

## Overview Timetable:

9.30 onwards - <b>registration</b>	
9.50-10.00 <b>Welcome</b>	
10.00-11.00 <b>Panel 1</b>	
11.00-11.15 break, chat	
11.15- 12.40 <b>Panel 2</b>	Workshops: Runic John
12.40-13.40 break for Lunch	
13.40-15.10 <b>Panel 3</b>	Workshops: Robin Herne – storytelling Runic John
15.10-15.30 break, chat, coffee	
15.30-17.00 <b>Panel 4</b>	
17.00-17.10 break	
17.10-18.00 <b>Roundtable</b>	
18.00-18.20- wrap-up plenary session	
19.30 onwards – Gordon the Toad and Susan Cross Andy Letcher and other musicians discussion, song, revelry	

### 1. Polytheism and Animism

- Graham Harvey  
Do animists need deities and totems?
- Andy Letcher  
"Out of my head!": Just where do magic mushroom spirits come from?
- discussion

### 2. Slavic and Maltese Polytheisms

- Anne Ferlat  
Experience of light in Slavic polytheism
- Kenneth Lymer  
A village called Shaitanka
- Kathryn Rountree  
Reconstructing Paganism in Malta:
- discussion

### 3. The Past in the Present

- Nick Ford  
Spirituality and Social Dislocation in Post-Imperial Britain
- Morgana  
Wicca as an emerging religion in the Netherlands -
- Robert Wallis  
Heathen shamanism and animism
- discussion

### 4. Polytheism in the landscape?

- Di Pattison  
Images of Neolithic deities?.
- Jon Fisher  
Legendary Irish Landscape - Attaching location to legend
- Jenny Blain  
Ancestors? Which Ancestors?
- discussion

### 5. Roundtable discussion:

- Loki and other 'tricksters'

# ASSOCIATION OF POLYTHEIST TRADITIONS

*Conference 13 May 2006: Polytheism and  
Animism*

University of Central Lancashire

Panel abstracts and Programme

In Association with the University of Central Lancashire Pagan  
Society

## 1. Polytheism and Animism

**Do animists need deities and totems? Further refining the “new animism” in relation to possible relationships with significant others.**

**Graham Harvey, Open University**

Having recently published my book on “Animism”, I’m now interested in testing the relationship between the new approach to / use of the term in relation to other relational terms. Here, “theism” and “totemism” will be my focus.

Animism can now be defined not as a “belief in spirits” (especially because the word “spirit” is too vague and “spiritual”) but as “a worldview and lifeway which encourages people to respect a living, relational cosmos”. In such a cosmos, all persons (human and other-than-human) co-create the world moment by moment, act by act. So, what role or place is there for deities? Perhaps a revised, polytheistic approach to polytheism will aid a reconsideration of what or who deities are, and what role they play among these relationships. Totemism, too, is implicated in the revised thinking about animism because it requires us to rethink human relationships not only with significant animal and plant persons, but also with other humans. Will a rejection of the individualism of New Age (perhaps neo-shamanic) “totemism” enable us to think about revising our Western modernist culture’s relationships so that we can, once more, or for the first time, talk about clans that include humans and significant other-than-humans? Will this talk be an honest reflection of hopes for a better world, or just another romanticism?

**“Out of my head!”: Just where do magic mushroom spirits come from?**

**Andy Letcher**

In the fifty years since they were rediscovered by the West, magic mushrooms (hallucinogenic mushrooms containing psilocybin) have become globally popular as an illicit way to get ‘out of one’s head’. But though they have been used, in the main, recreationally, magic mushrooms have also been co-opted into the neo-shamanic practices of ‘psychonauts’ (and some pagans). These practitioners grant mushrooms a spiritual significance and claim that the mushroom experience propels them into a shamanistic realm of spirits in which knowledge or even gnosis will be imparted. Using examples drawn from first hand accounts of mushroom trips (including my own) I want to discuss and problematise the provenance of these mushroomic spirits (and by extension, of gods and spirits more generally), addressing the question of whether they may best be explained shamanistically or psychologically. In other words can psychedelics (or, indeed, other forms of altered states of consciousness) ever allow us to transcend the constraints of culture, to get truly out of our heads?

## 2. Slavic and Maltese polytheisms – experiences, rejection, acceptance

**Reconstructing Paganism in Malta: When Polytheism Meets Catholicism**

**Kathryn Rountree, Massey University, New Zealand**

Malta, on the southern edge of Europe, has the beginnings of a local neo-Pagan movement, although the community is far from coherent or organised, and most Maltese Pagans of necessity keep a very low profile. This paper draws on anthropological fieldwork conducted among Maltese Witches and Pagans in 2005. It examines how they construct their religious identity in relation to mainstream Catholic society, their global relationships and local vulnerability. On one hand, individual Pagans in Malta construct highly idiosyncratic and eclectic paths, drawing on global sources available through the internet and literature from Britain and the United States. On the other, several deeply entwined indigenous cultural strands create a unique context for contemporary Maltese Paganism: Neolithic religion in Malta and its imaginative reconstruction, Roman Catholicism and Maltese folk beliefs and traditions. I argue that Paganism and Catholicism may have more in common than evangelical Protestantism and Catholicism.

## Experience of light in Slavic polytheism and its resurgence in neo-paganism

**Anne Ferlat**

In an article entitled “Spirit, Light and Semence”, Mircea Eliade studied the relationship between those three and in particular, the concept of light in different traditions. For instance, in Avestic texts, *xvarenah* is the light that every human being possesses, but is the characteristic of all the divine beings, and particularly the kings which were sacred in Ancient Iran. An old text asserts: “When the Sun shines, gods distribute the *xvarenah*”. The etymology then, according to Eliade, connects *xvarenah* with *hvar*, so with Sanskrit *svar*. In Russia, one of the main Gods of the pantheon is Svarog. The question is to see here how this concept of light is declined in Slavic mythology and how it is translated in contemporary paganism in Russia. We will try to examine different sources such as tales and bylines, the heroic legends, and oral folklore to see if those images are prevailing or not, and we will try to understand how this image of light was understood over the centuries until now with the resurgence of a paganism which aims at differentiating itself from Christianity on the contrary of the folklore which was a mix of both.

### **A village called Shaitanka; or, the things that post-enlightenment science does not tell you about when doing field archaeology in the Urals**

**Kenneth Lymer, Museum of London Archaeology Service, London, UK**

This is a story about several stories woven together in a narrative made of many dynamic - possibly animate - strands. When one is in a foreign land like Russia conducting archaeological fieldwork there are other processes than the pursuit of scientific knowledge that impinge upon the researchers and their colleagues. In the field myth and reality blend, distort and merge; but these are the things which rarely enter the lecture auditoriums of the academy or university. Therefore, I shall relate personal experiences of matters at the fringes of academic norms and outside the positivism and rationalism of archaeological excavation procedure. There will be a village in the Urals near a cave, bear cults, forest spirits, a mountain mistress, lizards, possibly a witch with iron teeth, lights in the sky, and, of course, 'mad-dogs and Englishmen'. Through this miasma of local lore and traveller's tales we can glean something which could be appropriately called 'the landscape of polytheism and legend'.

### ***3. The past in the present:***

#### **Would You Believe It? Spirituality and Social Dislocation in Post-Imperial Britain**

**Nick Ford**

Since the end of Empire, Britain has been in search of a new identity. For the past half-century and more, foreign powers have been arriving on our shores in ever-increasing numbers, spreading their strange and outlandish beliefs. Are these transplanted cultural enclaves a threat to the integrity of our spiritual heritage? Or do they offer a rare opportunity, a challenge to re-evaluate and enrich our spirituality and cultural identity?

Establishment conservatives insist we are a Christian nation and that our way of life is under threat. That battle must be joined for the soul of Britain.

Is Arthur right? Would you want your daughter to marry a Heathen Saxon?

(A re-examination of spirituality in present-day Britain (with close reference to divers paganisms) in the light of social and environmental change, and a discussion of similarities and relevances with 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> CE post-Roman Britain.)

### **“Wicca as an emerging religion in the Netherlands”**

**Morgana**

Is it a duotheistic, pantheistic or polytheistic religion? Or a bit of everything?

Wicca has been described a “scavenger religion” picking at every tradition available. Using Gerald Gardner’s legacy as a source of inspiration my partner Merlin and I introduced Gardnerian Wicca into the Netherlands in the early 1980’s. How have the spirits of the land and people moulded Wicca in the Netherlands during the last 25 years?

In the panel discussion “Polytheisms – past and present” I will be presenting the Wicca perspective based on my own experiences.

(Morgana, co-founder of “Silver Circle, Centre for the Old Religion”, the Netherlands and co-editor of “Wiccan Rede” an Anglo-Dutch Wiccan magazine launched in 1980)

### **Of Wolf-heads and Spellbooks:**

#### **Heathen shamanism and animism - The 'Ulfhednar' and 'Galdrbok'**

**Robert J. Wallis, Richmond University**

This paper presents work by the Ulfhednar (Wolf-head) Companions heathen group in Hampshire, as detailed in ‘Galdrbok: Practical Heathen Runecraft, Shamanism and Magic’ (The Wykeham Press 2005). In Galdrbok (‘spell-book’, in the sense of a medieval grimoire or ‘grammar’), we offer (amongst other things) a ‘systematic’ approach to contemporary heathen shamanism and animism. The induction of three trance states embodying mediumistic scrying, deity possession and ancestral communication, differ from the format of other heathen shamanistic and/or seidr practices. And, this understanding of shamanism is integrated with a (world)view of animism which takes on board 'old animism' (belief in 'inanimate' objects such as rocks containing 'spirit') and 'new animism' (requiring an 'altered style of communication' with other-than-human-persons). The aim of this paper is to offer additional kennings on the matters of seidr/shamanism and animism which may be of interest to heathens and other polytheists already working engagements with land wights and working with seidr/shamanism (the well-known ‘high seat’ discussed by Jenny Blain; the ‘freestyle’, more private/personal format of Jane Fries’ ‘seething’, and the more recent seidr/seething of Runic John incorporating Harner's core-shamanic 'journeying') – as well as to contribute to the developing discourse on heathenry today.

#### *4. Polytheism in the landscape?*

##### **Legendary Irish Landscape - Attaching location to legend**

**Jonathan Fisher**

Irish mythical history is firmly grounded in the landscape within which it takes place. This is evident from the frequent referral to specific places within the recorded tales. Using the tale 'Cath Maige Tuired' and its setting - the area around Moytura in Co. Sligo, an example of this link is provided. The landscape is such that the events described in the tale seem much more plausible when viewed in context. Some of the landmarks mentioned still remain, and the place name appears not to have changed since the tale was written. A recent reprint of research first published in the early 20th Century, funded by the Sligo County Council Millennium Committee has allowed this fine example of the link between legend and landscape to be explored in more depth.

##### **Images of Neolithic Deities? The stonecarvings at Avebury stone circle**

**Di Pattison**

A brief paper presenting an exhibition of annotated photographs of figurative stonecarvings from Avebury stone circle and the adjoining West Kennet stone avenue in Wiltshire, a 4500 year-old world heritage site.

My aim is to describe the site and the imagery and to seek information and opinions from delegates concerning their interpretation and specifically to ask whether these figures might be ancient manifestations of deities worshipped in a number of pre-Christian European religions (Celtic, Norse, Greek and Roman especially)

I will briefly describe, with illustrations

- The monument and its layout
- Its history
- Its sculptures
- How to look at the images
- My background and research aims
- The selection of images presented in the exhibition

A questionnaire and handout I will provide for information and feedback

##### **Ancestors? Which ancestors?**

##### **Place, time and remembrance in living (and cultural) landscapes.**

**Jenny Blain**

Polytheists and Animists - among others - hold attachment to the concept of 'Ancestors'. This paper begins with Sacred Sites (and the Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights project), goes on to touch on the British reburial issue, and takes in on the way ideas about how we conceptualise 'Ancestors', be these ancient or - comparatively - modern. For a polytheist, is there a difference between remembrance of 'ancient ones' in an Avebury barrow or a Clava cairn, and remembrance of the never-met great-great-grandparents (of, say, Parkhead Forge in Glasgow or the Bolton Dyeworks) who are the matter of the current tendency - nay, even movement - to family history research? How do we know ourselves, if not through place, time, naming of kin and deeds? Are the sacred landscapes of Kilmartin or Stanton Moor so different from those of Spitalfields, Leith, or the Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet?

This paper attempts to ground today's polytheisms in understandings of 'self' that include pasts and landscapes of many kinds: the ancestors in the landscape are not all ancient, the issues with honour and reburial are not all modern. Does the growing trend, in the UK and elsewhere, to know and honour 'ancestors' imply merely a quest for 'roots', or does this search, in itself, dispose increasing numbers of people to a more open relationship with those 'other-than-human persons' that Graham referred to in the first talk today?

#### *5. Roundtable discussion: Loki and other 'tricksters'*

**Including various members of the APT and we hope the audience!**

*ASSOCIATION OF POLYTHEIST TRADITIONS*

<http://www.manygods.org.uk/>