

WORLD TREE



BEHIND THE WIRE

by Amy Ahlberg-Venezia, Blood Eagle Kindred/Nine Kindred of the Northeast

As my kindred's support of the World Tree Outreach Ministry expands, we decided to move those activities to a regular featured column. This should help clarify the matter of Ásatrú Alliance kindreds and their role in the World Tree Ministry. We have inferred from the letters we receive that there is an impression held by some that prison advocacy is a function of membership in the Alliance. This has never been the case. The Ásatrú Alliance is a confederation of independent kindreds which may or may not elect to do the work. We hope that our past habit of including our activities with our kindred report has not added to the confusion.

All of the digitalized material (and new copy about the Ministry's mission) will be accessible at the World Tree Publications site. Karon has volunteered to take point with the building of the website. Hail Sloe-eyed Raven! I'm very pleased to announce the second edition of **Handbook of Ásatrú**, written by Tyrsoak Josephsson and the Raven-Wolf Kindred of FCI Pekin IL in 2253 Runic Era. **Ancestral Folkways** publisher Matt Hajduk (aka Death Wish Bronson) retyped the original edition, and Valgard edited the content, some of which was dated. I worked in the World Tree Publications runic material and added primal Bronze Age graphics for a cosmetic upgrade that should reproduce well; I hope you all like the new look. The new size of the **Handbook of Ásatrú** is 8 ½ x 11. It has been tightened up (without loss of substance) to 28 pages and is now available as a pdf file at the website. The companion volume **Our Sacred Land**, also written by Tyrsoak and Raven-Wolf Kindred, is currently undergoing similar upgrades. Completion will be announced in this column in the next issue. As more flyers are completed and new ones created, we will announce it here. Special thanks to Karon's husband the Hitman for his re-creation of the Greeting to Sunna flyer, which now features the chariot housed in the Copenhagen Museum. Ashley has been great help with the new World Tree Ministry information pamphlet. Dustin Turner's winning artwork "The Restoration" graces the back cover and it required some manipulation by Ashley to get it just right. Speaking of the freebird Dusty, we'd like to boast that his framed original artwork fetched a very handsome price at the auction. Mitch bid the highest amount, and then donated the item to the Valhallapalooza fundraiser next May. Some of you have written to me about the Valhallapalooza Skaldic Slam and Art auction; a mass mailing with information and a release form will be going out very soon to those of you who have written asking for details. If you would like to receive a copy of the

guidelines and release form, you can write to the Blood Eagle Kindred PO Box and I'll send you a notice when it goes out.

We have been working for over a year to digitalize all of the free literature to make it easily accessible and to save costs. Requesting hard copies of the digitalized material is defeating the purpose of our efforts, so *please* do all in your power to obtain your copies in this way. Valgard has always adhered to a policy of not charging inmates for literature and this policy will continue, but printing and postage costs consumes the largest part of the World Tree Ministry's budget. If you absolutely have no contact with anyone on the outside, you may request a hard copy of **Handbook of Ásatrú**, but be prepared to wait for one as there is a backlog of demand.

Several letters have bounced back to the kindred from inmates whose addresses are incomplete or abbreviated. Recently, materials sent to Paul B. in Concord returned to the PO Box twice – once for package size and the second time for incomplete address (after I met the size requirements of the package by redistribution of contents among more envelopes. Grrrrr...). This is the second time mail from Concord has been interrupted. Inmates who are abruptly moved won't get their mail forwarded or returned, either. Those letters sometimes bounce back but probably end up in the dead letter box in most cases. Please print clearly and don't use abbreviations; it causes the majority of returned mail. Contact continues with an inmate in the Menard system just coming off lockdown. Stay tuned...

While sorting through my World Tree files, I reviewed the meeting minutes that I took during the first in the series of Ohio trips that I took with Valgard last year. Since some of you are still asking me about the August trip, below are the paraphrased minutes which should clear up some confusion on World Tree's role and how we secured the rights of Ásatrú inmates to practice our Folkway.

The meeting took place on 22 August 2257 Runic Era at the Office of the Attorney General and was prompted by *Miller v. Wilkinson*. Present were members of the Office of the Attorney General, State of Ohio and officers of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (both from the Chaplain's office and their Division of Legal Services). In all, sixteen individuals sat around the conference table, with three legal personnel sitting along the wall, making a total of 19 individuals present with the inclusion of World Tree personnel. A "specialist in gang culture" (as he was described by other officials) was present as well as one of the prison wardens. Proceedings were digitally recorded by them, while I took copious notes. It was prefaced at the start of the meeting that the state of Ohio currently has 32 state prisons and 49,000 inmates (yes, I confirmed this number with the source at the end of the meeting). Sources references were *Living Ásatrú* and *The Ásatrú Alliance: A Brief Introduction*. It was explained by Valgard (and accepted by all present) that *Living Ásatrú* has been the basis for establishing Ásatrú within the state and federal penitentiaries for the past fifteen years. It was noted that the current pamphlet is an upgraded edition, although little content has changed. The Ásatrú Alliance was presented as a church which ministers to inmates. In this capacity the work of the World Tree Outreach Ministry is accepted by the Federal Bureau of Prisons nationwide. The Ásatrú Alliance is the oldest and largest organization and church with an elected spiritual leader who is also an advisor to the US Federal Bureau of Prisons and a contracted employee of the federal government.

It was soon clear that virtually of the questions posed to Valgard were framed within an (implicit) dogmatic worldview, which prolonged deliberations. Valgard gave the *literal* translation of his title as *every man's Godi*, although he expressed the *spiritual* translation of his title as *first among equals* to describe his relationship among the Folk in the Alliance. The former reflects the letter of the tribal law; the latter reflects the spirit—the empirical on one hand and the experiential on the other.

The essential beliefs and tenets of Ásatrú were established, with particular emphasis that this is a polytheistic Folkway. Brief description and discussion of the Æsir and Vanir were given. It was acknowledged that practice on the outside does not necessarily reflect how things are done inside due to security issues and prison regulations. At issue with most of this is the distinction which was frequently made between *requirements* of Ásatrú and *commonly held beliefs* or *cultural practices* of the Ásatrú. For example, the Greeting to Sunna is a *commonly held belief* but it is not a *requirement* of the Ásatrú to perform the Greeting to Sunna three times each day. Tattoos were also raised as gang related; but Valgard emphasized that tattoos on the Folk are a cultural practice much like the Pacific Islanders. Grooming issues, such as head shaving or beards, were likewise described as a common cultural practice. Just as a cube dweller in the free world does not practice the Greeting to Sunna three times per day, a surgeon, for example, cannot grow a long beard; it must be closely cropped because his job requires the wearing of a surgical mask. So Folk in the free world likewise demonstrate variability and adaptability in their expression and in the workplace.

Moreover, it was emphasized by Valgard that his message had always been consistent over the years and across the country. The right to Blót in individual and congregated worship; to possess and know the runes; and the right to own and wear a hammer are rights which (when granted) provide a foundation upon which inmates can build. This is not as easy as it sounds; it took an entire afternoon to establish specifications (dimensions and construction materials) for the fourteen items listed in *Living Ásatrú* so that the items would be in compliance with security there. Because security regulations vary by state and then further between the state and federal levels, the process is repeated each time Valgard meets with prison officials. In some cases, a chain must be used for wearing a hammer; in other yards, a cord is regulation, usw. By the end of the day, the items listed in *Living Ásatrú* had been hammered out with hairsplitting precision.

A question and answer session engaged almost all of the officials at some point during the deliberations of each item. In some cases comparisons were given to convey a point. For example, when asked if there were restrictions on touching inmates' items, Valgard was forceful about respecting the sanctity of inmates' personal items. If it was a basic Styrofoam cup that must serve as the inmate's drinking horn, that item was used in worship and hence became sacred. Some of the looks in response to that statement were incredulous; when Valgard compared the importance of the cup (horn) to the inmate to the role of the chalice in the church, it seemed to convey the point successfully to the religious officials present.

The thorniest issue was the matter of larger items like the Gandr and ritual Hammer. Cardboard was suggested as a substitute for metal or wood, which Valgard flatly rejected as inadequate. A copy taken from the Federal Guidelines was procured in which sturdy/heavy cardboard was suggested as an acceptable substitute; but Valgard

pointed out that first, those guidelines were dated and had since been updated and second, cardboard might be used only in an extreme case in Supermax. Tension escalated when one of the officers tried to force the issue of having ritual hammers to be made from cardboard. Valgard unequivocally and forcefully opposed, growling that a cardboard hammer was a “throw-away item” and was unacceptable. In the end the officer relented, and Valgard’s insistence prevailed. While some officers were receptive to what we were doing there, others appeared more interested in trying to find (or create) loopholes in answers in order to fit their agenda; namely, to make their job easier with as little concession as possible from them. A “threat to security” was frequently cited, particularly when runes were involved. Therefore, great forethought went into the answers given by Valgard so that his answers could not be mined in order to justify restrictions. The deliberations were rather like a chess match. Valgard sat at one end of the table with his arms folded and head down before answering each question, while I had my own head down with pen poised over my writing pad. Perhaps the officers thought “this guy’s fallen asleep”, but I knew that he was weighing his answers very carefully in anticipation of the direction in which the question was likely to go. Despite the disingenuousness of some of the questions and the overt and subtle attempts at disarmament, the meeting had a successful resolution. Please keep in mind, though, that securing just the basics took an entire afternoon of negotiations. At the close of the meeting, Valgard made it clear that he was going to hold them to their word of granting Ásatrú inmates the same rights already enjoyed by inmates of other faiths. I’m fortunate to have accompanied Valgard on that trip to support the work of the World Tree Outreach Ministry and the inmates whose interests it represents.

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