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Sites, Texts, Contexts and Inscriptions of Meaning: Investigating Pagan 'Authenticities' in a Text-Based Society

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Abstract

Questions of texts and 'scripture' sit uneasily with Paganisms. Most Pagans do not have 'sacred scriptures' and point to different constructions of spirituality that do not privilege conventional 'texts'. Further, popular or political perceptions that a 'religion' should or must have 'sacred texts' can become a means of denying various Paganisms—or indeed some indigenous spiritualities elsewhere—the official stamp of authenticity being 'a religion' in a legal or institutional sense. Yet Pagan meanings and practices are constituted with respect to written or verbal forms that may be regarded as sacred, practical, authentic or inauthentic, according to practitioners and their Paganisms. If we regard 'text' as that which can be 'read', Pagans may claim authority for practices rooted in, for instance, inscriptions of meaning in places or 'sacred sites' rather than in the written word. We investigate and problematise Pagan engagements with such conveyors of meaning: sacred sites, mediaeval literature and folklore, and present-day emergent verse or sung forms, which, used on either a national/international or local scale, may contribute to structuring meanings and practices. We also point to issues in the relationship of 'text' and 'performance', and re-embed analysis within the context of the hegemony of 'text' within social organisation, by questioning extents to which practitioners fall back on the authority of the text for legitimation of self, practice and developing context.

Introduction: Texts, Paganisms and Diversity

The concept of 'text' as applied to religion tends to denote 'sacred texts': the Bible, the Koran, the Torah, for example. There are, however, other implications, such as performance 'texts' and inscriptions of meaning in place. Here we investigate some meanings of 'text' (and, indeed, 'sacred') and some Pagan understandings of texts and Paganisms. We locate these

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within discussion of ways to approach 'text' and textually mediated meaning, within contexts of social, political and spiritual enquiry today. In examining what kinds of 'texts' Pagans draw on, we interrogate ways in which Pagans engage with 'text' in context, moving from text as source and as authentication, to text as partial constitution of meaning, and from Pagans as text-users to Pagans engaging creatively with meaning through textual readings and productions.

The basis for this paper is our own long-running ethnographic study of Paganisms, individually and since 2001 jointly as the Sacred Sites project (www.sacredsites.org.uk). This has involved extensive fieldwork and discussions with Pagans, notably Heathens, 'reconstructionists', Druids and various 'neo-shamans', but including also Wiccans, Goddess followers and others. This work is undertaken as reflexive critical anthropology and archaeology, from auto-ethnographic and auto-archaeological locations informed by epistemologies from feminist theory and queer theory.[1] As practising Heathens we have our own relationships to the 'texts' we are investigating, and to the groups whose interpretations we discuss here. Assertions about 'Pagans', 'Heathens' or others, in terms of what they do or how they relate to texts, therefore, are from our observations and our own participation in discussions and indeed in constructions of Pagan theology. Because of our work and our own practice, our examples will be taken primarily from Heathen and 'Celtic'/Druid 'texts'.

Paganisms do not, to a surface view, have 'sacred scriptures', and Pagans often point to different constructions of spirituality that do not privilege conventional 'texts'. Even though Wiccans, to mark an exception, may regard their 'Book of Shadows' as a form of sacred text—in theory hand-copied without change from the coven's Book of Shadows—more

1. For information on reflexive ethnography see Matts Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2000); on autoethnography, see Deborah E. Reed-Danahay (ed.), *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Oxford: Berg, 1997); on the specifics of our work, see Jenny Blain, 'Speaking Shamanistically: Seidr, Academia, and Rationality', DISKUS (2000), http://www.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/blain.html, Jenny Blain, 'Tracing the In/Authentic Seeress: From Seid-Magic to Stone Circles', in *Researching Paganisms: Religious Experiences and Academic Methodologies*, ed. Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy and Graham Harvey (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2004), Robert J. Wallis, 'Queer Shamans: Autoarchaeology and Neo-shamanism', *World Archaeology* 32.2 (2000): 251-61, Robert J. Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Pagans* (London: Routledge, 2003); on personal relationship with 'sacred' texts, see Jenny Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic* (London: Routledge, 2002).

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generally each Wiccan's book is personalised with at least some room for change or addition;[2] and most Wiccans of our acquaintance recognise that their practices are not ancient. For the majority of Pagans though, notably most Druids and Heathens, scripture is not part of religious discourse. For these Pagans, 'sacred texts' or 'scriptures' are associated (though not exclusively) with dogma and religious fundamentalism, something that Paganisms, as new and developing religious movements, are keen to avoid. There is, though, another sense in which questions of 'text' are problematic for Paganisms. Religions may be defined, whether popularly or politically, by having a 'supreme being' and a 'sacred book', and while some Paganisms do point to a leading deity or dual deities, polytheism is quite prevalent and sacred books are not readily found. Despite claims to polytheism, some Wiccans do perceive sacredness in terms of duality—a god and goddess, or lord and lady (and may also reduce this duality to a single deity); yet, the Book of Shadows is more a ritual diary and program of ceremonies (and in theory, at least, specific to each coven or indeed individual) than a text to be 'believed', word for word. Furthermore, ritual magicians (some of whom are Pagan) may perceive significant cabbalistic and other occult meanings in the words of, for example, *Liber Al vel Legis* 'the Book of the Law'[3], *OkBISH* 'Book of the Spider'[4], or *AZOËTIA* 'A Grimoire of the Sabbatic Craft'.[5] The volumes written by Crowley and Grant contain information allegedly channelled from extraterrestrial entities by Thelemic 'scarlet women' embodying Babalon in ritualised sexual ecstasy, while the Chumbley volume, self-described as 'a tome of the elder worship', alludes to the revealing of an initiatory sabbatic tradition 'under the guidance and tutelage of the Grimoire's patron spirit';[6] as such, these volumes constitute Grand Grimoires—sacred texts per se. Each of them is, none the less, usually

2. Wiccan 'traditions' vary considerably: furthermore, who can be considered 'Wiccan' differs between countries. We are here using the term in the more generic sense familiar to North American Pagans, though ourselves preferring the British understanding of 'Wicca' as an initiatory tradition implying that only those tracing initiation to Gardner's followers (or those of Alex Saunders) can claim the term. Several Books of Shadows are available via the Internet.

3. Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law (Liber Al vel Legis)* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1990 [1976]).

4. Kenneth Grant, *The Ninth Arch* (London: Starfire, 2002).

5. Andrew D. Chumbley, *AZOËTIA: A Grimoire of the Sabbatic Craft*, Sethos-Behena edition (N.p.: Xoanon Publishing, 2002).

6. Chumbley, vi-vii

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approached by magicians as one text among many, sacredness in Chaos.

For many Pagans, texts that are significant in inspiring their practices, such as for heathens the Icelandic Eddas, are regarded simply as informing these practices rather than dogmatising them. In the current marketplace of consumerist and individualist spirituality, such Pagans tend to approach texts as inspirational rather than prescriptive. Within Heathenry in particular, the standpoint from which our analysis is formed,[7] where source texts are subject to the inconsistencies of translation from Old Norse into English, for example, there seems sufficient flexibility to avoid dogma. However, the combination of the popular or political perceptions that a 'religion' should or must have 'sacred texts', and that these 'sacred texts' must be ancient, enduring and in many cases unchanging, can become a means of denying various Paganisms—and indeed some indigenous spiritualities—the official stamp of authenticity in being 'a religion' in a legal or institutional sense. Here, some Pagans find themselves in a difficult position, particularly when for many Pagans one of the attractions is a spiritual path that is unfolding and becoming, which is neither authoritative nor 'official'. Socially constituted and used in contexts that are as much social and political as spiritual, 'sacred texts' are more than collections of words or images, and social and spiritual meanings inform each other. An example is a process with which one of us (Jenny) engaged recently, 'swearing' an affidavit. In this instance, a notary 'swore' to Jenny's identity, using a Bible as hegemonic, and possibly unread, 'sacred text'; she and others in the room appeared rather startled when the offer of the Bible was politely declined, Jenny explaining that as she was not Christian she would prefer to 'affirm'. From discussions with other Pagans, the experience is not atypical. Such oath taking becomes a process of 'affirming', and lack of 'text' or socially approved 'sacred book' appears—or can appear—as lack of faith.

'Text', and particularly 'sacred text', then, holds multiple meanings. Here we will indicate some meanings of 'text' within some Paganisms, indicating ways in which Pagan 'texts', while not necessarily 'sacred' and certainly not 'scripture', do exist, how they may be regarded and how they form part of constructions of meaning within spiritual practice today. We begin with the more obvious 'texts' from mediaeval literature, move through images and artefacts as 'text' and end with a discussion of 'texts about texts'—how interpretations of place, landscape and monument constitute Pagan practices.

7. See also Blain, *Nine Worlds*; Wallis, *Shamans*.

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First, however, it is necessary to partially deconstruct the concept of 'Paganism'. If we look across 'Western' Pagan spiritualities in Britain or Europe, or North America or Australia, and seek for one 'sacred text' (or even one 'text' of any kind), there is no commonality. As soon as we cease looking for a unified 'Paganism', though, a host of 'texts' come into view. Some of these are 'texts' in the conventional, school-book sense: 'how-to' manuals covering a range of what might be termed 'seekers' or 'new Pagans', including the ubiquitous glossy 'teen witch' publications. Such books rarely move beyond 'the beginner' to address advanced practices or beliefs. Paganisms, particularly those based on Wicca such as some varieties of 'witchcraft', constitute a large market, and in a text-based society Pagans learn about practice—or claim authenticity for specific practice—by reference to texts, even if those are recent books or magazine articles, or the web pages of other Pagans. And within specific Paganisms, practitioners have their own methods for evaluating text within context. What we have been most concerned with is text-as-source—particularly relating to mediaeval literature and later commentaries, and particularly among Heathen and Druid communities. There are, however, other forms of 'text' used for claiming authenticity, including 'sacred sites', discussed towards the end of this article.

Text and Reconstruction

The relationship between Heathens and texts is not simple. The most obvious texts (at least within the Heathen community) are those most referenced by Heathens—notably the Eddas and some of the Icelandic sagas, the old English healing charms of the *Lacnunga* and *Leechbooks*[8], and assorted pieces of verse from *Beowulf*[9] to short fragments and the *Merseburg* charms.[10] There are questions of translation and version, and Heathens engage in considerable discussion and argument over the meanings of phrases and verses. Some will still seek 'facts' and ask simply 'what does it say' in order to elucidate the 'real' (single) meaning, but an awareness is growing within the community of documentary interpretations and understandings, and the diversity of translation and interpre-

8. E.g. Stephen Pollington, *Leechcraft: Early English Charms, Plantlore and Healing* (Hockwold-cum-Wilton, UK: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2000); also Louis J. Rodrigues, *Anglo-Saxon Verse Charms, Maxims and Heroic Legends* (Pinner, UK: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1993).

9. E.g. Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Translation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).

10. E.g. Stephen Flowers, *The Galdrabók: An Icelandic Grimoire* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1989).

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tation. Meanings are not straightforward. In attempting an understanding of (ancient and now modern) Heathen ritual and practice, an awareness of these 'texts' is crucial, together with an awareness of the ways in which today's Heathens relate personal experience to the text, and construct ritual practice from partial references. Texts form the basis of knowledge of past practices, and today's Heathens (many of whom see themselves as 'reconstructionists') are mining them actively as sources of information or implication. They point out, however, that these are not 'scripture', and do not, necessarily, regard them as 'sacred' in the sense in which they perceive some Christians referring to a Bible. There are shades of meaning here of 'sacredness', and perhaps the model for 'sacred text' that many Heathens assume—particularly those in the US—may be a fundamentalist approach to the Bible, rather than an interpretative approach. Moving beyond this perception—which has its own history and which again connects with the hegemony of 'Bible' as 'sacred scripture', used socially and legally as aforesaid—we can see how use and interpretation of text can assume 'sacredness'.

The poems of the Poetic Edda have their own history and are of course subject to considerable scrutiny within literary and Scandinavian studies. Not only the poems themselves (or their translations), but at least some of the more accessible commentaries[11] become 'texts' for study by Heathens—hence our analysis of the sources in this article focuses on those that are accessible to and accessed by Pagans, rather than those that are strictly academic and often out of print or expensive. Indeed, it may be older academic material, or pseudo-academic material, that is most accessible: the use of Rydberg[12] by some Heathens can be compared with the use of MacCulloch[13] by some 'Celtic' shamans. But whatever the 'text' used, Heathens can spend a considerable amount of time debating the relationships of their deities and wights with reference not only to the Eddas, but to specific translations or commentaries.

An example of Heathens' relation with an ancient text is found with the poem 'Hávamál', the words of the High One—Hár or Ódhinn. This—the longest of the Eddic poems—begins with what appear as

11. E.g. Carolyne Larrington, trans., *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

12. E.g. Viktor Rydberg, *Teutonic Mythology, Gods and Goddesses of the Northland*, trans. Rasmus Bjorn Anderson (Norrceona Society: London, 1906). Older editions of Rydberg may be hard to come by, but a recent translation can be found at the website http://www.northvegr.org/lore/rydberg/index.php and has been publicised within the Heathen community, particularly within the US.

13. John Arnott MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts* (reprint, London: Constable, 1911).

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maxims for everyday life before becoming increasingly complex, indexing various narratives about Ódhinn, delving into mysticism and altered consciousness, before reaching its culmination in the 'runic verses'. Some academic analysis has suggested a compilation in the twelfth or thirteenth century CE from several possibly unrelated poems. Larrington's analysis,[14] however, relates the poem to Old English 'wisdom' poetry and sees the sections forming a logical progression from the everyday into advanced occult knowledge. Heathens—usually without access to these analyses—use the poem in numerous ways, from drawing a (rather simplistic) set of 'nine noble virtues' from the everyday-life sections, to examining relationships between self and (implied) community, and attempting to deduce the (missing) stories about Ódhinn that are indexed. The reliance by some Heathens on the early sections as a source of Heathen 'morality'—the simplistic list of 'virtues' already mentioned—is, however, attracting its own critique within Heathenry, expressed, for instance, in a comment made by a Heathen academic on a US based email discussion list:

> Seeing all the 'trailer park philosophies' being peddled, a horrible thought occurred to me: Maybe one of the reasons Asatru is appealing to some folk is because the ethical codex laid out in the Havamal is very 'motherhood and apple pie'… If you strip away all the mythological veneer and 'far away Iceland in a different age' type mystique, all that remains from the Havamal is a behavioral codex that is about as complex as Fulghum's 'All I needed to know I learned in Kindergarten' (used with permission).

Yet beyond the early parts, the poem's discussion of 'right relationships' is nuanced and complex. It can be read[15] as beginning with the common-sense and politeness deemed proper at the time of writing, starting off with the motif of the arrival of the guest to a hall, progressing to dealing with processes and events that are more uncertain and multi-layered, dealing with a multi-level set of 'realities', as the following extracts demonstrate:

> All the entrances
> before you walk around
> you should look out
> you should spy out
> for you can't know for certain where enemies are sitting
> ahead in the hall
>
> Blessed be the givers!
> A guest has come in,

14. Carolyne Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense: Gnomic Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

15. Following Larrington, *Common Sense.*

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where is he going to sit?
(Hávamál stanzas 1 and 2, Larrington 1996 translation)

Cattle die,
kinsmen die
the self must also die;
but glory never dies
for the one who can well achieve it

Cattle die,
kinsmen die
the self must also die;
I know one thing which never dies:
the reputation of each one dead
(Hávamál 76-77, Larrington translation)

It is time to declaim
from the sage's high-seat
at the spring of fate;
I saw and was silent,
I saw and I considered,
I heard the speech of men;
I heard talk of runes,
nor were they silent about
good counsel
at the High One's hall,
in the High One's hall,
thus I heard them speak
(Hávamál 111, Larrington translation)

This 'text', written in one era, read in another for specific purposes, can bear as many interpretations as the people who read it: in a context of sound-bites and slogans, at least some Heathens or Asatruar take slogans as truth and reject ambiguity and uncertainty, while others find Hávamál's later ventures into discussions of gender and obligation grounds for creative thinking. This is a reminder that texts are not simple transmitters of meaning, but engaged with in context, and people construct meaning within and from texts, in a context that is political as well as spiritual.

Finally, the runic or mystical verses are used particularly by followers of Ódhinn in dedication or initiatory ceremonies, or in association with rune magic to construct a relationship with the god:

I know that I hung on the wind-swept tree
All of nine nights
Wounded by the spear, given to Ódhinn
self-to self offered

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on that tree for which none knows
the roots of its rising

They gave me no bread, nor drink from the horn;
I looked down
I spied the runes
Screaming I took them up
and fell back from there
(our translation)

The poem is mined for meaning, and the meanings emerging vary within the community, from the simple 'nine noble virtues' and a slogan-based morality, to complex sets of relationships, giving scope for discussion of Heathen views of death and afterlife, gender relations, and relationships between the concluding 'spells' (and their implications for analyses of late iron age social relationships) and the runes that Ódhinn gained in the verses quoted above.

Runes themselves may be seen as another 'text' that Heathens and other Pagans may deem sacred. What the runes represented during the centuries of their development into several different 'futharks' (or alphabets) is not clear. While academics concur that magical use was at least a development of their use,[16] not all agree it would have been a major focus.[17] The term 'rune' implies something hidden, mystical. To Heathens today they are much more than simply a written alphabet: each rune is a glyph that might be used in galdrstafr (the making of bind runes as symbols for effecting magic); some Heathens today have devised stadrgaldr (the adopting of runes postures also known as runic yoga); and each rune has a stanza of the Anglo-Saxon rune poem[18] (and for Scandinavian runes, Icelandic and Norwegian rune poems) linked with it.[19] Together, these form a 'sacred' alphabet, often used today as an oracle for communicating with deities/other-than-human agencies and divining the future.[20]

16. Ralph W.V. Elliot, *Runes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

17. Raymond I. Page, *Runes and Runic Inscriptions* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995).

18. E.g. Tony Linsell, *Anglo-Saxon Mythology, Migration and Magic* (Pinner, UK: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1994).

19. E.g. Jan Fries, *Helrunar: A Manual of Rune Magic* (Oxford: Mandrake Press, 1993).

20. E.g. Edred Thorsson, *Futhark: A Handbook of Rune Magic* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1984); Michael Howard, *The Wisdom of the Runes* (London: Rider, 1985); Freya Aswynn, *Leaves of Yggdrasil* (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 1994).

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Text as Performance Script

There has been considerable academic speculation[21] that at least some of the Eddic poems were 'performance scripts', and for several years at least one of these has been used as such—Skírnismál (the Lay of Skirnir), performed at the winter solstice in Iceland by a professional cast.[22] Within English-speaking contexts as a 'reconstructionist' religion, Heathens have experimented with 'performance' of these and other poems, in whole or part, whether in story-telling or ritual, whether involving originals, translations or re-tellings. Here again practitioners draw on academic interpretations to assist in creating something that has meaning for today. Some verses of the Eddic poem Sigrdrífumál (the Lay of Sigdrifa) are used as a prayer:

> Hail Day and children of Day
> Hail Night and her daughter
> Look on us with loving eye
> and success grant these ones here sitting
> Hail the Aesir, hail the Asynjur
> Hail Earth who gives to all
> Goodly wit and speech grant unto us
> and healing hands, in this life
> (our translation)

Two Old English charms, in particular, are pointed to by Heathens as a source of ritual ideas: the Acerbot (field blessing for 'unfruitful land') and Nine Herbs charm, seen by practitioners as thinly Christianised records of old Heathen practices; the field blessing (possibly) performed by a Heathen priest, the Nine Herbs charm, a possible example of

21. E.g. Einar Haugen, 'The Edda as Ritual: Odin and his Masks', in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Robert. J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), 3-24, and in particular Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995).

22. Within the academic literature this has tended to be discussed as (following Frazer's *Golden Bough*!) 'fertility cult' versus 'folk legend'—an example being Annelise Talbot's article 'The Withdrawal of the Fertility God', *Folklore* 93 (1982): 31-46. An overview of the twentieth-century discussion based on Skírnismál is given by McGregor (Rick McGregor, 'Skírnismál as Ritual Drama: A Summary of Scholarship this Century', *Deep South* 1.3 [1995], http://www.islandia.is/~sighar/edda1/skirnissum.html). Gunnell brings the 'eyes of a performer' to the debate and greatly extends this discussion (*Origins of Drama*). Our task here, though, is not to debate issues of whether Eddic poems or indeed Old English charms were derived from 'performance texts' but to indicate that within Heathen and non-Heathen contexts alike they are so used today.

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shamanic healing, with each of the nine references to the herbs setting up a particular set of meaning and relationships between people, land, gods and, of course, plants. For instance, one Heathen ritual based on the Acerbot starts:

> Eastward I stand, favour I ask:
> I bid the great lord, I bid the mighty drihten,
> I bid the holy warder of heavens,
> Earth do I ask and sky, and the fair sacred lady
> And heaven's might and high halls,
> That I may this galdor, by the drihten's gift,
> Speak clearly by my firm will,
> Grow up the crops to our worldly needs
> (our translation)

The Nine Herbs charm describes actions by Woden: but it addresses plants—the nine herbs by which it is known—directly. It seems particularly interesting as a plausible example of a 'shamanic' healing song, wherein the herbs (and indeed disease spirits) are addressed directly with their abilities praised and histories noted, as 'people' (rather than objects), the 'shaman' proclaims his or her own power, and the god Woden is indexed for his exploits rather than directly asked for assistance—and indeed some Heathens may attempt to use it shamanically.[23]

> Remember, Mugwort, what you did reveal
> What you did arrange in mighty revelation.
> You were called Una, oldest of the herbs.
> You have might against three and against thirty
> You have might against venom and against elf-bolts
> You have might against the loathing faring though the land…
> …
> I alone know the running streams, and they enclose nine adders.
> Let all weeds spring up as herbs,
> Seas slide apart, all salt water
> While I blow this poison from you.
> (Based on translations by Rodrigues and Pollington)

Heathens have tended to see such material as basically Heathen with some 'corruption' by Christianity, which they are stripping away—ironically, some translations[24] may misleadingly over-Christianise as a default position what can equally be translated as essentially Heathen or ambiguous sources. Alternatively, the texts may be products of a Christian era, which incorporate still-present Heathen/shamanic understandings

23. Blain, 'Tracing the Seeress'.
24. E.g. Rodrigues, *Verse Charms*.

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of land and plants. Today, they are being 'Heathenised' by action and ritual use, and by constant inscription of meaning—including an engagement with commentary[25] and subversion, and revision within politicised contexts in which the scripted 'original' (itself a translation/interpretation) is claimed as authenticating practice that is reinvented in today's contexts. That is, whatever the 'truth' of their production and meaning within mediaeval contexts, they are today 'Heathen texts' and not only matter for linguistic/anthropological interpretation.

Finally within Heathenry, the construction of seidr/shamanic rituals—that is, those incorporating ideas of 'working with spirits' within altered consciousness, for seeing or healing purposes—which we have discussed extensively elsewhere,[26] has involved deliberate searching for accounts of seidr practice and attempts to use textual sources in the construction of 'oracular seidr' for today. Here texts such as the Eddic poem *Völuspá* have been a model for ritual performance, giving a pattern of question and answer modified by particular communities and individuals to suit their personal styles. Text, here, serves as an initiator of practice: rather than fixing meaning, it enables meanings to flow around the text and develop within practitioner communities. Meanings are accomplished between text and context, and performative elements become paramount as styles and practices are developed into new 'texts'—words, artwork, ritual forms with the express purpose of producing religion for today. In addition to the specific importance of individual 'texts', there is a developing intertextuality in which relationships are patterned and established within changing contexts. Any one text may give 'clues' (and be called on to demonstrate 'authenticity') but it is the general 'feel' of relationships between human and non-human people that is engaged with as part of the formation of the more complex Heathen philosophies being established today.

Celtic Texts

In addition to Heathen uses of textual sources, 'Celtic Pagans' and/or Druids find their practices inspired by mediaeval literature, but this time

25. E.g. Godfrid Storms, *Anglo Saxon Magic* (reprint Folcroft Library editions, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975 [1948]); Pollington, *Leechcraft*.

26. See especially Blain, *Nine Worlds*; Jenny Blain, 'Magic, Healing or Death? Issues of Seidr, "Balance" and Morality in Past and Present', in *Practitioners, Practices and Patients: New Approaches to Medical Archaeology and Anthropology*, ed. Patricia A. Baker and Gillian Carr (London: Routledge, 2002), 161-71; Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis, 'The "Ergi" Seidman: Contestations of Gender, Shamanism and Sexuality in Northern Religion, Past and Present', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15.3 (2000): 395-411.

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from Wales and Ireland (and in some cases Scotland). In one instance, this inspiration has been inaugurated in dialogue with Heathen oracular rites. Philip 'Greywolf' Shallcrass—until recently Joint-Chief of the British Druid Order (BDO) told us that:

> [I]t struck me as strange that the seidr tradition should be undergoing such a dramatic and widespread revival, yet no one in the Druid community seems to be taking a similar approach to the practice of 'awenyddion'. I think this situation should change and wonder if maybe we can help that process along? (pers.com.)

According to Greywolf, Awenyddion is a practice similar to oracular seidr, described by Giraldus Cambrensis in his twelfth-century *Description of Wales*:

> [A]mong the Welsh there are certain individuals called Awenyddion who behave as if they are possessed… When you consult them about some problem, they immediately go into a trance and lose control of their senses… Words stream from their mouths, incoherently and apparently meaningless and lacking any sense at all…and if you listen carefully to what they say you will receive the solution to your problem. When it is all over they will recover from their trance, as if they were ordinary people waking from a heavy sleep… They seem to receive this gift of divination through visions which they see in their dreams (Greywolf)[27]

The extent to which Giraldus's statement is a reflection of reality in twelfth-century Wales is not of interest to us here. What is pertinent to our discussion is the way in which mediaeval 'Celtic' texts are being used to inspire contemporary practices. A further, perhaps better-known, example is the mediaeval Welsh tales of Taliesin. Taliesin, a semi-mythical figure perhaps dating from the sixth century CE, is understood by Celtic neo-Shamans as a shamanic figure,[28] and his series of trials against the mythical figure Ceridwen (perceived by such neo-Shamans as a goddess, though this is not clear in the text) is understood as an initiatory process in which Taliesin and Ceridwen undergo transformations into the guises of various creatures, culminating in Taliesin being reborn as an initiated shaman. There are complicated issues of mistranslation and the uncertain dating of the manuscripts recording this mythology, which hinder such interpretations.[29] Nonetheless, these are texts that inspire contemporary

27. Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans*, 103.

28. E.g. John Matthews, *Taliesin: Shamanism and the Bardic Mysteries in Britain and Ireland* (London: Aquarian, 1991).

29. See Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Robert J. Wallis and Jenny Blain, 'Sites,

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Pagan practice, and Pagans drawing on them often do not deem the secure dating or origin of the sources as of such importance as do academics. A case in point is Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*,[30] which was inspired by the Welsh mediaeval *Mabinogion* (itself a much mistranslated work, enigmatic in meaning and open to multiple interpretations), and outlines the concept of a Celtic 'tree oracle' based on the Ogham alphabet. Like runes, there is no precise evidence that Ogham staves were used in divination in the past, although they are so used today. Nonetheless, since Graves's suggestions (he later regretted writing the work[31]), Celtic Pagans have picked up on the notion of the Ogham as oracle.[32] For archaeologists and historians, this may be a misapplication of the Ogham; for Pagans 'proof' may not be required to legitimate practice, since 'what works' is often the reckoning force (i.e. the oracle is perceived to work now, whether or not Ogham was ever used as an oracle in the past). Indeed, this example, in similarity to those we have examined so far, demonstrates how Pagan approaches to texts are in some instances less dogmatic than those of academics. Instead, they are rather more inspirational, and in so doing are less concerned with 'sacred text'—in the conventional understanding of the term as fixed and scriptural in meaning—than with re-inscription of meaning for empowering use in the present. A further example comes from a recent (August 2004) 'Celtic Reconstructionist' ritual to Airmid, a lady or goddess within the Irish 'invasions' myths who specialises in healing and particularly in healing herbs. Here, two participants enacting the story of Airmid and her father Dian Cecht were 'given' verses that, taken together, provided a new interpretation of the myth. While such 'inspirational' interpretation is unlikely to be accepted by linguists or mythographers, it makes sense to those who, like the participants, are attempting to construct spirituality for today from the sources of the past. So once again we see that, in these instances of 'Celtic Pagan' approaches to literary and archaeological sources, such texts are not seen as 'sacred' in a fundamentalist sense of the term: they are approached as sources to be interpreted (that is, not explained in terms of truth-value), as inspiration for practices rather than dogmatic scriptures.

Sacredness, and Stories: Interactions of Archaeology and Contemporary Paganism', *Folklore* 114.3 (2003): 307-21.

30. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961 [1948]).

31. Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 145

32. E.g. Nigel Pennick and Nigel Jackson, *The Celtic Oracle: A Complete Guide to Using the Cards* (London: Aquarian, 1992).

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Landscape as Text

If meanings can be produced through engagement with text and context, a text is that which mediates meaning in our examples, between past and present, between ancestors, spirits and today's practitioners. The metaphor of 'text', then, is not restricted to written documents. Landscape and its inherent meanings are discussed as 'texts' in the work of anthropologists looking at indigenous spiritualities and meanings, and looking at colonial processes, and in the work of archaeologists moving beyond monument-specific to monuments-in-landscapes analyses. The storied landscape is both 'unfolding process'[33] and a palimpsest with meanings superimposed.[34] Landscape, in some indigenous thought, holds and conveys meanings previously inscribed by human and spirit agencies. Discussing representations of landscape in Northern Australia, Layton comments that 'Alawa discourse represents the landscape as the embodiment of animate agencies, whereas we represent it as the product of blind forces'.[35] Landscape, then, can be read—not only as a 'map' of recent events (holding footprints or the signs of erosion or wind force), but in terms of its construction by human and non-human persons for the meanings inscribed, reinscribed and engaged with in the construction of further meanings.

We have discussed some indigenous perceptions of landscape elsewhere[36] and indicated that some Pagan appreciations of landscape, sacred landscape and sacred site attempt to parallel such indigenous conceptions: the term 'new-indigenes' seems to us appropriate for those Pagans who attempt to engage with landscape as living. We conclude by turning to an examination of 'sacred sites' (particularly stone circles) as 'texts': archaeological and anthropological analyses now approach landscapes

33. Marie-Françoise Guédon, 'Dene Ways and the Ethnographer's Culture', in *Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*, ed. David E. Young and Jean-Guy Goulet (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1994), 39-70, quoted in Wallis and Blain, 'Sites'.

34. Margot Winer, 'Landscapes, Fear and Land Loss on the Nineteenth-Century South African Colonial Frontier', in *Contested Landscapes: Movement, Exile and Place*, ed. Barbara Bender and Margot Winer (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 266

35. Robert Layton, 'Representing and Translating People's Place in the Landscape of Northern Australia', in *After Writing Culture: Epistemology and Praxis in Contemporary Anthropology*, ed. A. James, J. Hockey and A. Dawson (London: Routledge, 1997), 140.

36. Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis, 'Heritage, Paganisms and a Climate of "Transparency": Autoarchaeological Method and the "Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights Project"' (Paper presented at the 5th Cambridge Heritage Conference, November 2002); Wallis and Blain, 'Sites'.

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and sites in landscapes as more than simply 'texts' that can be 'read', yet the textual analogy retains its usefulness: sites in landscapes are consistently overwritten and modified by political and cultural agency; they are contested texts in which meanings are far from fixed and where the sense of site and stones as 'text' is interwoven with the textual production of 'official' or scientific versions of site and meaning.

Sites and Meanings

Today's Pagans (or at least a significant proportion of them) frequent 'sacred sites' for immensely varied reasons, but many indicate a sense of living presence and of changing narratives that are developed within the site, connecting place, spirits and ancestors. Places such as West Kennet long barrow or Stonehenge in Wiltshire, or the small stone circles of the West Country and the Peak District, are locations where meaning is inscribed and negotiated, 'read' or heard, as one informant relates:

> West Kennet? It tells me to go and listen to the world and stop talking… It tells me to open my eyes and my mind and close my brain for a while—stop analysing everything. And I hear the land. The beat of the drum of the earth under me, the cymbals of the wind in my ears. The sound/light of the age of the earth

Stonehenge at the summer solstice of 2001 (we have conducted fieldwork here since 1999) provided an opportunity to ask people what the stones were 'about' for them. Some of their responses[37] included:

> This is the most magical place on earth. Bar none.
>
> I figure a lot more people are realising what they are in the whole scheme of things and uh you know, this structure was kind of built to kind of register and keep time on the bigger scale of things, with the planets and stuff, to keep people in check with the land and stuff…and be at least an equal part of it. And I think that really these sort of things are forgotten.
>
> …it's slight desperation as well really. A lot of people, I you know don't feel like they fit with, you know, society these days, and feel that like monuments like this are symbols of a really civilised society in a truer sense, purer sense, you know like much more equality, much fairer, I don't know a lot of, anyway people walking, treading lightly on earth…
>
> It's like as ancestral memory bit that's stored up, you know.
>
> You're drawn here, quite simply the bottom line is you're sort of drawn here.

37. Given also in Blain, 'Tracing the Seeress'.

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> Stonehenge, for me, represents individual freedom. And the individual freedom of everyone here, who've all come for their own reasons, but it all represents that spark of individual freedom. That's what it means to me.
>
> Yeah right. My mum always says that when she was a kid, she and her sisters came here for picnics and that, so I just thought that, wow you can't get close to the stones normally, so I just really would love to get actually really close to them. Get such a sense, I don't know this amazing feeling when you actually get in there. Yes, that's why I'm here!
>
> I think it's just a case, right, of just you're free away, right, it's an anarchy that's working, and you're free. Stonehenge used to have a festival here that was a month long, for maybe 12 years…
>
> I was conceived here 23 years ago today!
>
> I've come 'cos it's part of my faith.
>
> I've been to these stones now probably about five times, and I've always been resenting, well not resenting but I've always been really unhappy about the fact that I can't come and touch them…and so I've come along to touch them, you know. Makes it seem more meaningful and real. And I can't get over how huuuuge they seem once you actually get in amongst them.
>
> I follow quite a solitary Wiccan path, really, so it fits in… And my sort of ancestry back as well, like I can (be) remembering, as well, passing on. And, and celebrating change, again.
>
> …they've become so symbolic, and so much that's about freedom now. Like the first thing that was to accord with me was about ten years ago when I saw this documentary on the battle of the beanfield, and the Levellers uh sort of did that song about it, you sort of heard about festivals and stuff, but they've become so much a part of what's about freedom and struggles and resistance against, against sort of rules, and you know, all that sort of stuff. I guess that's part of it as well, really. That's part of it that sort of becomes important. So again it's not just about a physical thing, but that in itself is—well I guess spiritual, in a sense, and cultural, you know, they've come to mean so much.
>
> It's almost like a focus as well.

So meaning is polyvalent, written and rewritten. This is acknowledged in at least some of the comments: what people read from the site is not necessarily the meaning that their friends take from it. People read the text—the landscape, the stones—from their own location within layers of meanings, mythologies, and a diversity of spiritualities. Yet the multiple meanings—a magical place, a place of conception, a place about freedom and resistance or ancestral memory—reflect a sense of sacredness, and the recent exclusion appears to intensify this. The place was forbidden

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(and is still under threat from future management plans) and so people have come to it because they can now do so.

Sacred sites remain contested. While much interpretative archaeological thought holds that meanings of sites have always been multiple and are recoverable only in fragmented narratives, other older concepts and narratives of a quest for 'truth' are still commonly found—whether in archaeological or Pagan approaches. As with commentaries and analysis of mediaeval poetry, some Pagans become avid readers of archaeology, or at least such material they can get hold of: much of that which is new and may be of interest to Pagans (e.g. excavation reports) can be expensive and/or difficult to locate, while material that is available more widely can be conventional, outdated and/or 'alternative'[38]—and while alternative interpretations of sites are a welcome addition to the academic archaeological corpus, they do tend to present themselves as truth-explanations rather than possible (or even impossible) interpretations or narratives. Mainstream archaeologists may then criticise Pagans for misinterpreting the past, not being up to date, or being 'fringe' when they attempt to draw on, for instance, Gimbutas[39] to discuss Silbury Hill as 'the body of the Goddess'. We find these criticisms inappropriate, and consider that plurality of interpretation should be encouraged, while recognising that some interpretations may appear ludicrous or uncritical from the standpoint of others. With such competing claims to authority, it is difficult, within a rationalist worldview, to take seriously the claim that a site is sacred because 'it said so' or because the spirits in the land are more active there and have inscribed sacredness in the place. Or is it always so difficult, or only when the 'indigenous' contexts or 'irrational' views are European?[40] Elsewhere, archaeologists are engaging with 'native' animistic understandings of landscapes and megaliths, and indeed some acceptance of relevance of such understandings for British prehistory is accruing,[41] but the views of 'new-indigenes' are fairly regularly dismissed or mocked, in part on apparent grounds that Pagans cannot demonstrate continuous practice. Paradoxically, when traditions are increasingly seen within critical academic discourse as 'invented'—

38. E.g. Julian Cope, *The Modern Antiquarian: A Pre-Millennial Odyssey through Megalithic Britain* (London: Thorsons, 1998).

39. Popularised by Rianne Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco,1987) and others, e.g. Michael Dames, *The Silbury Treasure* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976); Marija Gimbutas with Miriam Robbins Dexter (as ed.), *The Living Goddesses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

40. Cf. Blain, 'Speaking Shamanistically'.

41. E.g. Michael Parker-Pearson, and Ramilisonina, 'Stonehenge for the Ancestors: The Stones Pass on the Message', *Antiquity* 72 (1998): 308-26.

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constantly renewed as re-creation of meaning—Paganisms are decried for that very 'invention'.

Text and Changing Context

We have moved in this article from conventional understandings of 'text' as authority and as fixed (inscribed) meaning, through 'text' as a source that demands creative interpretation or performance, to 'text' as a location of continual negotiation and inscription of fluid meaning—here differentiating inscription from 'text'.[42] The first sense still predominates among many practitioners: whether with the Eddas or stone circles, many practitioners seek 'truth' of interpretation, original intent, and are avid consumers of 'texts about texts' as direct authentication of practices and beliefs. Yet others engaging with manuscripts or translations may creatively produce their own 'new' texts, inventing kennings and transforming meaning, using sources as models for poetry or art, playing with meaning through manipulation of words and images, and interpreting today's images (for instance, perceived in seidr–gained altered consciousness) through a rather complex interaction with ancient texts and the (possible) contexts of their production.[43] Yet concepts of both 'sacredness' and 'text' are themselves disputed within Paganisms as within academia, and 'sacredness' is inscribed by many Pagans within contexts that are themselves fluid and politicised: for example, reclaiming the discourse of the 'ergi seidman'[44] or finding the stones to be 'about freedom', as well as disputing interpretations and re-creating ceremony.

Further, it is interesting to witness the unfolding of Paganisms as texts themselves, themselves using texts, and celebrating the polyvalence of meanings in texts. Just as a prehistoric site can be 'sacred' and undergo transformations of meaning and structure that might enhance its sacredness over time, so can a text such as the Edda, for example, be sacred without being unchanging. Indeed, the more Heathens have engaged with these texts and appreciated their polyvalence, they have perhaps become more sacred, more a part of the unfolding Heathen tradition. Unlike the Bible, which is, for some Christians, read as word-for-word-scripture, the 'sacredness' of the Edda or stanzas of the Anglo-Saxon rune

42. See Leo Howe, 'Risk, Ritual and Performance', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6 (2000): 63-79.

43. E.g. Nathan J. Johnson and Robert J. Wallis, *Shamanism, Runecraft and Magic: A Heathen Galdrbok* (Winchester: The Wykeham Press, 2004).

44. Blain and Wallis, 'The "Ergi" Seidman'.

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poem arises because they offer multiple meanings (or 'kennings') perceived in ritual after ritual, over time.

Issues of performativity and inscription are problematic on several grounds. We have hinted at some here. Aside from issues of physical 'inscription' and rather 'in your face' accomplishment of meaning (such as votive offerings and chalk graffiti at sites such as West Kennet), which we have described previously,[45] there are deeper issues of who or what constitute and mediate meaning in today's society, and how interpretations—of 'text', monument, text as monument or monument as text—are legitimated, presented and transformed as political statements, authorised 'authenticity'. As we have indicated, interpretation of 'text' and place is now being theorised and politicised in some contexts: notably those of post-colonial interpretation and re-envisaged visions of the (once)-exotic 'other'. Our claim is that—whether as Pagans or ethnographers, academics, story-tellers or policy-makers, in short any who work at making meaning from places, events or 'texts'—we need to turn our eyes and our theorising to the contested interpretations of history and 'heritage' that surround us, and, recognising the plurality and multivocality of spiritual and political meanings, explore their authoring as adding depth and richness to the cultural spectrum of Western cultures today.[46]

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45. E.g. Wallis, 'Queer Shamans'; Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis, 'Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights: Contemporary Pagan Engagements with the Past', *Journal of Material Culture* 9.3 (2004): 237-61.; Robert J. Wallis and Jenny Blain, 'No One Voice: Ancestors, Pagan Identity and the "Reburial Issue" in Britain', *British Archaeology* 78 (2004): 10-13.

46. An earlier version of this article was presented at the British Sociological Association Study Group on Religion, April 2003, 'Texts and Religious Contexts', at the University of Oxford, where we received useful feedback. The authors wish to acknowledge the support of the ESRC (grant RES-000-22-0074), which enabled presentation and fieldwork in 2003. We thank the two anonymous reviewers for *The Pomegranate* for their useful comments.

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