”.<sup>150</sup>

While it should be said that ritual praxis can be used to indeed sacralize a site, Rickert, echoing both a religious and new materialist notion, draws our attention to the fact that the environment spontaneously draws subjects in with extant ambience and compels action upon it.<sup>151</sup>

This compulsion comes from what Heidegger addresses as “Das Geviert”, translated as “the fourfold”. Rickert elaborates that “dwelling takes its bearings from, manifests and cultivates an attunement to Das Geviert, the fourfold meeting of the earth, sky, gods, and mortals”.<sup>152</sup> Coincidentally Rickert provides us a Nordic-oriented example of Das Geviert in the form of the Althing, at once a meeting place and event originating from pre-Christian Scandinavia but most notably Iceland, the “last bastion” of the pre-Christian Nordic folk belief before the country’s conversion to Christianity in 1000 A.D., a cultural shift decided at the Althing. The Althing took place on a hill on an open plane outside of what is now Reykjavik, the hill drawing the attention of the Icelandic settlers

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<sup>149</sup> Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 224.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

and compelling them to mark the spot as sacred and to host their Althing, a multiday meeting for trade, law speaking, folk ritual praxis, communal reconnection, and communal decision making. With the Althing as an example, Rickert points us to the notion that Das Geviert compels the coalescence of cultural materiality, a compulsion that is affirmed and enshrined through human action, explaining: “The fourfold is not simply a description of presence, of directly revealed things and their lived relations, but an ongoing process of disclosure that never fully wrests being from the world and brings it into human service”.<sup>153</sup> Reinforcing and adding to this idea, he states that “dwelling arises from craft and the acquisition of skill, but there in turn emerge through an attuned engagement with the surroundings”.<sup>154</sup> Rickert’s discussion of dwelling and the fourfold, while not necessarily possessing overtly religious or spiritual sentiment, may be applied to notions of religious assemblages and the natural environment exuding a spiritual or uncanny force compelling human action. Moving towards the lens of religious studies, we see that many scholars overlap with the ideas presented by Rickert and Heidegger, with a fair number of academics focusing on the latent power within the landscape, how human subjects relate to and draw attention to that power through demarcation and modification, and how that power is drawn out through attunement and ritual action.

Jaimie Gunderson in his article, “Feeling Apollo: Sensory Engagement in the Sanctuary of Apollo at Klaros,” describes how an assemblage of natural features, architecture, and ritualistic engagement with religious materiality allowed adherents of

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<sup>153</sup> Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 233.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 240.

Apollo at Klaros to feel the god every time they came to pray or consult the temple oracle. Gunderson indirectly echoes religious materialist S. Brent Plate, emphasizing that as the divine is encountered through the skin, it is the cultural context of the time of the encounter that alters it. Citing the work of historian Eleanor Betts, he states:

“physiological functions operated in the same way in ancient bodies as they do now, but the cultural context in which they were activated determined how they were experienced. From this premise, as Betts argues, we can investigate how particular sensory stimuli may have been physiologically and emotionally perceived”.<sup>155</sup>

Referencing Michel de-Certeau’s essay, “Walking in the City,” Gunderson explains that for the adherents to the Apollonian cult present at Klaros, a key way for these subjects to feel the presence of the god was through walking, which engendered a particular way of knowing in which the adherent could enmesh themselves within the sacred assemblage in which the temple, practitioners, landscape, and divine presence were a part.

Gunderson describes a situation in which, through the engagement of religious materiality, practitioners were and potentially are able to feel the presence of a deity. However, he also points to the notion that religious materiality may occasion and enhance connection to a presence or force that is being exuded by the natural environment or something else within it. This force was subsequently focused and emphasized by the construction of a temple and the performance of embodying rituals in which the assemblage of religious materiality is engaged and emphasized. Adjacent to Heidegger’s description of *Das Geviert* or the fourfold meeting of earth sky, gods, and humans, Gunderson conjectures that the uncanny presence or force of Apollo emerges from the

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<sup>155</sup> Jamie Gunderson, “Feeling Apollo: Sensory Engagement in the Sanctuary of Apollo at Klaros,” *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief* 17, no.3 (2021): 409.

natural environment, emphasizing his point by referencing Vincent Scully and his statement concerning the fact that “sites were considered holy before anything was built on them since the landscape features ‘embodied the whole of the deity as a recognized natural force’”<sup>156</sup>. Gunderson points to the fact that religious materiality in the form of temple architecture focuses the presence of Apollo and make his presence known and felt to practitioners at Klaros, although the architecture works in concert with the assemblage of the other present iterations of religious materiality, such as natural features, scents of sacrificial meats, and the chanting of the Apollonian choir and the oracle.

While only a singular article, Gunderson’s exploration of the goings on at a two-thousand-year-old temple is quite relevant to contemporary Neopagan practices, particularly Nordic Neopaganism and other cultural iterations that have direct or indirect representation in popular music such as heavy metal and Nordic ambient, genres that generated particular Neopagan themed festivals in areas of natural grandeur. Gunderson mentions the idea of *Locus Amoenus* in his description of the Apollonian temple at Klaros, that being a pleasant natural environment such as a grove in a solemn forest or a forested field of ancient burial mounds. While Nordic temples don’t stand on these sites, the burial field in particular may be understood to exude a sense of the uncanny, if not from the “ancestral dead” interred then from the force that compelled people to bury their dead at this site in the first place. The bands and organizers of these festivals no doubt are continuing an ancient tradition in choosing to hold festivals in these environs. No doubt, the uncanny force of the land calls out in some way, a foundational piece of Nordic

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<sup>156</sup> Gunderson, “Feeling Apollo,” 411.

Neopagan religious materiality upon and within which the sacred assemblage of the Nordic Neopagan sonic temple can be constructed.



Figure 7: Burial mound with well-worn hiking path

In his article “Constructing Identity with Dreamstones: Megalithic Sites and Contemporary Nature Spirituality,” Scholar of religious studies Phillip Charles Lucas explores the power of ancient stone structures and the natural environment of Britain and how they impact identity construction and provide spiritual access points for practitioners



of new age beliefs and on Insular Celtic culturally influenced forms of Neopaganism such as Neo-Druidry. Lucas identifies the megalithic sites of Western Europe as countercultural heterotopias that “bring together meanings from incommensurable cultural worlds” that are “linked by centerless flows of information”.<sup>157</sup> For practitioners of multiple nature centered spiritualities, the megalithic structures provide practitioners an avenue to inform spiritual identity, an identity based on cultural concepts and beliefs shrouded in the mist of time yet nonetheless approachable through these structures. Lucas identifies that these megalithic sites provide certain nature-centered spiritual communities with places they can interact with and glean from a “usable past” in order to inform their identities with how the megalith builders are remembered in popular British/Western imagination, such as being closer to the natural environment or being in tune with the spiritual nature of the landscape.<sup>158</sup> For instance, Lucas relays that in interviewing his subjects, he found a common belief:

“They speculate that megalithic sites mark sacred places where their spiritual ancestors worshipped earth goddesses and other nature deities, and practiced rituals that celebrated seasonal cycles. Through repeated use, the sites are believed to have built up a powerful spiritual atmosphere that enables easier access to wise ancestral beings and nature spirits”.<sup>159</sup>

While this exact belief may differ at individual interpretive level, Lucas shows that these sites hold sway over practitioners of nature spirituality not just at the level of the personal

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<sup>157</sup> Phillip Charles Lucas, “Constructing Identity with Dreamstones: Megalithic Sites and Contemporary Nature Spirituality,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 11, no. 1 (2007): 33.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

but at the communal, as these sites attract practitioners and serve as meeting places for ritual action reflective of the belief that the sites were used as spaces of nature veneration.<sup>160</sup> Additionally, Lucas highlights that the sites serve as sites of artistic inspiration, not unsurprising as in the Celtic past, the figure of the bard was held almost on par with that of the druid, both considered magical figures and lore keepers.

The megaliths and those that visit them are a part of a symbiotic relationship. Lucas highlights that those who built the megaliths and their culture are shrouded in the distant past, intact details about their folk lives are rare, and as such, interpretation is left to the adherent who is informed by what knowledge and speculation exists from the historical body on these peoples. This popular interpretation does nothing to dampen the spiritual power held to be present here, as people claim to experience altered states of feeling, artistic inspiration, decompression, and solidified feelings of community when attending ritual performances.<sup>161</sup> Despite a past that is impossible to be wholly remembered, it impacts believers and drives them to visit these sites solitarily or in a community. This manner of interaction with these sites empowers them as reflected elsewhere in Celtic Britain.

The notion of an empowered sacred landscape has been garnering more and more attention of late as scholars of material religion have expanded their lens in a new materialist direction to acknowledge the co-constitutive, affective power that bodies of sacred materiality possess. One manner in which this line of thinking has emerged into

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<sup>160</sup> Lucas, "Constructing Identity with Dreamstones," 38.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

academic parlance is a focus on the uncanny, what it is, and how it causes people to react to phenomena in the natural environment in which it is present. As described by scholar Helen Cornish, the uncanny is a “felt experience that disturbs the body as the known and familiar jolts out of place,”<sup>162</sup> and it is primarily experienced as emerging from the landscape or from unseen things within the landscape.

Cornish explores the notion of the uncanny with a witch in Boscastle, Cornwall, detailed in her essay, “In Search of the Uncanny: Inspired Landscapes and Modern Witchcraft”. Cornish describes Boscastle as a place with a Bretonic past and a landscape exuding the uncanny or the other, commemorated by both old and relatively recent actions on the surrounding countryside such as the construction of a witchcraft shop, the carving of labyrinthian stone art on local rock faces, the decorating of trees with ritual ornamentation, and the burying of the desecrated body of an alleged 19<sup>th</sup> century witch.<sup>163</sup> Mirroring Gunderson and his exploration of commemorating the divine empowerment in a landscape with the construction of a temple, Cornish shares that despite the level of contemporary esotericism, Boscastle did not possess much in the way of an esoteric past, other than how the uncanny is seemingly present in the varied environment around the town:

“Boscastle and the surrounding sites have scant documented histories of esotericism, popular accounts have provided mythic qualities, qualities that are further boosted by common expectations that Cornwall’s Celtic past generates senses of a folkloric and Pagan past distant from the secularized modern world”.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Helen Cornish, “In Search of the Uncanny: Inspired Landscapes and Modern Witchcraft,” *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief* 16, no.4 (2020): 413.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, 423.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, 420.

To Cornish's informant Sarah, the uncanny can be easily experienced by anyone learned in the ways of opening one's senses and perception, allowing oneself to become porous to the surrounding environment and subsequently becoming embodied by the way the natural environment makes one feel.<sup>165</sup> Boscastle exudes this presence and has attracted a relatively modern Klaros treatment in that people have erected buildings and decorated the natural environment through carving stone or bedecking trees in areas where the uncanny erupts forth.

Meaning making around the inspirited landscape points to the belief held by the local witches and the pilgrim witches that there exist multiple genius loci, spirits of place that seem to emerge stronger through material representation and even across faiths. Nearby there is the ruin of a Christian holy site known as St. Nectan's Hermitage, a spot frequently visited by Cornish's witch informant Sarah. In Sarah's description of the site, she makes mention of "layers of the sacred", called by scholars such as Jon P. Mitchell a "palimpsest" landscape in which sacred histories layer upon one another and magnify the uncanny presence of a site.<sup>166</sup> Cornish's informant Sarah explains having powerful feelings for a genius loci at St. Nectan's hermitage and elsewhere with Cornish relaying that it is through the repeated human activity that the spirit of place is made more emergent, with Sarah stating that the inherent spirit of place of Boscastle invites this activity.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Cornish, "In Search of the Uncanny," 416.

<sup>166</sup> Jon P. Mitchell, "How Landscapes Remember," *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief* 16, no. 4 (2020): 439.

<sup>167</sup> Cornish, "In Search of the Uncanny," 424.

In the final segment of her article, Cornish and her informant explain, in the same phenomenological vein as S. Brent Plate and David Morgan, that this landscape, though built up with such modern contrivances as witchery shops, witch history museums and continuously worked labyrinthine carvings, and the repatriated body of an alleged witch, exudes an uncanny presence that is magnified by these constructs and experienced through the human sensorium, accounts of which in Boscastle and elsewhere are plentiful. Cornish explains:

“It is the senses that are pricked through uncanniness, Sarah felt connected to ancestors of multiple kinds and identified these places (around Boscastle) as sites where the veil between worlds is thin, and temporality is unstable, where the past, present, and future are not so easily distinguishable”.<sup>168</sup>

For the Boscastle witches and the witch pilgrims that visit, “the otherworld is encountered through hearing, seeing, smelling, feeling things which are hidden, perhaps invisible, provoking sensory effects”.<sup>169</sup> The uncanny or divine presence embedded in particular locales in a given landscape may be physically experienced and as a result of this experience become enshrined in the notion of a palimpsest landscape, where sacred histories revolving around an uncanny or sacred presence build and possess the ability to collapse time for those within the bounds of this presence. This collapsing of time empowers new religious movements such as Wicca or Nordic Neopaganism as these movements grew partially out of a desire for a return to the past, not necessarily a fundament of any kind but an idealized way of being in the world that upheld and

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<sup>168</sup> Cornish, “In Search of the Uncanny,” 426.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, 426.

venerated the natural world and both its seen and unseen denizens. Even if the genius loci of a place are surrounded by multi-faith or multi-cultural presence, it may still be felt and may further still wrest the imaginations of experiencers and reinforce their spiritual identity and occasion spiritual experience through felt uncanny phenomena. This visceral experience, accompanied by the sense of temporality collapsing or altering, can be taken with the sense that not only does the landscape itself remember and have said memory commemorated through human action, it can both trigger previous memories in experiencers and alter them, resulting in the evolution of spiritual narrative such as that occurring at Midgardsblot.

I want to return to Mitchell's notion of palimpsest landscapes, layered not only with sacred histories and traditions but the memories that are associated with them too:

“It is well documented that religious sites are often constituted on existing sites of worship. Many Christian sites for example were established by replacement or by repurposing of earlier Pagan sites. The contemporary religious landscape, then, consists of palimpsest sites”.<sup>170</sup>

These palimpsest sites accrue more relevance and power through subsequent remembrance activities such as rituals. Mitchell explains that these places, “through repeated remembering become places of memory, what scholar Pierre Nora called ‘lieux de memoire’”.<sup>171</sup> Citing Nora, Mitchell elaborates that the concept of *lieux de memoire*, while associated with place in the landscape, can be unbound and be used to refer to “events, symbols, ritual action, texts, any significant entity whether material or non-

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<sup>170</sup> Mitchell, “How Landscapes Remember,” 435.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid*, 437.

material in nature which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community”.<sup>172</sup> Mitchell further cites Nora’s corresponding notion of *milieux de memoire*, which represents a place where “memory is imminent; it is lived or inhabited as spontaneous reality; it is immediate with experience and without mediation”.<sup>173</sup> These two concepts taken together may be seen in particular religious sites yet are especially pertinent for observing new religious and non-traditional places of spiritual experience and meaning making such as music festivals.

*Lieux* and *milieux de memoire* may be seen at work when observing Norway’s Midgardsblot festival. People no doubt were drawn to Borrehaugene to bury their dead for a reason, perhaps genius loci such as those dwelling in Boscastle in Cornwall. As time passed people were further drawn to the site and constructed buildings to be repositories of the local Iron Age and Viking Age histories relative to the Borre Mounds that in turn attracted tourists, musicians, and Nordic Neopagans. The historically inspired buildings shared between Midgardsblot and the Midgard Vikingsenter, in addition to the memorial landscape, represent a palimpsest environment in which the uncanny is amplified and empowered with each visitor and with each year bringing a new festival.

Year round, the national park and history museum attract many visitors, both those who generally profess an enjoyment of history and those more adjacent to Nordic Neopaganism. This everyday usage and exploration of history no doubt builds upon the presence within the landscape which both coalesce with the flows of materiality that

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<sup>172</sup> Mitchell, “How Landscapes Remember,” 437.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, 437.

converge to establish Midgardsblot as a temporary temple, or a *milieux de memoire* that is spontaneously experienced in a current reality in which time is collapsed. This and other uncanny landscapes exhibiting the *milieux de memoire* are continually empowered through visitation use, constantly sharpened like a blade of materiality becoming affective and keen:

“The *milieux de memoire* rest on what Law and Mel call ‘material semiotics’. Material semiotics extends the relationality of linguistic semiotics to the material, suggesting that material things act upon each other in mutually constitutive ways: ‘they make a difference to each other; they make each other be’. Inasmuch as we are embodied, humans are also material and so also enmeshed in these webs of mutually constituting materiality in which the landscape and environment around us are as much agents as we are”.<sup>174</sup>

The lessons and multivalent experiences of the attendees serve to impact the landscape just as the striking natural landscape affects the attendees in kind, making the wisdom shared in the lectures more and more real. This corresponds with Rickert’s notion of “attunement”, a recognition of the personhood or agency of an environment that reveals itself in patterns of relationality.<sup>175</sup> Mitchell’s exploration of landscapes ‘remembering’ correlates with other religious materialist notions of the affective power of sacred and uncanny landscapes and how that power sways the porous human subjects that visit them. Furthermore, Mitchell highlights the idea that while certain landscapes are inherently uncanny or possessive of a genius loci as discussed by Gunderson, Cornish, and others, human subjects and these landscapes are in a co-constitutive relationship with human subjects being affected and compelled to continually act upon the site in question

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<sup>174</sup> Mitchell, “How Landscapes Remember,” 449.

<sup>175</sup> Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 221.



across time and across faiths, thus creating a palimpsest landscape that accumulates both uncanny force and memory.

The work of the scholars of religious materialism and their explorations of the role of the land as home of the uncanny and repository of memory may be reinforced by the work of scholars from particular regional literary or archaeological disciplines such as those concerning themselves with the Scandinavian cultural area, particularly apt as their insights provide further lenses through which to observe a particularly Nordic Neopagan relationship with the palimpsest landscape upon which Midgardsblot takes place.



Figure 8: Midgardsblot Festival Grounds, across a field from the Midgard Vikingsenter



Figure 9: Burial Mound nearest the coast and festival campsite

Scholar of Old Norse Literature, Slavica Rankovic, explores the role that landscape plays in the formation of memory outside of but pertinent to a religious context. Her article, “Remembering the Future,” in the *Handbook of Nordic Memory Studies*, explores the collected Sagas of the Icelanders and how Icelanders engaged with them to shape their society. In this analysis, Rankovic makes mention of the fact that elements of these stories serve to promote distinct cultural memory similarly to how material religion scholars describe landscapes as being layered with memory. Rankovic sites the work of Andy Clark and David Chalmers, notably their notion of “extended mind theory” to explain how human beings utilize the external to formulate the internal.

“According to the extended mind thesis, cognitive processes including recollection take place beyond the boundaries. Rather, our brains exhibit ‘the general tendency to lean heavily on environmental supports’ whether these include surrounding landscapes, objects, or indeed other people”.<sup>176</sup>

Elsewhere in her exploration of the Icelandic sagas and their environmental themes, Rankovic again returns to the role the environment plays on memory formation, explaining that within the realm of the extended mind thesis, the natural environment is not only a memory aid but can actively shape memories of events that have already occurred. Citing the 2011 work of scholars Adam Brown and William Hirst concerning memory formation, she explains:

“As Hirst and Brown point out ‘that the same attitudes, schemata, and social and physical environments that promote individual differences can also transform initially disparate memories into shared recollections. In other words, the very same malleable memory mechanisms that make us individuals also make us social beings’”.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Slavica Rankovic, “Remembering the Future,” in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, ed. Jurg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell (Berlin, De Gruyter, 2018), 527.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, 528.

Following, she references the work of Dudai and Edelson, stating that they “suggest that we conceive of memory as a ‘multi-node network’ whose prime objective may not be veracity but rather ‘assimilation of culture or norms as well as future planning and imagination’”.<sup>178</sup> The scholars referenced by Rankovic serve to flesh out the work of aforementioned religious materialists concerning landscape and memory while also providing a window into the formation of “future memories” or the collective imagination, providing a valuable insight into the development and revival of pre-Christian European folk traditions such as Nordic Neopaganism.

While those under the umbrella of Nordic Neopaganism see nature as sacred and do much of their gathering in small groups in locally accessed areas of nature, these spaces may not immediately be what Mitchell calls palimpsest landscapes. A festival such as Midgardsblot represents both a *milieu de memoire* and a palimpsest landscape, as the site has been in use for thousands of years. Borre Park, effectively part of the festival grounds where Midgardsblot takes place, is readily seen as a palimpsest site due to the ancient wooded grave mounds therein and the elements of living history that have been built as complement to them, such as the Gildehall longhouse and the Midgard visitors center. Both sites of discourse for Scandinavian and Viking Age history and folk practice, these constructs may be viewed along the lines provided by Gunderson and Cornish, as they draw attention to the fact that the land itself is possessed of the uncanny, if not a felt genius loci that also brings about the understanding that this is a “Pagan” place, a notion that the music and the events hosted at these festivals draw out.

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<sup>178</sup> Rankovic, “Remembering the Future,” 528.



Figure 10: Gildehallen, reproduction of a Viking Age longhall and site of performances and lectures at Midgardsblot.

### **Lay of the Land**

In Nordic Neopaganism, divinity is seen as immanent with the landscape being home to various land spirits, deities, and perceived ancestors. Certain points in the landscape possess an uncanny quality, perhaps aligning with the notion of the fourfold, the place where earth, sky, humans, and gods meet. These points, through human engagement over time, become palimpsest landscapes, accumulating meaning and sacrality through human intervention. With its striking natural landscape, historical narrative, and the human action performed upon it, Borre Park may be framed as a palimpsest landscape and Midgardsblot may be framed as both a temporary sacred space taking place upon it. The festival and the space it occupies is re-sanctified and reinforced by the experience of coalesced elements of Nordic Neopagan materiality such as bodies and the landscape, but also of the music being played therein. The landscape, lectures from perceived authority figures, and the music being performed impart a sense of cultural memory to varying degrees that reinforce the notion of Midgardsblot as a sacred space as the following data will reflect.

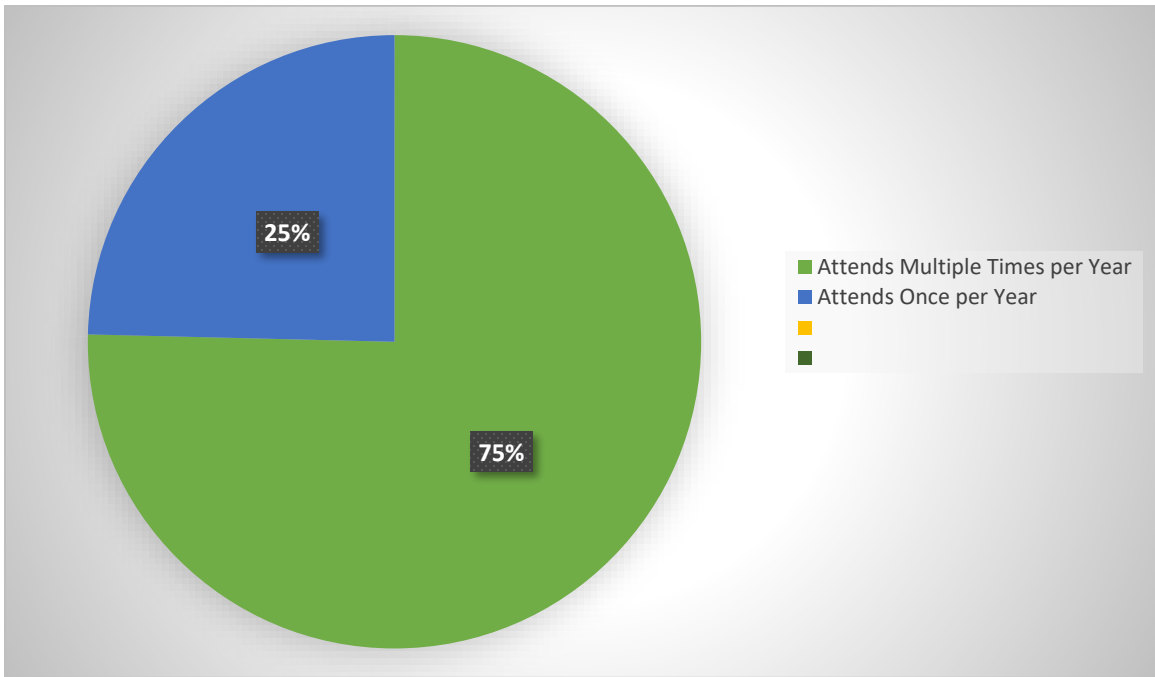


Figure 11: Frequency of festival attendance among survey population.

Survey questions six through eight attempt to ascertain how frequently the survey population attends music festivals such as Midgardsblot and Fire in the Mountains and whether this attendance leads to an impactful personal experience. Question six asks: “How often do you attend live music events such as concerts and festivals?” Of the respondents, 75% responded that they attend these events multiple times a year while 24.49% responded that they only attend once a year. Of the survey population, one participant refused to answer this question. None of the respondents answered that they never attend events such as these. Question seven asks: “To what extent do you think particular concerts or festivals can be events of spiritual significance?” Of the survey population, 74% answered in the affirmative, stating that they do believe these events to be of spiritual significance. Of this percentage, 40% strongly agreed and 34% somewhat

agreed, 16% maintained a stance of neutrality and neither agreed nor disagreed, whereas 6% somewhat disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed.

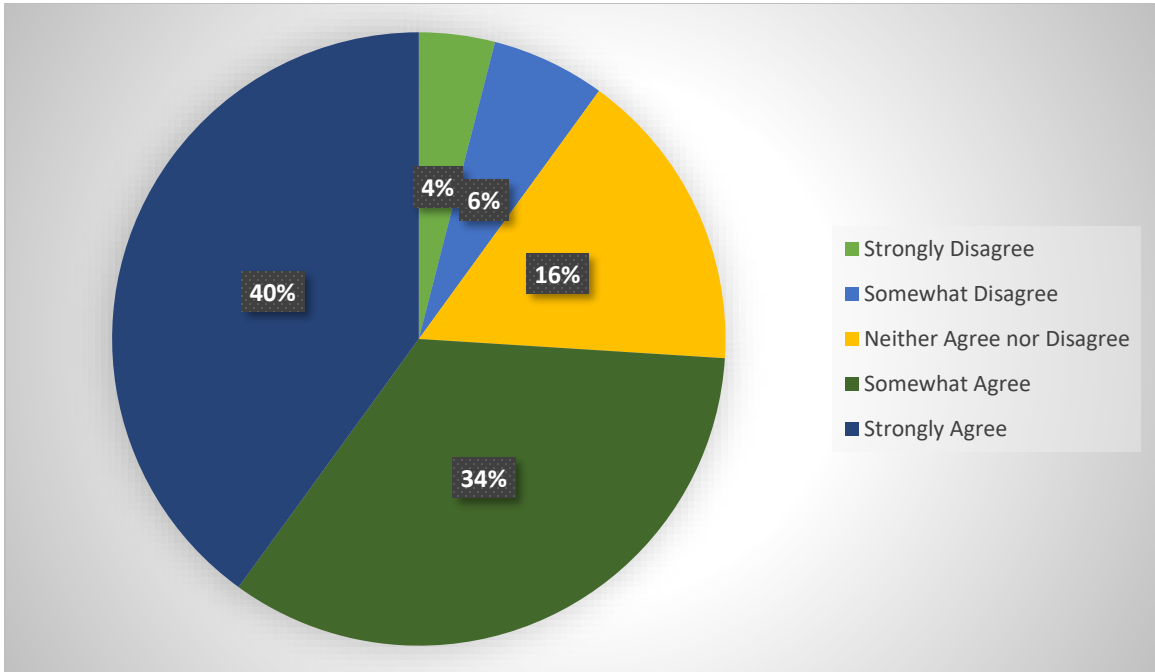


Figure 12: Survey population's recognition of festivals as spiritual events

Building off this query, question 8 asks “To what extent do you think that festivals such as Fire in the Mountains and Midgardsblot are spiritually significant?” Though the survey population more than likely did not attend Fire in the Mountains, a large portion of this group responded that they felt Midgardsblot was an event of spiritual significance, with 82% of respondents answering in the affirmative. Breaking down the data received for this question 2% strongly disagree, 10% somewhat disagree, 6% neither agree nor disagree, 30% somewhat agree, while more than half of the survey population, 52%, strongly agree that Midgardsblot and festivals like it are events of spiritual significance.



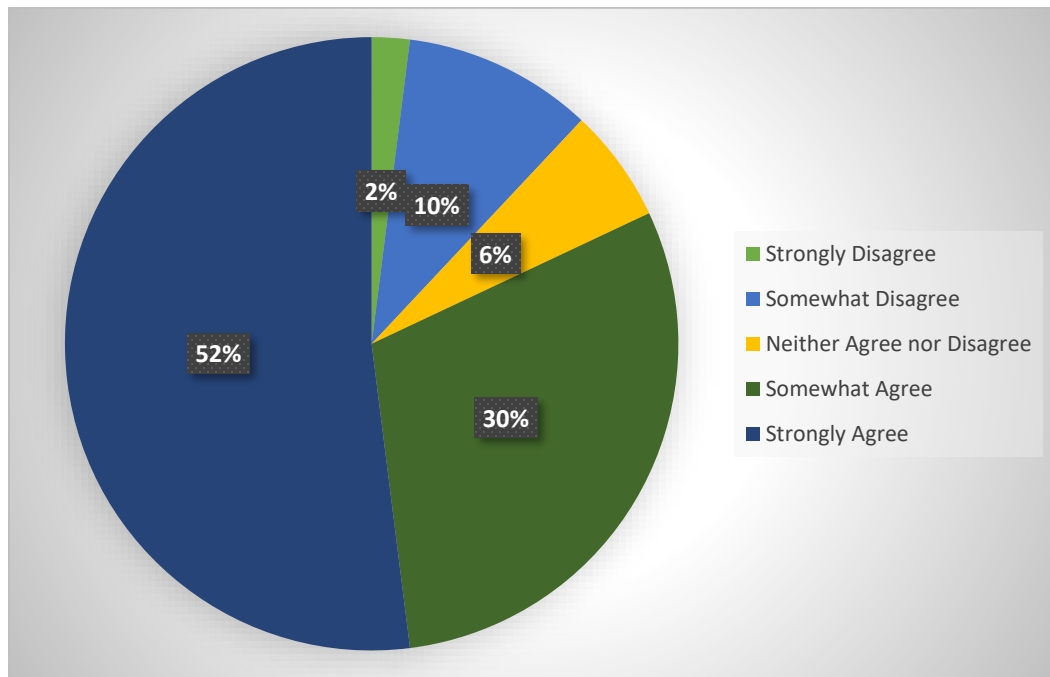


Figure 13: Survey population's recognition of Midgardsblot and related festivals as spiritually significant

Some of the performers at Midgardsblot, such as Folket Bortafor Nordvinden, explicitly labeled the event as a Blot, a pre-Christian Nordic religious ceremony meant to honor the gods and land spirits, and therefore an event of spiritual significance. Similar sentiments were echoed in some of the responses to question 10, which asks “Do you think concerts or festivals can be events of spiritual significance?” One respondent answered: “Yes like I wrote above. when we are blotting we can actually feel the Gods we are screaming the name of in to the sky and flames.” Some respondents described the visceral sensations they experienced when seeing Nordic Neopagan bands such as Wardruna perform:

“The music is most important to me, whether it’s live or at home, but the live setting definitely adds to the energy because you’re witnessing it for real right in front of you, with so many other people that are feeling the same thing. At Midgardsblot

2022, when Wardruna played Helvegen, I cried harder than I have in a long time, it brought out so much emotion and beauty.”.

While a few respondents answered “no” for both questions, the majority of respondents reported experiencing physical reactions and altered states of awareness when experiencing this music to a degree while alone but amplified in a communal setting such as a festival. Of the survey population, one respondent described that while the music was powerful, for them the heightened states of awareness and physical reactions came about because of the location of the festival: “Yes, but more because of the location. Midgardsblot is on sacred ground.”. Question eleven of the survey concerns proximity to the natural environment, asking respondents, “Does the natural environment enhance the festival experience?” Of the survey population, 92% responded that the natural environment enhances their experience in some way, with an overwhelming 70% saying they strongly agree and 22% saying they somewhat agree. The remaining 8% responded that the natural environment has no effect on their experience whatsoever.

### Question 11: The natural environment serves to impact/enhance your experience of a festival

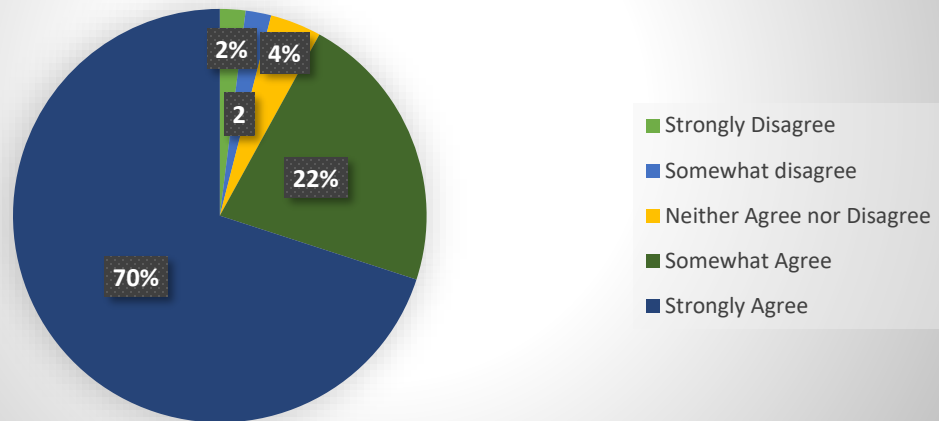


Figure 14: Degrees to which the survey population sees the natural environment impacting their festival experience.

Question twelve served as an addition to question eleven, allowing the survey population an opportunity to elaborate on their thoughts relating to the relationship between these festivals and the natural environment, and how experiencing such an event in a meaningful natural site impacts their relationship to the natural world outside of the festival. It asks: “After experiencing a festival or concert in a striking natural area do you feel a renewed/different relationship to the natural world? If so, please explain.” The majority of the answers described the music at the festival as having a relationship to the natural world and enhancing it and vice versa. One respondent reported that “I’d rather say the other way around. I feel like the music is complimented by the strong atmospheric of for example a great scenery.” Another explained: “I have not experienced many musical performances held in natural areas. However, there is something about the beauty of the environment that enhances the musical experience.” Some respondents replied no,

but provided an explanation that they already attempted to live a lifestyle oriented around nature, so the festival experience didn't diminish or enhance this feeling. One stated, "No, but I think this is possible. I already feel this as I am pagan from childhood," while another describes, "Not really. I live on a homestead in pretty awesome natural surroundings, so perhaps I am a bit spoiled." Some respondents described a more muted experience while acknowledging that the festival setting as enhanced previously held views: "Sometimes, I'm already very connected to the natural world, but going to Midgardsblot was the melding of many things I love." Some respondents reported powerful experiences of connection and relation during the sets of the Nordic Neopagan bands in attendance, with one respondent experiencing an uncanny moment during the Wardruna performance:

"Yes. If you attended Wardruna's concert at Midgardsblot you will remember the flock of geese flying ahead in a W formation. I am so glad someone started cheering because that's exactly how I felt – I just wanted to cheer. It brought me joy to see these animals living their best life."

Midgardsblot possesses many elements that delineate it as a sacred space for Nordic Neopagans, though paramount among these is the discourse occurring at the festival that solidifies the event as such. This discourse is multivalent; it occurs amongst the attendees around the campfire and is provided by the performers and lecturers in attendance who explicitly state the sacred nature of the event. In their respective lectures, musician Einar Selvik and academic Rune Rasmussen discussed the festival as a Nordic Neopagan sacred space. Identifying their personal practice as Nordic Animism, they

discussed this emergent tradition's emphasis on re-establishing relations between humans and the natural world and between humans inter-communally, citing Midgardsblot as an ideal site for the celebration and establishment of Nordic Neopagan community. In the chapter that follows, I discuss how this "official" discourse provided by respected Nordic Neopagan figures, along with public ritual performances, legitimizes Midgardsblot as a sacred space and pilgrimage destination for Nordic Neopagans.

## Chapter Four: Midgardsblot

Midgardsblot is a music festival where a variety of Nordic and other Neopagan elements coalesce to create a temporary, multivalent sacred space wherein receptive practitioners may construct and reinforce a religious identity. The festival features multiple outlets for this identity formulation to occur, such as collectively experiencing music, lectures, and ritual performances in addition to living in a temporary communal setting. This coalescence represents a mobilization of Neopagan religious materiality and its coalescence at these specific sites, which in turn continually charge these sites as sacred, becoming “places” as defined by cultural geographer Yi Fu Tuan.<sup>179</sup> The festivals as temporary sacred places are reinforced as such by the meeting of these facets of materiality and interpersonal discourse. The interaction of the attendees with one another at the festivals and online, in addition to statements made by festival organizers in their physical and digital advertisement of these events, enhances the nature of the festival spaces as palimpsest landscapes that accrue spiritual character and become reinforced as sacred sites through human action and attunement. This manifold human action further leads to the understanding that these festivals, particularly Midgardsblot, are worthy as sites of pilgrimage that reinforce communal identity and generate the experience of belonging and homecoming.

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<sup>179</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81, no. 4 (1991): 684.

Midgardsblot and similar festivals are coalescent points of religious materiality for people self-identifying as Neopagan. To show that this phenomenon isn't likely isolated to Midgardsblot, I'd like to pivot to another metal festival possessing Neopagan adjacent themes. In the initial stages of this project, I had planned on disseminating a survey for the Wyoming based festival, Fire in the Mountains. Though I did not receive explicit consent to disseminate a survey, I was invited to speak on a panel being hosted at the festival and as such, undertook participant observation. Fire in the Mountains, with its emphasis on rewilding, land stewardship, and workshops focusing on ecology and community building represents a heavy metal festival with a broad nature spirituality theme featuring Indigenous North American, Celtic, and Nordic elements.<sup>180</sup>

Midgardsblot, on the other hand, with its curated selection of workshops, presentations, and reenactments pertaining to both the Viking and Nordic Iron Age, and in addition to it taking place adjacent to the burial mounds dated to these respective periods of time, make it a more desirable location for those self-identifying as specifically Nordic Neopagan.

Fire in the Mountains does not possess the unified Nordic folk cultural themes that Midgardsblot does. Certain Nordic folk cultural elements are present in some of the bands and speakers in attendance, but the festival theme is one celebrating multiple nature-centered folkways and indigenous traditions. In a phone discussion with festival organizer Alex Feher, he explained that care was taken to include indigenous scholars and speakers and to provide a space in which nature-centered worldviews and concepts

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<sup>180</sup> "Our Vision," Fire in the Mountains, accessed July 10, 2022, <https://fitmfest.com/about-fitm/our-vision/>

such as rewilding, reorienting with the natural world, could come together.<sup>181</sup> The inclusion of these speakers as lecturers and participants in a panel dialogue alongside musicians and scholars focusing on Celtic and Nordic Neopaganism provided a form of “interfaith” discussion that highlighted the place of music as a storytelling medium and element of ritual technology among these cultural areas. I was invited to participate as a speaker in this panel discussion, advertised as a key non-musical feature of the festival, and can say that it served as a platform for these scholars to discuss the animistic elements of the aforementioned cultures and how they can be accessed through the experience of storytelling and so used to restore relation with the natural environment.<sup>182</sup> Midgardsblot presents a similar experience, although emphasis is placed on Nordic folk cultural and Nordic Neopagan ways of relating to the natural world.

Taking place at the foot of the Tetons, the sacred status of the land to the indigenous groups native to the area is conveyed through the decision to feature workshops and lectures hosted by local indigenous academics and activists. I took part in a panel discussion hosted by musicologist Ross Hagen about music as a ritual technology and tool for refocusing the natural world. Joining us on this panel were elders from the Lakota nation and the Incan cultural area who described the power and role of music in ritual performances in their respective cultural contexts. The striking Wyoming landscape combined with input from indigenous figures served to orient the festival towards an event celebrating a more generalized nature spirituality and the animist idea of building

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<sup>181</sup> Alex Feher (Fire in the Mountains Organizer) in discussion with the author, March 2022.

<sup>182</sup> Ross Hagen et al., “Mirrors, Revolving Doors, and Wormholes: Music’s (Fuzzy) Connections to Cultural Pasts (Panel Discussion, Fire in the Mountains, Moran, WY, July 24, 2022).



relation with the natural world and within community to address contemporary societal ills such as lack of community.<sup>183</sup> This discussion was magnified by the fact that Fire in the Mountains is a smaller festival where these academic and indigenous specialists were able to speak with groups in a more intimate setting. The festivals and the spaces they temporarily occupy may be considered palimpsest landscapes in the vein of Gunderson, Cornish, and Mitchell because the human interaction upon them combined with the cultural and historical importance placed upon them over time leads to their reinforcement as sacred spaces.

### **An Occultural Gathering**

In addition to being new religious movements, Neopaganisms may further be defined as vernacular folk religions. Due to their countercultural and individualized nature, this understanding of Neopaganisms correlates with the idea of “occulture” put forth by Christopher Partridge. Partridge defines occulture as “those often hidden, rejected, and oppositional beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices”.<sup>184</sup> Partridge presents the emergence of occulture as a response to secularization. Citing Colin Campbell’s theory that “secularization is the declining of religion”, Partridge provides a counterpoint arguing that religion is far from going anywhere; rather, it is changing, and secularization may be understood as part of the natural life cycle of a religious system.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> “Our Vision,” Fire in the Mountains

<sup>184</sup> Partridge, *Re-Enchantment*, 68.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

Partridge equates those beliefs that constitute “occulture” as being centered on the individual rather than the community, albeit up to a certain point.

Partridge’s identification of Neopaganism as an aspect of occulture, his discussion of occulture being a response to social change, and his identification of those denizens of the occultural realm as being largely individual practitioners, aligns with Neopagan scholar Barbara Jane Davy’s description of Neopagans. She labels them as solitaires and states that they largely practice on their own or in very small gatherings of likeminded people.<sup>186</sup> This proclivity for solitary practice does not eliminate the need for community: “although there are solitary practitioners, generally speaking the Pagan community is valued by individual Pagans as a source of spiritual guidance and support”.<sup>187</sup> In Nordic Neopaganism, this community is found both locally and online, with many content creators and artists occupying a specific niche of authority within the Nordic Neopagan milieu as observed by scholars such as Ross Downing. Considering Partridge’s explanation of occulture, one may mark Fire in the Mountains and Midgardsblot as occultural gatherings. The festivals provide attendees a place where they may refine their identities through exposure to various elements of Neopagan materiality and through the experience of an occultural community.

The discussions occurring at these festivals, whether amongst attendees or between attendees and lecturers, represents a discourse that solidifies these festivals as sacred spaces and pilgrimage destinations. This action is not simply visitation, but it is also discursive. The mobilization of language reinforces these festivals as sacred places.

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<sup>186</sup> Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies*, 4.

<sup>187</sup> Partridge, *Re-Enchantment*, 79.

While the landscapes that these festivals occupy are physically transformed during the festivals by human interaction, they are metaphorically transformed narratives about them are circulated by attendees, organizers, and performers. These stories are told interpersonally but are also told via social media postings and even festival signage. At Midgardsblot, there are many stories being told at once, but a key narrative relates to the idea of homecoming. As it is understood by organizers and attendees, Midgardsblot is a home for those who identify with heavy metal, Nordic history, and Nordic Neopaganism. This narrative of homecoming is magnified not only by the presence of the burial mounds and the Nordic folk artifacts present in the Midgard Vikingsenter, but it is also further reinforced by the ongoing discourse between the human actants temporarily inhabiting these spaces during the festival that “converts the space into a real presence”.<sup>188</sup>

This reinforcement through storytelling meshes with certain formations of Nordic Neopaganism, particularly Nordic Animism, which seeks to advance Nordic cultural ideas of relation-building through ritual and discourse.<sup>189</sup> Aligning with the narrative set forth by scholar practitioners of Nordic Animism, Tuan’s description of Australian Aboriginal practices sheds light onto the role of storytelling within indigenous traditions but also in contemporary, animistically inclined new religious movements. Explaining the effects of Aboriginal “songlines”, Tuan elaborates that through them:

“Natural features such as a heap of stones, a stand of trees, a cave, or a billabong acquire visibility because of Dreamtime actions, as these are told in myths. The

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<sup>188</sup> Tuan, “Language,” 686.

<sup>189</sup> Rasmussen, “What is Animism”

telling itself, not always accompanied by ritual, has the power to endow a site with vibrant meaning”.<sup>190</sup>

The multivalent discourse occurring at these festivals between attendees, organizers, and performers, and in the stories large and small told between these parties about the Midgardsblot festival site, reinforces not only Borrehaugene as a sacred place, but also the festival itself. Furthermore, this discourse and its legitimization of Midgardsblot as a sacred place legitimizes it as a viable pilgrimage destination.

Scholars Michael Di Giovine and Jaeyeon Choe problematize the assumed idea of pilgrimage, broadening the term to make room for non-traditional pilgrimage destinations and highlighting their spiritual importance.

“Pilgrimages are hyper-meaningful travel to hyper-meaningful sites that are set apart from the profane and everyday world” and further explain that “these sites are important to visitors in that they promise personal or social transformation”.<sup>191</sup>

But what determines the sacrality of these non-traditional pilgrimage destinations, especially if these destinations, on paper, do not have a religious affiliation? To Di Giovine and Choe, the power indeed lies with the people: “the sacred manifests itself semiotically and performatively through discourse and practice”.<sup>192</sup> The sacred, therefore, is a matter of cultural and subcultural context.

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<sup>190</sup> Tuan, “Language,” 687.

<sup>191</sup> Michael A. Di Giovane and Jaeyeon Choe, “Geographies of Religion and Spirituality: Pilgrimage Beyond the ‘Officially’ Sacred,” *Tourism Geographies: An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment* 21, no. 3 (2019): 362.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*, 363

## Ritual Reinforcement

Di Giovine and Choe explain that most pilgrimages need to be authorized for them to be considered valid.<sup>193</sup> While there is no central hierarchy in Nordic Neopaganism, there are respected figures within and adjacent to the tradition that are also involved with these festivals whose opinions serve to legitimize the concept that these are sacred spaces. Di Giovine and Choe outline that in order for a pilgrimage to a site to be validated, the sacrality of a given site or event must be authorized through tradition, canonical text, and institutional norms.<sup>194</sup> Though lacking hierarchy and strict dogmatism, respected scholar practitioners and musicians in attendance, popular discourse, and ritual action allow for the consideration of Midgardsblot as a Nordic Neopagan sacred space. In terms of tradition, both Fire in the Mountains and Midgardsblot possess opening and closing rituals that separate them from profane time. While the rituals at Fire in the Mountains were not necessarily attached to a folk tradition, the rituals at Midgardsblot were explicitly Nordic Neopagan in nature. The name of this festival itself is derived from Nordic folk tradition and refers to the festival as being a Blot to Midgard, or a ritual for the earth/the realm of humankind. At the opening ritual for Midgardsblot, one of the musician officiants referred to not just the festival but the opening and closing rituals as the largest Blots to have occurred on Scandinavian soil in a thousand years.

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<sup>193</sup> Di Giovane and Choe, "Geographies of Religion and Spirituality," 366.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, 366

The Midgardsblot opening ceremony was a reconstruction of what the term Blot initially referred to: an offering or sacrifice.<sup>195</sup> The ceremony took place behind the Gildehallen, the historical reproduction of a Viking Age long hall, and was officiated by members of the musical and ritual group Folket Bortafør Nordavinden (The People Beyond the North Wind) who in addition to officiating the rite, drummed and sang chants in Norwegian. Festival attendees gathered around the group, who were in a demarcated ritual space, at the center of which were two wooden god statues, one of Odin and one of Freyja. The members of Folket Bortafør Nordavinden anointed these statues with “animal blood”<sup>196</sup> and used bundled tree branches to sprinkle the blood on those around the circle. Additionally, entrances into the ritual circle were made and festival attendees were allowed to enter two at a time to dip their hands in a bowl containing the blood to anoint themselves and to anoint the statues if they wished. Many participated and for the rest of the festival people were proudly wearing their bloodstains on their faces and clothes. The festival was sealed with a closing ritual, performed by popular Nordic folk band Heilung, known for their ritualistic creative processes and performances. Throughout the festival I observed small groups performing personal rituals among the burial mounds at night and was invited to participate in a small Blot atop one of the mounds with some of the festival organizers and workshop presenters.

In addition to the opening and closing Blots, Midgardsblot hosted a ritual closer to the original meaning of the term, albeit in lieu of blood, pain was the offering of choice. A figure in the global Nordic Neopagan community and PhD candidate in Scandinavian

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<sup>195</sup> Nordvig, *Asatru for Beginners*, 65.

<sup>196</sup> It was later revealed to the author that theatrical blood was utilized for this rite.

history, Tim Nancarrow, worked with the festival organizers to engage in a suspension ritual dedicated to the god Odin to be held in the Gildehall. The day of the ritual, Nancarrow hosted a talk describing the fluidity of modern ritual practice for Nordic Neopagans and elaborated on why he has chosen suspension rituals, rites where he is hung from hooks, as one of his preferred ritual technologies. In his discussion, he emphasized that for modern Neopagans, emphasis should be equally placed on “recollection and recreation”, stating that many rituals have been lost to time, and it lies with the contemporary practitioner to explore what works for them.<sup>197</sup>

The remainder of his discussion saw Nancarrow provide candid, personal elaborations with the audience and shared both personal reasoning and accounts from the mythology surrounding Odin in his explanation of his ritual choices. He described that not only are sacrificial rites ways to talk with the gods, but this particular sacrifice of pain and endurance was in line with Odin’s personality and actions described in the body of myth, as the god put himself through great sufferings to gain ultimate knowledge and sorcerous skill. A popular story summarizing these traits concerns Odin hanging himself from the cosmic world tree, Yggdrasil, for nine nights, transfixed by his own spear. On the ninth night, Odin freed himself, and as he fell, he grasped the runes, learned their power, and shared them with humanity.<sup>198</sup>

Further along in his workshop, Nancarrow provides an unpackaging of the figure of Odin (not an easy task as the god is known by manifold names and associated aspects),

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<sup>197</sup> Tim Nancarrow, “Propitiation, Supplication, and Sacrifice.”  
(Presentation, Mimir Talks Lecture Series at Midgardsblot, Horten, Norway, August 17, 2022).

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

a controversial deity when compared to the social norms of the Viking Age. Odin was a practitioner of seið magic, controversial for a masculine god in that it is a form of magic associated with women that utilizes trance states and the invitation of spirits into the body to enact changes in the surrounding community and world.<sup>199</sup> Odin was seen as a shamed god due to his hanging from Yggdrasil to gain knowledge of runes, as “hanging was reserved for those who had committed crimes and were put on display for the community”.<sup>200</sup> After a description of his planned ritual and a working through of the figure of Odin, Nancarrow fielded audience questions and provided commentary relating to contemporary Nordic Neopagan ritual performances and offerings, and he elaborated on his personal ritual practice.

Following, he described his planned suspension ritual, revealing that it would be accompanied by the recitation of prayers and incantations dedicated to Odin. He explained that he was going to undergo the suspension ritual while fasted in order to achieve a heightened endorphin response and facilitate heightened awareness.<sup>201</sup> Unfortunately, I was not able to see the ritual in person, as the Gildehall was completely filled with those hoping to see Nancarrow’s rite and to receive the blessings Odin would bestow in return for an offering of pain. In the context of Midgardsblot, Nancarrow represents an emergent authority figure to the Nordic Neopagan milieu in attendance. With his discussion of personal exploration to find suitable ritual practice, he reinforces

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<sup>199</sup> Jenny Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seið Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-Shamanism in North European Paganism* (London: Routledge Press, 2002), 124

<sup>200</sup> Nancarrow, “Propitiation, Supplication, and Sacrifice.”

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*



the notion of Nordic Neopaganism as a vernacular practice that demands personal choice and exploration. Nancarrow's authenticity is not only strengthened with his academic training, but also through ritual action that was both a personal exploration of spirituality and an offering for the blessing and sanctification of Midgardsblot.

### **Legitimization**

The ritual activity occurring at Midgardsblot may be equated with Di Giovine and Choe's notion of tradition, yet pilgrimage to this festival is further validated through and equated with their notion of canonical text and institutional norms. This validation comes in the form of historical accounts describing when and where people would perform ritual and from input provided by Nordic Neopagan aligned academics, artists, and musicians. These authority figures provide their followers with interpretation of the body of myth and share their personal ritual praxes. These individuals have been invited to host workshops and presentations at these festivals which reinforce the overarching festival theme, which in the case of Midgardsblot is engagement with Nordic history and bringing that history into the present. The topics discussed in these workshops and shared on social media may come to be seen as institutional norms for Nordic Neopaganism, or rather, new ways to engage with the religion that may not be universally accepted but will at least have some recognition from followers active on social media and those attending the festival workshops in person. With the religion emphasizing non-dogmatism and vernacular expression, the sentiments possessed by attendees recognize the festival as a sacred space worthy of pilgrimage and shared amongst one another on the festival grounds and on festival affiliated social media may also be considered a form of affirmation.

Attendance of these festivals can serve as a form of communal affirmation. Di Giovine and Choe observe that “pilgrimage is performance that pilgrims with their own agency enact to work out social tensions or communicate the changing model of the universe and their place in it”.<sup>202</sup> This working out of place in the cosmos is aided by attendance to workshops discussing ritual praxis and elaborating on Nordic history and cosmology, in addition to discussions themed around potential avenues of growth for Nordic Neopaganism, such as the adoption of a distinctly Nordic animistic worldview and exploration of the work of indigenous academics to compare and contrast elements of traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) in an effort to explore methodologies of living with nature rather than apart from it as a response to climate change.<sup>203</sup> Many speakers in attendance presented discussions covering a variety of historical and spiritual material useful in the construction of vernacular Nordic Neopagan practice, yet one of the most striking discussions was provided by one of the musicians performing at the festival: Einar Selvik of the band Wardruna.

Wardruna may be considered explicitly Nordic Neopagan music; Selvik has gone on record in interviews describing his usage of Wardruna as both a personal method of exploring spirituality and a facet of his spirituality that can be shared with others in the hopes of inspiring them to explore it on their own.<sup>204</sup> Selvik’s discussion was wide ranging, focused on the composition and performance of contemporary Nordic traditional

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<sup>202</sup> Di Giovane and Choe, “Geographies of Religion and Spirituality,” 373.

<sup>203</sup> Rune Rasmussen, “Viking Environmentalism: Nordic Animism, a Strategy for Applying the Nordic Past in Current Culture.” (Presentation, Mimir Talks Lecture Series at Midgardsblot, Horten, Norway, August 20, 2022).

<sup>204</sup> Handelman, “Wardruna”.

music. Selvik covered the usage of music in Nordic ritual, the traditional construction of instruments and the entombment of instruments at certain burial sites, belying their cultural importance, and the usage of music as an animistic tool of relation with the natural world. For the latter, he discussed the traditions of Lok, a haunting, lilting form of singing predominantly used by female herders to call their flock and to communicate with one another across the forested valleys.<sup>205</sup> Selvik also discussed that this style of singing was affective to the animals because it calmed them, and aspects of this singing style were used in a ritualistic fashion, to not only call animals but to invite protective spirits to the wilderness traveler.<sup>206</sup> Selvik further elaborated that both his and Wardruna's musical endeavors reflect a Nordic animist sensibility. In addition to utilizing traditional singing styles like Lok, he and the band create their instruments using traditional methods and utilize natural materials and animal parts such as bone and goat horn. He reflected that the choice to use these natural materials serves as a reminder of what he and Wardruna want to accomplish musically and spiritually.

Speakers in attendance such as Tim Nancarrow and Einar Selvik, among others, reinforced the ethereal idea that the festival could be considered a sacred place or at the very least somewhere that could be used to work through spiritual identity construction and to experiment with ritual. Dr. Rune Rasmussen in his discussion of Nordic Animism seemed to say what many were thinking (myself included) when he endeavored to frame the Midgardsblot festival in a Nordic Animist gathering, describing it as a place where

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<sup>205</sup> Einar Selvik, "Weaving Sounds with Sources of Ancient Nordic Musicology."  
(Presentation, Mimir Talks Lecture Series at Midgardsblot, Horten, Norway, August 19, 2022).

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

interpersonal relation, and relation between the Midgardsblot community and the natural world, could be worked through.<sup>207</sup> He provided a personal anecdote regarding how he married into the Baya tribe of South Africa and explains how their animistic worldview informs their cultural practices to build community. In his talk, Rasmussen elaborated that the increasingly technologizing and modernizing world caused isolation and made people lose their sense of collective identity, exacerbating cultural problems but also climate problems.<sup>208</sup> He also drew attention to Nordic Neopaganism as a response to this lack of societal connectedness and claimed that it provided a way in which people could feel a sense of homecoming and belonging.<sup>209</sup>

During his discussion, Rasmussen explained that the cultures of Northern Europe were previously animist in nature and were acutely aware of the importance of societal connectedness in response to crises within community and within the natural world. Aligning with the rhetoric of other workshop speakers such as Timothy Nancarrow, Dr. Rasmussen elaborated on the importance of storytelling and ritual in a modern animist context. He explained the world ending myth of Ragnarok as a parable of the collapse of relation between humans, the gods, and the natural world and (re)introduced an eight-year ritual cycle to be practiced by Nordic Neopagans beginning with what is known as the Year of Aun in 2023.<sup>210</sup> Dr. Rasmussen explained that he chose the name of this ritual year in reference to an old Scandinavian legend concerning a decrepit king who kept

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<sup>207</sup> Rasmussen, “Viking Environmentalism”.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

sacrificing his sons to extend his life.<sup>211</sup> Rasmussen explained that this tale may be understood in an animist light, stating that it describes the perils of “unending consumer comfort” and the cost of such comforts manifesting in often unseen violence against nature and people.<sup>212</sup> The music, architecture, landscape, digital discourse, and respected personalities providing lectures and talks at Midgardsblot serve to validate it as a religious site and a place worthy of pilgrimage that simultaneously generates feelings of belonging in many of those that make the journey to attend. .

### **Portable Neopagan Community**

Divorced from the events of Midgardsblot, the community in attendance constitutes an important piece of religious materiality. Temporarily living in a community setting with fellow metalheads and appreciators of Nordic folk tradition and culture helps define the overall experience of the festival. While there are attendees that opted not to camp on the Borrehaugene grounds and yet still made meaning from their festival experience, the group that chose to camp near the festival (of which I was a part) established themselves as what scholar Robert Gardner refers to as a “portable community”. Gardner’s portable community lies adjacent to Partridge’s idea of occulture in that the portable community is countercultural and serves as a response to a society that is becoming hyper-individualized and affords people less and less opportunities to experience community in a traditional sense.

Gardner explains that “portable communities are a cultural response to globalization, the decline of individual communities, and an increase in social

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<sup>211</sup> Rasmussen, “Viking Environmentalism”.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

isolation”.<sup>213</sup> Nordic Neopaganism is present in the occultural, portable community seen at Midgardsblot. Portable community may be read as a significant phenomenon leading to the refinement of Nordic Neopaganism as a religious tradition. As a non-dogmatic religion with non-traditional authority figures such as influencers, musicians, and academics that dispense suggestion rather than dogmatic edict, Nordic Neopaganism manifests in the portable festival community and grows within such bounds, as the discourse within these communities further refines individual and communal religious identity to allow those within it to work out certain understandings of the religion that they may keep with them after the festival ends. This discourse within the festival itself and within the portable communal setting of the campground reinforces notions relating to personal ritual praxis and what constitutes sacred space.

As both an occultural and vernacular folk tradition, Nordic Neopaganism is a countercultural force. The small gatherings of adherents for ritual or the larger gathering of like-minded individuals at music festivals represent Gardner’s notion of portable community and are reinforced by participation. Gardner explains: “participants create these communal spaces outside of local institutions, form enduring networks and relationships and foster social capital and an inclusive public sphere”.<sup>214</sup> The discourse and the atmosphere this creates is readily seen at these festivals, but most notably at the campsites. At Midgardsblot, attendees that opt to camp do so in a contained tent community overlooking the Skagerrak Strait. This camp is named “Utgard” by the

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<sup>213</sup> Gardner, “The Portable Community,” 158.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid*, 157.

festival organizers and is an example of the Nordic folk symbolism present at the festival. Utgard is a land of giants and trolls in Nordic mythology, enemies of the Aesir gods but also nature spirits.<sup>215</sup>

Camp Utgard as a site of portable community serves as an affective portion of the palimpsest landscape of the Borrehaugene park. Utgard sits directly on the Skagerrak Straight and is an incredibly short walk to the wooded grave mounds, the Midgard Viking Historical Center, and the festival grounds proper. The grave mounds not only serve to charge the festival, but their proximity also affects the camp setting. Proximity to these mounds is magnified for those who attended the historical and religious workshops hosted at the Viking Center, allowing receptive attendees to understand that within the mounds dwell ancestors worthy of respect, dictating how Nordic Neopagan attendees relate to one another in camp, with the natural environment, and how they orient themselves towards the mounds. The mounds and the Nordic Neopagan understanding of landscape reinforce Camp Utgard, an already liminal space at a liminal festival that is further impacted by the public rituals performed and personal rituals undertaken by attendees. During the night, a handful of people went out to the grave mounds for their personal practices, but the camp itself served as the site of a nightly drum circle that persisted until dawn. This drum circle drew many and served as a continuation of the larger festival once the scheduled performances had ceased.

Camp Utgard as a liminal space is informed by the Nordic cultural and religious symbolism present in the natural environment and the grave mounds, in workshops at the Midgard Vikingsenter, in the festival itself, and in the interactions between attendees at

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<sup>215</sup> Nordvig, *Asatru for Beginners*, 35-36.

the festival and campgrounds. The liminal festival and camp environment allows attendees to experiment with their identity and work through their identity with performance. Though Gardner's work concerned the bluegrass festival, his thoughts pertaining to bluegrass festivals as sites of identity formation in a secular world resonate with what I experienced at Midgardsblot. Gardner states: "At certain festivals, participants dress and behave in ways that celebrate the intentionality of the space created for self-expression".<sup>216</sup> The Midgardsblot festival features events and spaces dedicated to reenactment of Viking Age life ranging from agriculture and crafting to warfare.

Though they were prevalent and a feature of the festival, the reenactors were not the only ones bedecked in period appropriate clothing. Other attendees did as well. Their garb is not limited to historically accurate clothing, and I was able to see attendees wearing elaborate costumes inspired by Nordic folklore representing figures such as faeries and elves in addition to some artistic renditions of Nordic warriors and seers akin to those influencers researched by Downing.<sup>217</sup> The liminal free space of self-expression was present at Midgardsblot outside of clothing and was also evident in personal ritual, interpersonal interaction, and the aforementioned drum circle. This drum circle drew a sizable crowd each night and served as a place for people to drink and talk together in addition to experiencing the music and dances performed by fellow festival attendees. While drums were a main feature, students of the guitar, flute, and bagpipes also contributed and formed impromptu jam sessions.

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<sup>216</sup> Gardner, "The Portable Community," 168.

<sup>217</sup> Downing, "Hashtag Heathens," 186.



While Fire in the Mountains represents a consciously themed festival oriented towards rewilding and connection with the natural world that promotes a distinct form of portable community, Midgardsblot does this while directly promoting an inclusive Nordic Neopagan themed community that welcomes Neopagans and people of all backgrounds. The symbolic themes of these festivals, together with the curated performances, talks, and the natural spaces the festival occupies, work together to create distinct portable communities that enhance both Nordic Neopagan and other occultural religious identity formations. In terms of Occulture, these festivals serve as pilgrimage sites separated from the vagaries of the modern world and the social isolation and lack of community that is rampant within day-to-day life.

Though operating from a non-religious standpoint, Gardner points out that an aspect of portable community that these festivals promote relates to a separation from an isolating modern culture and a pointing away from the current time to an idealized past. This idealized past is one where community is upheld and human beings have a closer relationship to the natural world, things that are impacted by modern capitalism. While certain academics in attendance such as Rasmussen advocate confronting capitalist systems through the worldview and values of Nordic Animism and having Midagrsblot provide a space for such discussions, the festival itself and the Nordic Neopagan religion are not free from the global capitalist paradigm. Like many pilgrimage destinations, Midgardsblot is an economic burden to attend, especially for those traveling from outside of Northern Europe. Converted to U.S. dollars, a festival pass and full-length camping pass costs roughly \$400, and a roundtrip flight to Norway plus ground transportation can cost upwards of \$1200. Additionally, the religion present at Midgardsblot is consumed in

accordance to the global capitalist paradigm by those in attendance as a personal creative and self-defining activity as discussed by scholar of religion Katherine Lofton.<sup>218</sup> Attendees buy band merchandise and implements of Nordic Neopaganism such as Mjolnir pendants, statues of the Nordic gods, and historical reproductions of clothes, home goods, and both weapons and armor from the Viking Age. Though not universal for all attendees, many are engaging in capitalism to arrive at and to achieve some type of experience of communal belonging, religiosity, or both in the liminal space of Midgardsblot.

Fire in the Mountains and Midgardsblot, festivals curated to celebrate cultural pasts and reconnecting with the natural world, serve to “focus attention backward” to an idealized time when people lived in community with one another and with the natural world and represent what Gardner notes as a “romantic reaction against modernity”.<sup>219</sup> As destinations of pilgrimage in rural areas, the liminal space created at these festivals, partially separates attendees from modernity, the sacred from the profane. These festivals then represent a refuge from the exhaustive qualities of modern capitalist society and allow attendees to return to an idealized “simpler way of life” if only for a short time.<sup>220</sup> The liminal, romantic environment of these festivals, particularly Midgardsblot, fosters a liminal space in which attendees, should they wish, explore themselves and their place in a larger community. Both Fire in the Mountains and Midgardsblot represent spaces in

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<sup>218</sup> Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>219</sup> Gardner, “The Portable Community,” 170.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid* 171.

which the shackles of day-to-day life may be removed and in which attendees may develop the confidence to try new behaviors, activities, modes of dress, and to explore new modes of thought.

This liminal free space as Gardner names it is where “religion, family, and community can be celebrated and navigated without their associated burdens and boundaries”.<sup>221</sup> While Fire in the Mountains and Midgardsblot possess similar qualities, the latter exemplifies Gardner’s notion, particularly in an outright religious context, as through the events, musical acts, and, most importantly, the rituals and discourse amongst the festival attendees, musicians, speakers, and festival organizers, solidify the event as a distinctly Nordic Neopagan ritual and sacred place. Midgardsblot is advertised as “home” for a body of fans that spans the globe. Signs around the festival reinforce this by referring to the event as a homecoming, and it is treated as such by all in attendance. The discourse of homecoming, musical performances, discussions and performance of Nordic Neopagan ritual, and dwelling in a temporary communal setting leads to the establishment of the Midgardsblot portable community, which in turn reinforces the idea of the festival as a worthy destination for pilgrimage.

Before continuing, it is pertinent to discuss the role inclusivity plays in the construction of community. Certain subgroups of Nordic Neopagans advocate for exclusivity based on ethnic background, such as the previously discussed Asatru Folk Assembly. While individuals adjacent to these groups may have been in attendance, Midgardsblot actively opposes such notions through their selection of organizations, performers, and speakers that they deem appropriate for the event. One organization,

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<sup>221</sup> Gardner, “The Portable Community,” 174.

Metalheads Against Bullying, was given a prominent tent space in the Viking Market adjacent to the reenactor village. Metalheads Against Bullying is a Norwegian organization founded in 2015 and actively works towards generating a space of racial equality and LGBTQ+ acceptance.<sup>222</sup> While this organization did not host any lectures, they were visible at Midgardsblot, and I observed that their tent was frequently visited by people who bought their merchandise in a show of solidarity.

Heavy Metal is notorious for its vocal minority of fans that seek to gatekeep the genre from others, and the inclusion of Metalheads Against Bullying at Midgardsblot is an encouraging step in the right direction for generating an inclusive festival environment. Certain performers and speakers in attendance echoed this sentiment and extended it to the practice of Nordic Animism. Performer Einar Selvik and scholar-practitioner Rune Rasmussen both utilized their platforms at the festival to address the need for inclusivity not just at Midgardsblot but in Nordic Neopaganism. Selvik made space to discuss inclusivity and anti-racism during his performance with Wardruna, one of the headline events at this festival. In between songs he addressed the crowd, sharing his thoughts on how his music and Nordic Neopaganism was for everyone and that in his eyes, excluding people based on race, gender identity, and class had no place in Nordic Neopaganism, no place at Midgardsblot, and no place in heavy metal. Rune Rasmussen echoed these sentiments in his Mimir Talks installment pertaining to Nordic Animism as a response to climate change, structural violence, and community building. During this discussion, Rasmussen energetically discussed the necessity of inclusivity and anti-

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<sup>222</sup> “Who is MAB?” Metalheads Against Bullying, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.against-bullying.com/metalheads-against-bullying>

racism, sentiments repeated on his social media postings but also on the front page of his official website for Nordic Animism.<sup>223</sup> Though certain groups and individuals adhering to Nordic Neopaganism and heavy metal are actively spouting exclusivist rhetoric, there are major figures attached to this movement and genre that are taking steps to make Nordic Neopaganism, heavy metal, and festivals such as Midgardsblot spaces for the construction of an inclusive, socially progressive community.

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<sup>223</sup> “Nordic Animism,” Nordic Animism



Figure 15: Festival entrance leading to Gildehallen

## Community and Wellbeing

My participant observation and the following survey questions serve to address two of my leading research questions, “Does a festival such as Midgardsblot function as a sacred space?” and “What kind of ritual activity does this festival support?” I was able to learn about and experience Nordic Neopagan ritual performances while attending this festival. The iterations of the Blot I was able to personally experience involved the performance of sacrifice, the opening Blot consisted of theatrical blood used to anoint statues and people, and the private Blot I was invited to attend involved the offering of mead ritually imbibed. Though I was unable to personally see Tim Nancarrow’s suspension ritual in which he offered pain and discomfort to Odin for the sanctification of the festival, I was able to witness him speak and narrate the ritual in a lecture preceding the rite. The “sanctioned” ritual activity performed at Midgardsblot inspired others to explore their own ritual praxes as I saw upon my nightly walks back to the campground. These rituals in conjunction with the other activities such as reenactments, lectures pertaining to Nordic Neopaganism and Nordic folk history, and the experience of enjoying these things as well as the music with a likeminded community, solidify Midgardsblot as a sacred space for Nordic Neopagans and in which they are encouraged to explore their religious identity and where they may form bonds of community as the following survey findings will elaborate. Question thirteen asks the degree to which respondents felt a sense of community when attending festivals such as Midgardsblot or Fire in the Mountains, and when participating in the events outside of the musical performances, such as rituals, reenactments, and various workshops and lectures. Of the survey population, 89.72% responded positively, with 69.39% reporting that they

strongly felt a part of a larger community while 16.33% reported “somewhat” feeling a sense of community. Of the survey population, 6% reported ambivalence and 8% reported that they did not feel part of a larger community when they participated in the events hosted at the festival.

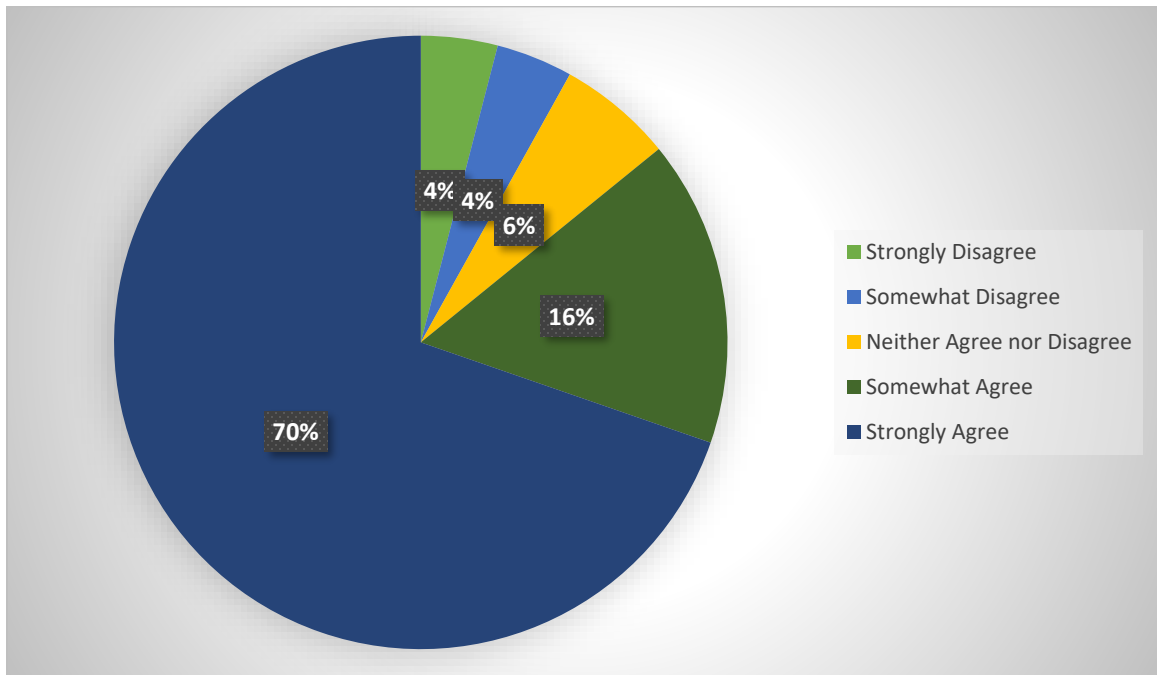


Figure 16: Degree to which respondents felt a sense of community when they participated in the events and workshops at Midgardsblot.

Question 14 relates to festival attendees experiencing a shift in their spiritual outlook after attendance to these festivals. It poses the statement, “Experiencing festivals such as Fire in the Mountains or Midgardsblot impacts your personal spiritual outlook.”. The majority of respondents answered in the affirmative, saying that these festivals did affect their spiritual outlook. However, a decent percentage of respondents reported a stance of neutrality or that they did not agree and did not receive a change in spiritual outlook or benefit from attending Midgardsblot.



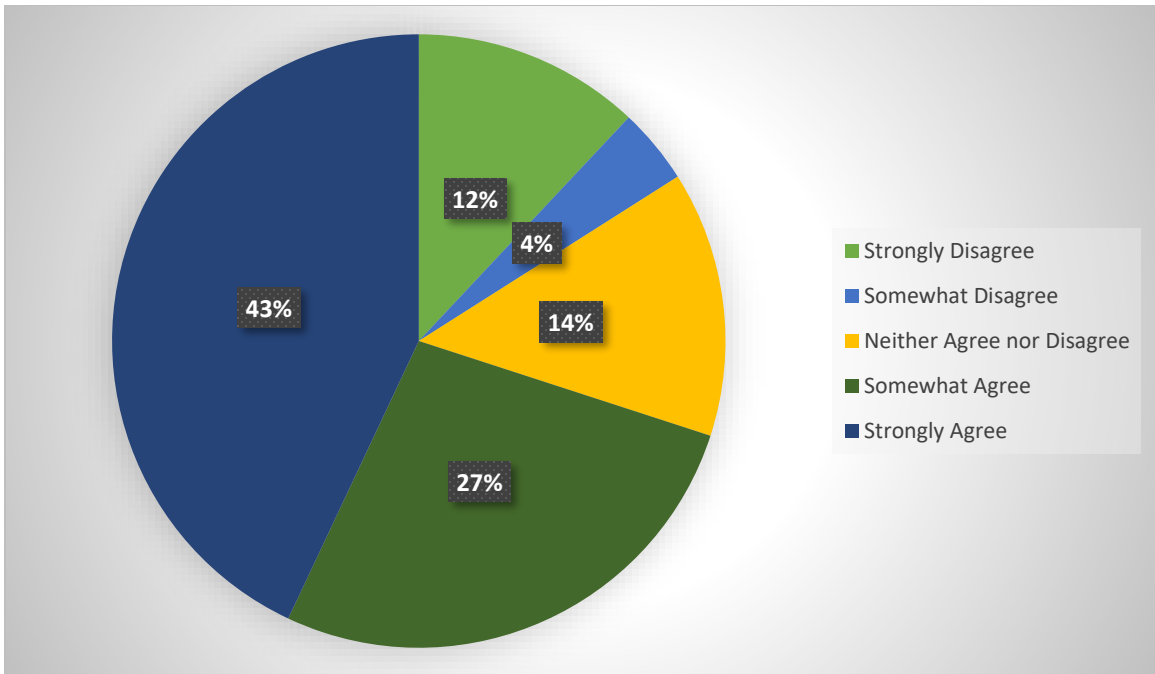


Figure 17: Degrees to which the survey population feels that the festival experience of festivals such as Midgardsblot impacts their personal, spiritual outlook.

Finally, Question 15 poses the following to respondents: “Experiencing festivals such as Fire in the Mountains and Midgardsblot impacts your mental wellbeing in which way,” with the option of answering “not at all”, “somewhat”, and “strongly”. Of the body of 50 respondents, 49 answered this question and 93.88% of this group responded in the affirmative. Of this population, 4.22% responded that these festivals do not have an impact on their mental wellbeing. However, 16.33% answered that these festivals somewhat impact their mental wellbeing, while 77.55% answered that attendance to these festivals strongly impacts their mental wellbeing.

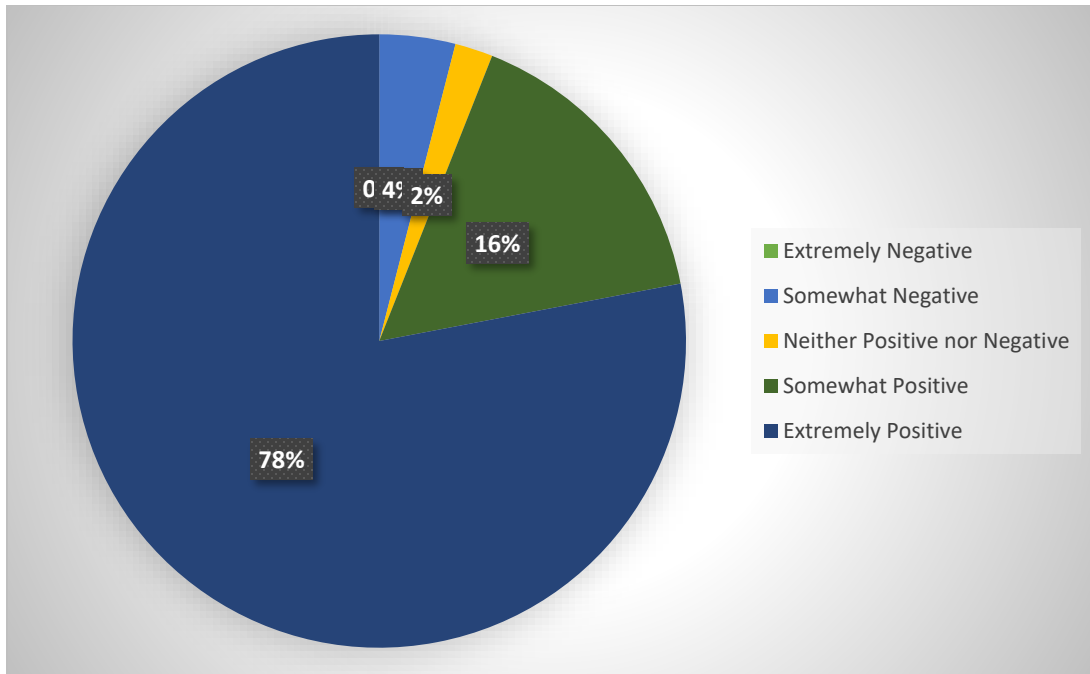


Figure 18: Degrees to which the survey population feels that attendance to Midgardsblot and related festivals impacts their mental wellbeing.

When taken together, the data gathered from this survey population generally points to these festivals, namely Midgardsblot, as places where people are experiencing something spiritually meaningful and formative. The data displays that this event is drawing people self-identifying as belonging to a branch of Neopaganism, with the majority of respondents claiming identification as Nordic Neopagan. Those identifying as belonging to another branch of Neopaganism such as Wicca or Celtic Paganism were present as well, as were those identifying as generally spiritual. The population further revealed that Nordic themed folk and heavy metal music play a noticeable part in their day to day lives, with some of these respondents explaining that they engage with this music when they are performing ritual. Furthermore, this music serves as a formative medium, not only for ritual practice but also for inspiring personal research into Nordic history and folk culture. Though this could be a hobby, with the percentage of those

identifying as Nordic or Other Neopagan, it is within the realm of possibility that these subjects are engaging with this music and research as form of spiritual identity formation.

The data suggests that members of this population engage with Midgardsblot as a spiritually formative activity. Most of the respondents indicated that they attended these kinds of events multiple times a year and further indicated that they saw these events as spiritually meaningful and positively impacting their spiritual outlook. Data I have previously mentioned indicates that both the natural environment in which Midgardsblot takes place and the music featured therein are causing members of the survey population to have spiritual experiences, with the music causing strong emotion or eliciting other physical reactions and the natural environment enhancing the performances for some. Furthermore, respondents indicated that experiencing a festival such as Midgardsblot, which highlights the surrounding nature and historic burial mounds, causes them to have a renewed outlook towards the natural world, enhancing peoples' relationships and spiritual understandings of it. Finally, this data shows that experiencing this festival is impacting attendees' ideas of communal belonging and spiritual outlook. A majority of those in attendance at Midgardsblot reported that participation in the events of the festival -- the concerts, reenactment performances, and the lectures on history, Nordic religion, and contemporary spiritual practice -- resulted in them feeling like they belonged to a community of like-minded individuals. The survey population also reported an improvement in spiritual outlook and mental wellbeing due to attendance of this festival.

The act and burden of traveling far to attend this event, held in a culturally, historically, and religiously significant space in which like-minded people interact and experience an alternative form of community, is akin to northern European tales of being

transported to another world. In this liminal world separated by time and distance from a continually isolating and anti-communal Western society, pilgrims experience an alternative space in which they may explore different aspects of themselves. This exploration may be purely social, as the festival and many of the events may be read as simply a celebration of culture. The festival and its locale, however, are very much understood as sacred spaces, and the event writ large represents an opportunity for people to explore their spirituality in a community that will not judge them. This spiritual exploration is reinforced and encouraged by the rhetoric of the festival organizers at the festival proper and online, the rhetoric of the festival attendees, the academic workshops on history and spirituality taking place in the on-site museum, the ritual performances hosted by the festival, the personal ritual explorations undertaken at the festival, and by living in a temporary community with like-minded people. Taken together, these factors of event and discourse reinforce the notion of Midgardsblot as a special time and site that warrants pilgrimage for those identifying as Nordic Neopagan. Here, facets of Nordic Neopagan spiritual materiality temporarily coalesce to create a special place and community in which individuals may explore themselves and discover new depths to their spiritual identities.

## **Chapter Five: A Temporary Temple**

As a scholar practitioner of Nordic Neopaganism and a firm proponent of Heavy Metal, attending Midgardsblot confirmed my inclinations that it could serve as a formative event for Nordic Neopagans, effectively functioning as a temporary temple that my participant observation and data collection verified. Being drawn to the subfield of material religion and experiencing the scholarship therein, I started to see how easily it is to take the “stuff” of religion for granted: the piece of religious jewelry, the music, the community, and the landscape, to name just a few. With material religion and a religious studies interpretation of new materialism as guideposts, I can verify that the heavy metal festival Midgardsblot is an event where manifold Nordic Neopagan materiality may be experienced, religious identity constructed, and community reinforced.

### **Questions Answered**

For this project, I presented three primary questions: “In what ways does Midgardsblot function as a sacred site,” “What kind of religious activity does this festival support,” and “What kind of religious identity does this festival allow attendees to express?” Let us start by approaching the first two questions at once, the idea of Midgardsblot functioning as a sacred site for Nordic Neopagans and a space supporting Neopagan religious activity. Certain scholars within material religion have problematized the notion of sacred space by pointing to the fact that people have religious

experiences in non-religious spaces such as concerts or sporting events.<sup>224</sup> Midgardsblot partially corresponds to this notion, the data showing that a noticeable number of attendees self-identify as Neopagan or as possessing an alternative religious identity. An overwhelming majority of my survey respondents, 98%, identified as possessing a religious identity alternative to mainstream religious movements. Half the respondents in my survey population identified as possessing a Neopagan religious identity, with a noticeable portion of this subset, 30%, explicitly self-identifying as Nordic Neopagan. This festival is not only attracting Nordic Neopagans and those belonging to other cultural iterations of Neopaganism, but the data also reflects that these respondents consider Midgardsblot to be a site of spiritual significance. Of my survey respondents, 82% responded that they felt the festival was spiritually significant, while 69% reported that attending Midgardsblot positively impacted their spiritual outlook. Furthermore, 93.88% of the survey population reported that attendance to Midgardsblot positively impacted their mental wellbeing.

The reasons for these responses are manifold. The staff overseeing Midgardsblot promotes a distinctly Nordic Neopagan aesthetic and sense of community that is solidified through public ritual performance and narrative provided by musicians and scholar practitioners in workshops hosted at the on-site Viking Age history museum, Midgard Vikingsenter. Midgardsblot is opened and closed with Blot rituals. The Blot was historically a ritual of blood sacrifice, but in contemporary Nordic Neopaganism, it is a ritual of oblation; participants pass around a drinking horn filled with mead and invoke

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<sup>224</sup> Plate, *Key Terms*, 4.

divinities or ancestors for aid or praise. The opening Blot of Midgardsblot was more akin to the historic definition. The opening Blot took place behind Gildehallen, the modern reconstruction of a Viking Age great hall that houses musical performances and exclusive workshops during festival time. Officiated by one of the folk musical groups performing at the festival, , the opening Blot featured the band in a cordoned off ritual area with two wooden statues of the gods Odin and Freya, soaked in theatrical blood. The band then sprinkled this blood on the crowd surrounding them. They also oversaw attendees entering the circle to anoint themselves and to apply the “blood” to the statues before exiting the circle. The closing Blot was performed by one of the headlining bands, Heilung. Heilung actively narrate their performances as ritual experiences and uphold this narrative by dressing in intricate regalia inspired by the Nordic Iron Age, providing opening and closing prayers to their performances, and by performing small rituals throughout their sets such as the burning of bundles of herbs and spreading the smoke throughout their performances space and over the audience with an eagle feather fan.<sup>225</sup> Between the opening and closing Blot, a public ritual dedicated to the god Odin was performed by one of the scholar practitioners in attendance. Scholar Timothy Nancarrow hosted a workshop on contemporary Nordic Neopagan ritual and described how he was to perform a suspension ritual, an offering of pain for the sanctification of the festival and the assembled community in which he would be suspended from hooks in the Gildehallen to be accompanied by chanting and to be performed while he was in a fasted state.

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<sup>225</sup> Heilung, *Heilung / Lifa – Full Show*

The musical performances themselves, particularly those by bands who explicitly narrate their Nordic Neopagan identification such as Heilung, Wardruna, and Folket Bortefors Nordavinden represent the primary draw and ritual performances of this event. Naturally, the music of Midgardsblot is the main draw, but what is interesting is how the attendees reported their personal relationship with this type of music. The majority of respondents, 82%, answered that they regularly listen to Nordic Neopagan aligned music, artists and songs which draw upon the body of Nordic history, myth, and folk tradition. Roughly the same amount, 80%, of the survey population further reported that regularly listening to this music inspires them to delve into this body of history, myth, and folk tradition. This data, when taken with the 30% of the population that explicitly identifies as Nordic Neopagan, and the personal accounts provided by some of the survey respondents, leads me to assert that some within this subset of the survey population engages with this type of music not only to inform their personal religiosity but also in personal ritual practice.

The public ritual and musical performances featured at the festival frame Midgardsblot as a sacred site, as do the lectures hosted by scholar practitioners and the landscape upon which the festival takes place. The lectures featured ranged from presentations on Nordic history to contemporary ritual practice in Nordic Neopaganism. Notable lectures were hosted by Einar Selvik, lead singer of one of the headlining bands, Wardruna, and scholar-practitioner Rune Rasmussen. These lectures proved to be immensely popular, as each was standing room only in the small conference room made available. Selvik provided a lengthy discussion describing the composition choices of



Wardruna, transitioning into a discussion on how his proclivity to utilize traditional instruments and melodies corresponded to his personal practice of Nordic Animism and supported an Animistic worldview highlighting interconnectedness with the natural world and with the assembled community at Midgardsblot. Echoing the Nordic Animist sentiments elaborated by Selvik, Rasmussen provided a lecture highlighting the role of Nordic Neopaganism and its emergent formation of Nordic Animism as being religious practices that could be used to counteract the ongoing climate crisis. Furthermore, his discussion of the role of Midgardsblot as a sacred event on sacred land emphasized the role this festival played in the reinforcement of a Nordic Neopagan community through the experience of Nordic folk symbolism in the music and the discourse had between attendees, musicians, and lecturers.

As an event built around Nordic folk themes, featuring Nordic Neopagan adjacent music, and highlighting workshops discussing contemporary Nordic Neopagan practice, Midgardsblot represents a space that encourages people to express themselves accordingly. In addition to the performances and lectures related to Nordic Neopaganism, there were reenactments and workshops pertaining to the Viking Age. The reenactments featured were those pertaining to village life, crafting, and combat hosted at both the Midgard Vikingsenter museum and on the festival grounds proper, where a “Viking Village” was set up which featured vendors selling historical reproductions of weapons, armor, and crafts alongside vendors selling the ever-coveted band merchandise. Behind the vendors, something akin to a “war camp” was erected, featuring reproductions of historical tents that functioned as the lodging for the reenactors in attendance. This war

camp, in addition to a field outside of the museum, were the sites of combat reenactment. The presence of these reenactment events and spaces seemingly encouraged people to wear traditional dress as a noticeable number of attendees outside of the cadre of reenactors were present in historically inspired garb and reproductions of Nordic religious jewelry such as the Mjolnir hammer pendant.

The landscape of the festival, the wooded coastline punctuated by ancient burial mounds and the large yet secluded “Utgard” campsite served to encourage personal ritual and group expressions of religiosity and community. On multiple nights walking among the burial mounds back to camp, I noticed light from small candles, hushed voices, rhythmic drumming, and the barely visible silhouettes of people adjacent to some of the mounds in the darkness, engaging in personal and small group rituals. I was invited to participate in a small Blot atop one of the mounds with friends new and old. The Utgard campsite provided those who opted to camp on the festival grounds an opportunity to establish or reestablish communal bonds. The revelry in the camp often lasted until dawn, with many campers interacting and celebrating long into the night. There was also a fire pit next to the ocean where campers would congregate and the musicians among them would start to perform. As I witnessed on my final night there, the fire pit and musical performances attracted a large portion of the camp community. The musicians, I found, would play closest to the fire with the surrounding throng bobbing their heads and moving in time with the melodies and beats being played. This music also inspired a few brave souls to begin dancing around the inner circle of the fire pit.

The multiple workshops concerning Nordic history and folk religiosity, the reenactment sessions pertaining to Viking Age life, and the public rituals come together and serve to reinforce the attendees' sense of communal belonging. I noticed this reflected not only in the data, but in my own observations of the festival. Of my survey population, 85.92% responded that they felt a sense of communal belonging when visiting Midgardsblot and participating in the communal events and the workshops hosted. Though my survey question concerning this communal belonging did not include any references to camping with fellow attendees, it was apparent that there was a sense of community felt by those camping on-site for the festival weekend that was reinforced by the communal gatherings around the seaside firepit.

### **Project Contributions**

Foremost among this project's contributions is that it shows an increasingly popular heavy metal festival as a sacred space for adherents of Nordic Neopaganism. The data reflects that this festival is attracting adherents of this growing tradition and that they view this festival with its rituals, reenactments, workshops, and musical performances as relevant regarding personal religiosity and mental wellbeing. Furthermore, the data reflects that this festival is a site where attendees, whether Nordic Neopagan or possessing another, alternative religious identity, have an opportunity to feel a sense of community. Additionally, from my observations of the public rituals, the workshops featuring speakers actively encouraging personal religious creativity, and the various modes of dress ranging from expected heavy metal attire to historically accurate garb, this festival serves as a space where people may experiment with personal identity

without fear of judgment by onlookers. From my participant observation and reviewing the data, it is not out of the question for me to state that this festival can be understood as a contemporary variant of the ancient Scandinavian tradition of the Althing, a multi-day event featuring religious ritual, trade, and the reinforcement of communal bonds.

Second, this project contributes to the field of material religion. By utilizing material religion as a theoretical basis, I show that Midgardsblot represents a coalescence point of Nordic Neopagan materiality in a temporary bricolage. Aspects of this bricolage, namely music and landscape, are becoming increasingly important to the Nordic Neopagan tradition, with Heavy Metal and Nordic Folk music representing a contemporary form of storytelling and a method of imparting folk cultural lessons and worldviews. The music imparts fragments of Nordic Neopagan symbolism to listeners and allows them to construct an imagined virtual reality of an idealized Nordic past that they may engage with to inspire their religious worldview. The landscape works with the music, helped along by the discourse provided in the lecture series emphasizing Nordic folk traditions of land connectedness, lectures recognizing the nearby dead dwelling in the mounds as ancestral figures, and the recognition of other spirits dwelling in the landscape.

### **Limitations**

One of the primary limitations to this study was time. A project such as this would benefit from multiple years of field research to track any changes in the discourse, performances, and lectures being featured at the festival. Additionally, though the personnel involved with Midgardsblot are overt in their framing of the festival as a

Nordic folk cultural and Neopagan event, this project could have been further reinforced by official interviews with the performers, lecturers, festival organizers, and museum staff. Second, the survey distributed did not inquire of participants their age, gender identification, ethnicity, or country of origin. Had I included questions pertaining to these identifying factors, this study would have been able to provide a better snapshot of who is attending and participating in this festival. A third limitation to this study involves data dissemination. It was my initial hope to disseminate this survey on the primary social media pages for Fire in the Mountains and Midagrdsblot to learn whether Nordic Neopagans are engaging the former as a sacred space as well. Unfortunately, I was unable to receive consent from the Fire in the Mountains festival organizers to disseminate my survey on their social media page.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The driving questions behind this project may be applied to inquiries concerning other music festivals functioning as sacred spaces for not only the tradition of Nordic Neopaganism, but other cultural iterations of Neopaganism. Like Nordic Neopaganism, other cultural iterations of this tradition do not possess a strict hierarchical structure or dogmatism, allowing adherents a great degree of personal creativity and choice in how they construct their religiosity. Other festivals could function for other iterations of Neopaganism in a way similar to how Midgardsblot functions as a sacred space for Nordic Neopaganism. Castlefest, for example, is a medieval and fantasy themed music festival in the Netherlands hosts musical acts drawing upon Nordic, Celtic, and other European folk tradition themes. The questions behind this project could also be mobilized

to ascertain if people are having experiences associated with other religious traditions at festivals lacking overt religious or folk cultural themes such as Coachella and Bonnaroo. Coachella could be ripe for study, as it has in the past featured religiously oriented events such as the “Sunday Service” hosted in 2018 by the divisive Kanye West and featuring Kid Cudi and Chance the Rapper among others. Furthermore, this project’s inquiries could be mobilized to see what, if any, religious groups or trends are present at other pop cultural gatherings such as Burning Man.

Future iterations of this project could provide a deeper exploration of particular elements of religious materiality, sacred time, and representation at Midgardsblot. For example, a section on the use of entheogens as ritual tools to alter states of perception at these festivals could be helpful in fleshing out the Nordic Neopagan practices engaged at this festival. Alcohol was available at Midgardsblot, yet I was made aware of one instance of entheogen usage by one of the artists following his band’s performance. An expansion of this project could include survey questions asking about entheogen usage at these festivals and a response section allowing participants to elaborate on the ways in which they engage with entheogens in these settings and for what purpose, if at all.

This project could have benefited from an exploration of sacred time in Nordic Neopaganism. During the Mimir Talks lecture series, scholar practitioner Rune Rasmussen shared with the audience his intent to reintroduce of the Nordic folk ritual calendar and reignite the octennial Nordic ritual cycle beginning with 2023, what he and other scholar practitioners have named “The Year of Aun”. Leading up to the festival, Rasmussen shared this idea on his YouTube and Instagram channels and currently

provides musings on how those interested may celebrate this reignited ritual calendar. Future research at Midgardsblot could include interviews, survey questions, and survey response sections aimed at discerning how Nordic Neopagan festival attendees observe concepts of sacred time and if attendance to the festival constitutes part of this observance. Furthermore, I can include questions pertaining to the perception of time at Midgardsblot by attendees and how this does or does not impact their festival experiences.

Future iterations of this project would also benefit from a survey and further participant observation attention to inclusivity. Prominent figures at Midgardsblot utilized their platform to promote inclusivity, anti-racism, and anti-fascism at the festival and in Nordic Neopaganism. A future survey could ask respondents how they perceive inclusivity at this festival, if and how they promote inclusivity in their local Neopagan group if they belong to one, and any steps they feel the festival could take to improve inclusivity. Furthermore, a future iteration of this study would also benefit from data pertaining to festival accessibility relating to feelings of inclusivity and a deeper exploration of the commodification of religion at this event.

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