

Article

Music as Ritual Infrastructure: Sound, Cohesion, and Practice in a Contemporary Swedish Ásatrú Blót

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Abstract

This article examines the use of reproduced music during a large-scale summer blót organised by Ása-samfundet in Sweden. Based on ethnographic observation, it traces the unfolding of the ceremony and identifies when music is introduced and the roles it performs within the ritual process. Rather than treating music as a vehicle of symbolic meaning or religious identity, the analysis conceptualises it as part of ritual infrastructure. From this perspective, music functions as a material and sensory resource that structures ritual time, supports continuity between ritual actions, and contributes to the organisation of a spatially dispersed gathering. Focusing on the use of music by the Nordic project Wardruna, the article argues that the ritual significance of reproduced music lies less in the transmission of specific meanings than in its practical role within the unfolding of the ceremony. Particular attention is paid to how music accompanies transitions, bridges temporal gaps between ritual actions, and provides a continuous sonic environment in situations where participants are distributed across a large ritual space. By shifting attention from representation to mediation, the article contributes to discussions of materiality, atmosphere, and the infrastructural dimensions of contemporary ritual practice.

Keywords: music; ritual practice; neopaganism; Ásatrú; sound; ritual infrastructure; ethnography

1. Introduction

Music occupies a prominent and often taken-for-granted position within contemporary Pagan movements; yet its role in ritual practice remains, to a considerable extent, undertheorized in scholarly research. While the study of modern Paganism has traditionally focused on mythological narratives, textual sources, symbolic systems, or questions of identity and authenticity, the sonic dimension of ritual is typically treated as secondary or illustrative. As Sabina Magliocco and Holly Tannen have argued, however, it is precisely in religious environments lacking a unified canon and a fixed liturgy that music and song may assume a structurally significant role, insofar as they “serve to codify and transmit shared principles within Pagan culture” (Magliocco and Tannen 1998, p. 176). This observation raises the question of whether music in contemporary Paganism should be understood not merely as an expression of identity, but as an active constituent of ritual practice. Although music is frequently discussed in relation to Pagan identities and subcultures, its practical role within ritual organization has received considerably less attention.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this article proceeds from the assumption that music in Pagan ritual contexts cannot be adequately analysed solely as a bearer of symbolic meaning or as an aesthetic accompaniment to ritual performance. Consequently, it does



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not offer a musicological analysis of specific compositions nor a close reading of song lyrics. Instead, it focuses on how music operates within ritual situations: how it structures ritual time, contributes to the continuity of the ceremony, and supports the organization of ritual action in large-scale gatherings. Music is approached as a performative medium and as part of ritual infrastructure—that is, as an element that does not simply accompany ritual action but contributes to the organization of ritual action and the conditions under which it unfolds. At the same time, the article examines whether and in what respects this situational function of music corresponds to, or diverges from, the ways in which music is interpreted and framed by its creators in public discourse.

In line with this approach, the article addresses several interrelated research questions. First, it asks how music functions in the concrete ritual setting of a blót and what roles it effectively fulfils during the ritual. Second, it examines how music structures ritual time and contributes to ritual continuity, particularly under conditions of large-scale and spatially dispersed gatherings. Finally, it considers whether the practical use of music in ritual contexts aligns with the meanings attributed to it by its creators, or whether its function and significance shift in relation to the specific ritual situation. More broadly, the article asks what this case implies for the analytical understanding of music as part of ritual infrastructure in contemporary Paganism, and to what extent musical meaning can be understood as situationally contingent rather than as an inherent property of compositions.

The empirical basis of this article is ethnographic observation of a blót conducted in Sweden as part of a broader research project on contemporary Swedish Ásatrú. Ásatrú is a contemporary Heathen religious movement inspired by pre-Christian Nordic traditions, Old Norse literature, and relationships to landscape, ancestry, and cyclical conceptions of time. As scholars of contemporary Paganism have noted, modern Heathen movements are generally not characterised by attempts at strict historical reconstruction but rather by the selective reinterpretation of historical and literary sources within contemporary cultural and religious contexts (Aitamurto and Simpson 2013; Strmiska 2005). Ritual practice therefore emerges through an ongoing negotiation between inherited traditions, present-day concerns, and local circumstances.

One of the central ritual forms within Ásatrú is the blót. Historically, the term referred to sacrificial rites described in Old Norse literary and historical sources, often involving offerings, communal feasting, and the maintenance of reciprocal relationships between humans and divine powers. Contemporary Ásatrú communities, however, have substantially reinterpreted these practices. Modern blóts rarely seek to replicate historical rituals directly; instead, they typically involve offerings, libations, invocations, and collective participation adapted to contemporary social and legal contexts. Rather than treating blót as a fixed liturgical form, this article approaches it as a situated ritual gathering whose concrete shape emerges through the interaction of ritual action, organizational structures, material settings, and the practical decisions of ritual leaders. This perspective allows attention to be directed toward how specific ritual elements—including music—acquire significance within the unfolding of a particular ceremonial context.

In the case analysed in this article, the blót involved many participants distributed across space at varying distances from the centre of ritual action. This spatial and organizational configuration significantly shaped the course of the ritual, particularly regarding temporal delays between individual ritual acts and the limited possibility of direct participation for all those present. It was under these conditions that recorded music proved crucial for maintaining ritual cohesion. Music was present throughout the duration of the blót and functioned as a stable sonic framework that bridged temporal gaps between individual ritual actions and prevented their dissolution into profane waiting. By “stable sonic framework”, I refer to the continuous presence of reproduced sound linking other-

wise discontinuous ritual actions and maintaining temporal continuity across a spatially dispersed gathering. Through its continuous sonic presence, music provided a shared acoustic environment even when core ritual actions occurred beyond the immediate visual or auditory range of many participants. In the context of a large and spatially dispersed gathering, music thus contributed to maintaining temporal continuity across the gathering.

Analytical attention is paid to the fact that the music used during the blót was reproduced through modern sound technology. While this raises broader questions concerning the relationship between ritual practice, technological mediation, and notions of authenticity in contemporary Paganism, this article deliberately avoids normative evaluations of technological mediation or assessments of historical “faithfulness”. Instead, it examines how technologically reproduced music becomes a functional and largely transparent component of ritual infrastructure, whose practical effects outweigh considerations of origin, medium, or technical means. During the ritual, music was reproduced through loudspeakers positioned near the ritual centre, making it audible across most of the gathering area.

The analysis of the ritual function of music is further situated in relation to the discourse of the music’s creators. The music discussed in this article consists primarily of recordings by the Norwegian project Wardruna, whose compositions combine vocal performance, frame drums, reconstructed and traditional instruments, repetitive rhythmic patterns, and texts inspired by Old Norse language and runic traditions. In public statements, these artists consistently emphasize that their work does not aim at reconstructing historical pasts but at fostering connections with pre-Christian worldviews, landscape, and cyclical conceptions of time. Music is framed not as a historical artefact but as a medium through which such relationships can be explored. Analytically, this discourse is significant because it facilitates the incorporation of music into ritual practice without requiring a unified doctrinal framework.

The aim of this article is therefore to analyse the role of music in the ritual practice of Swedish Ásatrú based on ethnographic observation of a specific blót, and to situate this case within a broader discussion of the use of music in contemporary Paganism. The following sections first outline the general functions of music in Pagan ritual contexts and the theoretical framework employed, before turning to a detailed analysis of the ethnographic case.

2. Methodological Note

The analysis presented in this article forms part of a broader doctoral research project examining contemporary Ásatrú communities across Europe. The project combines ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, informal conversations with community members and ritual leaders, and the analysis of publicly available organizational materials. While the wider project incorporates multiple sources of data, the present article draws primarily on ethnographic observation and focuses on the observable organization of ritual action rather than on participants’ subjective interpretations or religious experiences. Consequently, interview materials collected during the broader research project are not analysed here.

The blót discussed in this article was a publicly announced ritual event organized by Ása-samfundet in Sweden and attended by the researcher upon invitation from representatives of the organization. Fieldwork was conducted in an overt research role, and all individual actors have been anonymized. Observation focused on the spatial organization of the ritual, the sequencing of ritual actions, the use of material objects and sound, and the practical mechanisms through which ritual continuity was maintained within a large and spatially dispersed gathering.

The selection of this particular blót as a case study reflects its distinctive character within the broader fieldwork corpus. Most rituals observed during the research were considerably smaller in scale and involved a more limited number of participants. By contrast, the blót analysed here brought together a large gathering distributed across an extensive ritual space and made unusually extensive use of reproduced music throughout the ceremony. Rather than being treated as representative of all contemporary Heathen rituals, this case is approached as an opportunity to examine how music may operate within a large-scale ritual setting and how its presence can become entangled with the organization of ritual time, movement, and continuity. The case therefore offers a useful perspective on the possible roles of reproduced music within contemporary Pagan ritual practice.

3. Pagan Music in Contemporary Neopaganism: Between Identity and Ritual Function

Music commonly described as “pagan” or “neopagan” does not constitute a unified genre or a homogeneous repertoire in the contemporary context. Rather, it refers to a loosely defined field of musical practices that share certain thematic, aesthetic, and symbolic references. These references typically relate to imaginaries of a pre-Christian past, mythological motifs, landscape, or cyclical conceptions of time; however, their concrete musical forms are highly diverse, ranging across popular music, experimental production, and ritual-inspired formats (Weston and Bennett 2014). In scholarly literature, such music is most often analysed as part of broader cultural scenes, within which it functions primarily as a means of self-identification and of articulating affiliation with alternative religious or subcultural milieus (Ezzy 2014).

Within this framework, pagan music is predominantly understood as an identitarian resource. Musical production inspired by pagan themes enables individuals and groups to articulate relationships to notions of tradition, authenticity, or spirituality without necessarily implying direct participation in religious practice. As studies examining the relationship between paganism and popular music have shown, music frequently operates here as a cultural language through which pagan motifs are shared, reinterpreted, and symbolically actualised (Weston and Bennett 2014; Helden 2010). Such approaches, however, tend to overlook situations in which music does not function merely as representation or as an identity marker, but enters directly into the structure of ritual action.

From the perspective of ritual practice, it is significant that contemporary neopagan contexts typically lack a unified liturgical canon or a binding corpus of ritual texts. Aitamurto and Simpson (2013) have pointed to the high degree of variability and situationality characteristic of pagan rituals, whose concrete forms emerge in relation to specific places, communities, and organisational conditions. It is precisely within this open framework that music acquires the potential to function not only as a cultural reference but as a practical tool for organising ritual situations. Music may thus compensate for the absence of a fixed liturgical structure by providing a temporal framework, supporting continuity between ritual phases, and contributing to the organisation of ritual action in situations where participants are distributed across space and ritual activities unfold over extended periods of time.

This shift from a representational to a performative understanding of music resonates with broader approaches in the study of religion and ritual that emphasise what music does rather than what it signifies. As DeNora (2000) has demonstrated, music is capable of shaping temporal perception, organising action, and structuring social situations in ways that often remain implicit to participants themselves. Similar observations have been made in studies of ritual and religious music, where scholars have highlighted music’s capacity to contribute to the organisation of ritual processes, transitions, and forms of

participation without necessarily conveying explicit doctrinal content (Ralls-MacLeod and Harvey 2000). From this perspective, music may be approached not simply as a symbolic representation but as a practical element embedded within the unfolding of ritual action. In ritual settings, repetition, rhythmic regularity, and the continuity of sound can contribute to the maintenance of temporal coherence, particularly in situations where ritual activities are extended in time or dispersed across space. A similar emphasis on process and transition can be found in studies of ritual and religious music. Engelhardt and Bohlman (2016) argue that music frequently accompanies moments of transition and transformation, not merely by expressing religious meanings but by participating in the temporal unfolding of ritual processes. Such perspectives direct analytical attention away from questions of representation and toward the practical ways in which music becomes embedded in ritual action.

Particular attention is warranted regarding musical projects that are widely shared within neopagan environments and repeatedly employed across different communities. Such projects may come to function as a kind of common repertoire, recognisable beyond local contexts and readily integrable into a variety of ritual situations. In these cases, music does not necessarily function as a vehicle of specific theological content but may instead provide a sonic environment that accompanies ritual action and facilitates continuity between different phases of the ceremony.

It is precisely within this context that the work of the group Wardruna has gained prominence in contemporary neopagan environments. In both scholarly literature and actor discourse, Wardruna's music is frequently associated with an emphasis on experience, embodiment, and relationships to landscape, rather than with ambitions to reconstruct historically specific religious practices (Ezzy 2014). In public statements by the creators themselves, it is repeatedly stressed that their music is intended as a means of establishing a relationship to a particular mode of being in the world, rather than as a historical artefact. Analytically, this discourse is significant in that it creates conditions under which Wardruna's music can be integrated into ritual practice without being perceived as a problematic or external element. Such observations resonate with broader discussions of religious music, which emphasise that the ritual significance of music often lies not solely in symbolic representation but in its capacity to become embedded within ritual processes and modes of participation (Ralls-MacLeod and Harvey 2000).

Within neopagan contexts, Wardruna's music is frequently incorporated into ritual settings and appears particularly adaptable to a variety of ceremonial situations. Its significance in such contexts does not necessarily derive from the accurate transmission of historical knowledge or theological content, but from the ways in which it can accompany ritual action and become integrated into the temporal unfolding of ritual processes. As Engelhardt and Bohlman (2016) have argued, music in ritual contexts often acquires importance through its role in mediating transitions and shaping the temporal organisation of ceremonial events. It is this openness and adaptability that make Wardruna a productive case for examining how contemporary music may become embedded in neopagan ritual practice and acquire significance through its situational use rather than through fixed meanings alone.

4. Wardruna and the Interpretation of Its Own Work

From its inception, the musical project Wardruna has been framed by its creators not as an attempt to reconstruct historical religious practices, but as a contemporary musical endeavour inspired by pre-Christian Nordic worldviews, landscape, and cyclical conceptions of time. In interviews and public statements, the project's founder Einar Selvik has repeatedly emphasized that Wardruna does not aim at an "authentic" reproduction of

the past, but rather at creating music that is meaningful in the present and enables listeners to establish a relationship to certain values and modes of experiencing reality (Selvik 2023, 2024). In this framing, the past is not understood as a closed historical horizon, but as a layer that can be repeatedly actualised through experience, sound, and embodied perception.

This approach can be interpreted considering Mircea Eliade's concept of sacred time, in which ritual action does not entail a return to the past in a historical sense, but its re-presentation in the present moment (Eliade 1954). At the same time, it resonates with contemporary debates in memory studies and discussions of deep time. Kennedy and Silverstein (2023) argue that relationships to the past in modern cultural practices cannot be reduced to linear transmission or reconstruction but should instead be understood as engagements with "deep history" that is continually activated and reinterpreted in the present. In this sense, Wardruna's discourse may be interpreted through the notion of the "deep present" proposed by Kennedy and Silverstein (2023), insofar as it presents the past not as a distant historical object but as a resource continually reactivated in the present.

Selvik also explicitly distances his work from popular notions of "Viking music", which he considers reductive and closely tied to contemporary media representations. Instead, he emphasizes a broader cultural and temporal framework that extends beyond the Viking Age to encompass more general pre-Christian worldviews, relationships to nature, and experiences of cyclicity (Selvik 2023). This position is reflected in Wardruna's engagement with historical materials. Runes, early texts, and archaeological finds are not treated as literal instructions or authoritative sources, but as inspirational points of departure that enter dialogue with the present and are reinterpreted within contemporary contexts.

A central element of Selvik's self-reflection is his emphasis on an animistic understanding of the world. According to his statements, Wardruna's music is intended to mediate an experience of reality in which nature is understood as an active and meaningful component of the world rather than as a passive background for human action (Selvik 2023). This perspective is not articulated as a systematic religious doctrine, but as a general orientation toward the world that may also resonate beyond explicitly pagan contexts. In Selvik's account, music is presented as a means through which such a perspective may be explored experientially rather than articulated through systematic doctrine.

This orientation is closely connected to Selvik's emphasis on the material dimension of musical production. His work with traditional instruments, natural materials, and specific sound textures is not merely an aesthetic choice, but part of a creative process in which music emerges in direct relation to materiality, landscape, and physical experience (Selvik 2024). Sound is thus not treated as an abstract musical structure, but as the outcome of interactions between the human body, instruments, and environment. This focus on process and experience further destabilises the boundary between music as an artistic product and music as a medium of experience.

From the perspective of reception within neopagan environments, it is significant that Wardruna is not perceived as an authoritative source of religious meaning, but rather as an open sonic framework that can be integrated into diverse contexts. As analyses of Wardruna's reception and digital circulation suggest, the project occupies a space between popular music, spiritual practice, and environmental aesthetics, addressing audiences with varied motivations and expectations (Ensovoort 2024). It is precisely this openness that allows Wardruna's music to be employed in ritual situations without the need for a unified interpretation of its "meaning".

The discourse articulated by the creators thus establishes a framework within which Wardruna's music may be incorporated into neopagan ritual practice not as a representation of the past, but as a contemporary medium through which relationships to landscape, memory, and pre-Christian cultural imaginaries can be explored. In concrete ritual situations,

however, the meanings associated with the music are shaped by the specific contexts in which it is used. As the analysis of the present case demonstrates, Wardruna's recordings became part of the broader sonic environment of the blót and accompanied several transitions within the ritual process. The significance of the music therefore emerged not only from the intentions of its creators, but also from its situational incorporation into ritual practice.

5. Ása-Samfundet: Institutional Framework and Ritual Cohesion

The empirical and institutional context of the analysed blót is provided by Ása-samfundet, one of the officially registered Pagan religious organizations in Sweden. In its public materials, the organization presents itself as a contemporary form of Ásatrú inspired by pre-Christian Nordic traditions, while explicitly rejecting ethnic or racial interpretations of religion and emphasizing openness and inclusivity (Ása-samfundet 2024).

Ása-samfundet understands Ásatrú not as a project of historical reconstruction, but as a living religious practice that draws inspiration from Old Norse sources, relationships to landscape, and cyclical conceptions of time without treating these sources as normative authorities. The past functions primarily as a source of inspiration that is continually reinterpreted in relation to the needs and circumstances of the present community (Ása-samfundet 2024).

From an organizational perspective, Ása-samfundet operates through a decentralized ritual structure. Blóts are organized at different locations throughout Sweden, most often in natural settings. This decentralization, however, does not imply the absence of ritual continuity. The organization appoints a chief goði responsible for the preparation and training of other ritual leaders, thereby maintaining a shared ritual framework while allowing individual ceremonies to adapt to local environments and situational circumstances.

Ritual continuity is therefore maintained not through a fixed liturgical manual but through the transmission of ritual competence, shared understandings of core principles, and repeated ritual practice. This arrangement enables a balance between flexibility and continuity that is central to Ása-samfundet's self-understanding. The role of the chief goði functions less as a rigid hierarchy than as a mechanism through which ritual knowledge and practice are coordinated across different local contexts.

The annual summer blót analysed here represents one of the largest ritual gatherings organized by Ása-samfundet and brought together participants from different regions of Sweden. It is precisely this combination of decentralized ritual practice and a large-scale gathering that creates conditions in which certain ritual elements—including reproduced music—may acquire particular significance. Rather than functioning primarily as a vehicle of doctrinal content, music has the potential to become integrated into the practical organization of ritual situations, especially where participants are distributed across a large space and ritual activities unfold over an extended period of time.

The following section focuses on a specific blót organized by Ása-samfundet that I attended as part of long-term ethnographic fieldwork. The aim is not immediate interpretation but rather a detailed reconstruction of the ritual's course, spatial organization, and practical logic. The description is based primarily on direct ethnographic observation and contemporaneous field notes, supplemented by contextual information derived from organizational materials and broader fieldwork.

Blót is approached here as a situated practice whose concrete form emerges through the interaction of Ása-samfundet's institutional framework, the material and spatial conditions of the site, and the practical decisions of ritual leaders. This situational perspective is important for the subsequent analysis because it allows for tracing how particular ritual

elements—including music—acquire significance within the specific configuration and unfolding of the ceremony.

6. Site, Spatial Arrangement, and Organizational Framework of the Blót at Rök

The analysed blót took place in southern Sweden, in the region of Östergötland, in the vicinity of the village of Rök. The area is characterized by an open agricultural landscape with extensive fields, sparse settlement, and gently undulating terrain. Spatially, the event was anchored near the runestone known as Rökstenen, one of the most prominent Old Norse monuments in Sweden. Today, the runestone is situated on the edge of the village, directly adjacent to a local Christian church, and forms part of an officially managed historical site that is publicly accessible.

This spatial configuration—a runestone located in immediate proximity to a Christian sacred building—constituted a striking visual frame for the gathering. Although the proximity of the church was not explicitly addressed during ritual action, it was occasionally commented upon in informal conversations among participants and formed part of the broader interpretive landscape surrounding the event. In the field situation itself, however, this symbolic dimension did not manifest as a source of conflict. Rather, it functioned as a silent backdrop that underscored the historical stratification of the landscape in which contemporary ritual practice was taking place.

From an organizational perspective, the gathering was divided between two main locations: a campsite and the ritual site of the blót itself. The campsite was located approximately one kilometre from the ritual area, on a meadow situated below a large parking area serving a nearby grocery store. The store was actively used by participants throughout the event as a form of practical infrastructure. This part of the space was distinctly profane in character and primarily served everyday needs, such as food shopping, meal preparation, rest, and informal social interaction.

The campsite was marked by a high degree of heterogeneity. It included tents styled in historically inspired forms drawing on popular imaginaries of the Viking Age, alongside fully modern camping equipment. Aesthetic elements associated with metal subculture were also prominent, characterized by minimalism, black clothing, and festival-like modes of dwelling. At the same time, many participants displayed no visible stylization at all. These differences did not give rise to tension and were not explicitly commented upon; rather, they produced a diverse and open environment in which multiple modes of participation coexisted without the need for visual or behavioural uniformity.

The spatial organization of the campsite was largely unstructured. Social focal points emerged around shared grills and large tents equipped with beer tables, which served as spaces for meeting, conversation, and spending time together. Informal discussions—including conversations with community members concerning the organization of the blót and its anticipated course—took place alongside routine activities such as pitching tents or preparing food. These interactions were not separated from the everyday rhythm of the gathering but unfolded within it.

The morning of the main day of the event did not have a clearly demarcated beginning. The campsite gradually and unevenly came to life, without formal announcements or time pressure. Participants moved between tents, prepared meals, sat at tables, or made repeated visits to the nearby store. The proximity of everyday infrastructure—road, parking area, and shop—was not problematized; on the contrary, it was accepted as a self-evident part of the environment in which the gathering unfolded. The sacred and the everyday were not spatially separated but coexisted within a shared terrain.

As the morning progressed, time was gradually filled with activities that were not officially designated as “program” yet nonetheless contributed to the rhythm of the gathering. These included a mythology-based game distributed throughout the campsite, a children’s inflatable structure, and skill-based activities such as knife throwing, archery, and the use of paintball markers. These activities were neither time-bound nor interrupted in relation to the approaching blót; instead, they continued seamlessly before and after the ritual. At the same time, a market area gradually developed, with stalls integrated into the broader space and functioning as additional sites of social interaction.

Only shortly before the planned start of the blót did the first unambiguous signal of a shift in the rhythm of the day appear. This signal was not a verbal announcement or a technical instruction, but the sound of drumming. The drumming functioned both as a call to gather and as a means of structuring the transition between the campsite and the ritual site. Ritual leaders assembled and formed the front of a procession, while the drumming continued during the movement itself. The drumming consisted primarily of frame drums producing repetitive rhythmic patterns that remained audible throughout the procession. As the movement progressed, additional participants joined with their own drums, increasing the density of the soundscape and gradually transforming an initially small group into a larger collective procession.

The procession proceeded along an ordinary public road toward the ritual site. The transition covered approximately one kilometre and took place without any demarcation from everyday traffic. Ritual movement thus unfolded directly within the infrastructure of ordinary life rather than outside it. Not all participants moved on foot; some chose to travel by car. This difference was neither thematized nor evaluated, suggesting that the form of movement itself was not understood as carrying intrinsic ritual value, but as a practical aspect of the situation.

The site of the blót consisted of an open grassy area near the runestone. No ritual enclosure was marked, nor were there physical boundaries separating a “sacred” space from the surrounding landscape. Participants gradually gathered around a fire pit, forming a wide and variable circle whose shape and density shifted over the course of the ritual. The surrounding environment—fields, trees, roads, and buildings—remained visible and accessible throughout. The ritual thus took place in a setting where historical memory, contemporary infrastructure, and religious practice intersected without an explicit hierarchy or spatial separation.

This spatial and organizational configuration is central to understanding both the course of the blót itself and the role of music within it. The absence of clearly defined boundaries, the large number of participants, and the dispersed spatial arrangement produced conditions in which ritual coordination could not rely solely on direct verbal communication. Under these circumstances, sonic elements—including drumming during the procession and reproduced music during later phases of the ritual—became particularly visible features of the ceremonial environment. The following section examines how these sonic elements were incorporated into the unfolding of the ritual and what roles they appeared to play within this specific setting.

7. Ritual Leadership, Sound, and the Structuring of the Blót

The blót itself was led by a total of seven ritual leaders (goði/gydja). Four of them—goðar—were positioned within the ritual circle according to the cardinal directions, analogously to the face of a clock, occupying positions corresponding to twelve, three, six, and nine o’clock. Each of these goðar had their own small fire or candle and a set of ritual objects consisting of a large stone Thor’s hammer and a smaller hammer carved from wood.

These goðar were not spatially separated from other participants but stood directly within the circle as its integral components.

In addition to them, two gydjur and a chief goði participated in the ritual, the latter coordinating the overall course of the blót. Visually, the ritual leaders were readily identifiable by their historizing attire inspired by popular imaginaries of the Viking Age. All wore cloaks whose coloured trim indicated levels of ritual competence and authority: red signified the lowest level, purple an intermediate level, and green the cloak of the chief goði.

Immediately prior to the formal beginning of the ritual, the opening tones of the Wardruna composition *Lyfjaberg* were played through loudspeakers. The music sounded only briefly—just a few introductory tones—before being turned off. This moment did not function as a ritual act in a narrow sense, but rather as a sonic transition that alerted those present to a shift in the situational mode. The music was played by one of the founders of the movement, who simultaneously assumed the role of the opening speaker.

This was followed by an introductory address lasting approximately five minutes. The speaker thanked participants for their presence, briefly explained the course of the blót, addressed incidental onlookers, and recalled the continuity and successes of previous gatherings. The function of this introduction was clearly organizational and inclusive: it established a shared frame of understanding without yet entering ritual action proper. Beside the speaker stood an offering table with horns, flowers, and religious symbols, which formed the visual centre of the ritual space.

After the conclusion of the opening address, the founder transferred ritual leadership to the chief goði. At this point, the blót formally began and continued for approximately one hour. The first ritual phase consisted of the consecration of the space. From the four cardinal points, the goðar stepped toward the centre of the circle carrying Thor's hammers and symbolically purified and demarcated the ritual area. This action took place in silence, which contrasted sharply with the earlier informal noise and underscored the transition into a more focused phase of the ceremony.

Prayers addressed to the gods followed, delivered by the ritual leaders. Silence continued to prevail, and participants were generally oriented toward the centre of the circle. While verbal elements were present, their audibility varied depending on spatial position. The ritual therefore unfolded not only through spoken words, but also through gestures, movement, and the broader spatial arrangement of the gathering.

After the prayers, the ritual moved seamlessly into the phase of offering. Mead was poured into horns, and circulation around the circle began. Individual participants approached the horn, pronounced their own toast to the gods, concluded it with the exclamation *heil*, and drank. It was precisely during this extended and potentially fragmenting phase that music again assumed a prominent role. In the background, Wardruna's *Lyfjaberg* was played twice consecutively, followed by the composition *Solringen*.

It was during this extended phase of the ritual that reproduced music became most consistently present. As individual toasts varied in duration and participants were positioned at different distances from the ritual centre, the music provided a continuous sonic backdrop to the unfolding of the ceremony. Rather than interrupting the ritual process, the circulation of the horn, the toasts, and the music became intertwined within a single extended sequence of ritual activity.

Following the completion of the circulation, the chief goði performed the main offering by pouring mead from the horn. This was followed by the sprinkling of participants with saltwater using an oak branch, a task carried out by the gydjur. During this phase, Wardruna's music was again present, this time including the compositions *Rotlaus*, *Tyr*, *Fehu*, and other tracks from the *Runaljod* albums. Music remained present during this phase

of the ritual, accompanying participants' movement through the space and the sequence of actions associated with the sprinkling ritual.

Before the formal closing of the blót, a ritual act took place that exceeded the framework of offerings and toasts and explicitly articulated the internal structure and continuity of ritual authority. In this phase, the chief goði conducted the ritual elevation of two goðar, performed publicly within the blót itself and in the presence of the entire assembly.

The elevation took a distinctly symbolic form. Goðar received new cloaks, whose coloured trim indicated their newly acquired ritual status. The act of bestowing the cloaks was not separated from other ritual actions by a special explanation; instead, it was integrated into the course of the blót as a natural culmination. The hierarchical change was thus not presented as an administrative decision but as part of continuous religious action.

In this context, the role of ritual objects as carriers of authority became particularly apparent. In addition to Thor's hammers used during the consecration of space, nearly all ritual leaders possessed their own ritual staffs decorated with runes. These staffs were not actively employed in every phase of the ritual, but their presence was visually prominent. They functioned as material markers of role and experience, remaining effective even in moments when verbal guidance was not audible to all participants.

From an analytical perspective, this moment can be understood as a key point at which the blót functioned not only as a site of communication with the gods, but also as a space for the reproduction and public confirmation of ritual structure. Authority was not expressed through formal declaration, but through embodied action, material symbols, and their embedding within the ritual frame. The elevation took place in the presence of music, fire, and collective assembly, thereby transforming hierarchical change into a shared experience rather than a separate institutional act.

Only after this act did the chief goði formally close the blót. Immediately thereafter, *Lyfjaberg* was once again played through the loudspeakers, this time louder and without interruption. Here, music did not mark the end of the ritual through a sharp boundary but facilitated a gradual transition from ritual concentration to progressive relaxation. Participants began to engage in individual activities—photographing the runestone, bringing personal offerings to the altar, or engaging in quiet conversations—and gradually dispersed back toward the campsite.

The conclusion of the blót did not take the form of a sharply demarcated ending but rather of a gradual transition into other activities associated with the gathering. Music continued to be audible as participants dispersed through the site, while conversations, individual offerings, and informal interactions gradually resumed. The ritual thus gave way to other forms of social activity without a clear spatial or temporal break. This observation highlights the importance of examining ritual elements—including music—within the specific contexts in which they are employed, rather than treating their significance as inherent or fixed.

8. Music Between Non-Intentionality and Structural Compatibility in Ritual

As noted above, the field data do not allow one to state with certainty that the selection of specific Wardruna tracks during the blót at Rökstenen resulted from an explicitly planned symbolic dramaturgy. Throughout the ritual, the music selection was not commented upon; tracks were neither announced nor explained; and their textual or mythological content was not thematized for participants. Methodologically, it is therefore necessary to avoid interpretations that would attribute to the music a fixed meaning consciously intended by actors.

At the same time, the absence of a declared intention does not entail the absence of an analytically graspable structure of meaning. The ethnographic material shows that Wardruna's music was used repeatedly during the blót and at key transitional moments of the ritual. Its presence coincided with key transitional moments of the ritual and formed a recurring part of the broader sonic environment of the ceremony. This is precisely where an interpretive space opens for approaching music not as a carrier of fixed meaning, but as part of ritual infrastructure—an element whose effects emerge only within a concrete situation.

This approach is consistent with conceptualizations of music as an active agent of social action, as developed by DeNora (2000). In this perspective, music does not function solely as a representation of meaning but may also contribute to the organization of social situations and temporal experience. In ritual contexts, music can be understood as a technology that enables the emergence and maintenance of a specific regime of action—a regime grounded not in explicit comprehension but in shared experience.

It is also important to emphasize that this analytical approach is not in tension with the way Wardruna's creators frame their own work. On the contrary, actor discourse provides a crucial context for understanding why their music is so readily integrated into neopagan rituals.

In public statements, Wardruna's founder Einar Selvik repeatedly stresses that his aim is neither the reconstruction of historical religious practices nor the production of "authentic Viking music". Instead, he explicitly rejects the idea of the past as a closed historical horizon. Music is intended to facilitate a relationship to a particular mode of being in the world—to nature, cyclicity, and experiences of time—and to be meaningful above all in the present (Selvik 2023, 2024).

Selvik further emphasizes that Wardruna is oriented toward effect and experience rather than the transmission of determinate content. In relation to the *Runaljod* albums, for instance, he notes that his ambition is not to "explain the runes", but to "approach them" through sound, material, rhythm, and the creative process. Runes are not treated as a text to be interpreted, but as dynamic principles that can be encountered bodily and affectively (Selvik 2018; Wardruna 2012).

Similarly, when discussing the track *Lyfjaberg*, Selvik explains that it draws on an eddic motif of a healing mountain to which "the sick and wounded" come. Yet the central element is not the myth as such, but the process of journey, exertion, and reciprocity. *Lyfjaberg*, in his account, is a song about the principle that "a gift requires a gift", and that healing, or transformation is not automatic but demands personal engagement (Wardruna 2020).

Analytically, what matters is that this authorial framing does not prioritize correct textual understanding, but the capacity of music to generate a particular field of experience. It is precisely this openness and emphasis on effect that allow Wardruna's music to enter ritual practice without requiring a unified interpretation of its "meaning".

During the blót at Rökstenen, *Lyfjaberg* was played repeatedly and in key phases of the ceremony. Unlike congregational ritual songs, *Lyfjaberg* is a recorded composition performed in Norwegian and built around layered vocal lines, frame drums, and a relatively restrained instrumental texture. The track unfolds gradually, without abrupt climaxes or strong contrasts, relying instead on repetition, sustained sonic textures, and slow rhythmic development. First, only its opening tones were played before ritual speech began; later, the track appeared as sonic background during the ritual; and finally, it was played again loudly at the closing. This repetition establishes *Lyfjaberg* as a stable sonic motif that framed the ritual process.

Considering the authorial interpretation, *Lyfjaberg* can be understood as a musical form of journey and transition. In the ritual context, however, this symbolism was not articulated narratively. The track did not function as a "story" about a healing place, but

as a means of structuring transitions between different regimes of time and action. The brief initial sounding of a few tones operated as a subtle signal of a shift in the day's rhythm—not a dramatic beginning, but a gradual retuning of attention. Likewise, the final reappearance of the track did not close the ritual through a sharp cut; rather, it enabled a gradual dissolution of ritual intensity and a return to profane space.

This mode of framing can be interpreted in relation to Eliade's concept of sacred time, which is not separated from profane time by an absolute boundary, but is constituted through repetition, return, and transition (Eliade 1954). It can also be read alongside the concept of the "deep present" as formulated by Kennedy and Silverstein (2023): here the past is not reconstructed but activated as a present layer of experience through sound, body, and situation.

Crucially, this effect is not contingent on knowledge of the lyrics or mythological background of the track. Even participants unfamiliar with the meaning of *Lyfjaberg* were exposed to its structuring influence. This supports the argument that the significance of music in this ritual context emerges primarily at the level of effect rather than interpretation. Music does not require comprehension to function; its efficacy lies in sustaining the ritual frame in time and space.

Whereas *Lyfjaberg* primarily framed transitions and stabilized ritual time, tracks from the *Runaljod* trilogy entered the ritual during its central phases—during the offering, the circulation of the horn, and the sprinkling of participants with saltwater. It is in these moments that Wardruna's music most clearly appears not as an illustration of meaning, but as part of ritual infrastructure capable of carrying and sustaining ritual authority under conditions of high spatial and social complexity.

As in the case discussed above, *Runaljod* was conceived as a musical engagement with runes rather than their interpretation. Runes are not treated as a code to be deciphered, but as dynamic principles that can be "approached" through sound, rhythm, material, and the creative process (Selvik 2018). Music is meant to enable experience rather than to deliver a message. This orientation is essential for understanding why tracks from *Runaljod* can be ritually functional even in the absence of explicit interpretation.

In the analysed blót, runic symbolism was present not only through music, but also materially. Nearly every goði carried a personal staff decorated with runes, functioning as a sign of ritual competence and authority. These staffs were not explicitly explained or interpreted during the ritual; their significance was implicit and shared through practice. In this context, music from *Runaljod* can be understood as an acoustic analogue to these material symbols: just as runic staffs visualize ritual authority, music "distributes" it across space and time.

The track *Fehu*, inspired by runic poetry and thematizing the ambivalent nature of wealth and possession, accompanied the phase in which the offering horn circulated around the circle. Compared to *Lyfjaberg*, *Fehu* is more rhythmically pronounced. Repetitive percussion patterns occupy a central position, while vocal lines and instrumental textures are layered around a persistent pulse. The composition creates a sense of continuity through repetition rather than through melodic development or narrative progression. Selvik repeatedly emphasizes that *Fehu* does not celebrate wealth as an unequivocally positive value but works with its ambiguity and its potential to generate both cohesion and conflict (Selvik 2022). In the ritual context, however, this thematic content was not explicitly articulated. Participants approached the horn sequentially, delivered personal toasts to the gods, and shared the drink in a process that was time-consuming and spatially uneven. It was here that the infrastructural function of music became most visible: *Fehu* provided a stable sonic background that sustained collective attention even when ritual action unfolded in sequence and with pronounced temporal gaps.

In this sense, the music did not transmit the “meaning” of *Fehu* as a rune. Rather, it produced conditions under which the ritual could continue without collapsing into profane waiting. As Bell (1992) argues, ritualization involves, among other things, the production of difference—the separation of a particular mode of action from ordinary time and space. Here, music operated as one of the primary instruments of such ritualization, helping to maintain the situation as “ritual” even while participants occupied different stages and intensities of involvement.

Another track played during the blót was *Solringen*. Selvik interprets it as a contemporary actualisation of ideas associated with the summer solstice, inspired by practices in which singing, and movement “awakened” forces of the landscape and secured fertility (Selvik 2022). *Solringen* thus thematizes cyclical time, relationships to landscape, and the entanglement of human action with more-than-human agents. In the context of a summer blót at Rökstenen—performed in the open agricultural landscape of Östergötland—the track appeared meaningfully compatible even though intentional seasonal programming cannot be demonstrated. Again, the analytically relevant question is not intention but effect. Given its thematic association with seasonal cycles and relationships to landscape, *Solringen* appeared broadly compatible with the setting of a summer blót performed in an open agricultural landscape. Whether this correspondence played a role in the selection of the track cannot be established from the available data.

Other *Runaljod* tracks, including *Rotlaust tre fell*, sounded primarily during the sprinkling of participants with saltwater and the use of an oak branch. These actions were strongly material and embodied and were not accompanied by extensive verbal commentary. Music here functioned as a binder between ritual acts and helped maintain their continuity.

From the perspective of ritual theory, this function can be understood as a form of bodily memory in Connerton’s sense. The repeated use of the same recordings across ritual settings raises broader questions concerning repetition, familiarity, and ritual continuity, themes that have been discussed in studies of ritual memory (Connerton 1989). It is precisely the repeatability of Wardruna’s tracks across different rituals and communities that contributes to their becoming part of a shared sonic repertoire of contemporary neopaganism.

Particular attention should be paid to the fact that music from *Runaljod* sounded within a ritual that was also a site of explicit articulation of ritual hierarchy. Cloaks with different colours, the elevation of two goðar, and the presence of the chief goði as an authority were visible manifestations of structured power within the community. Music did not operate as an instrument of this hierarchy, but as its acoustic background, enabling authority to be perceived as continuous and uninterrupted.

The coexistence of ritual hierarchy, material symbols, and reproduced music illustrates how different elements of the ceremony became embedded within a shared ritual framework. Music did not function as an explicit expression of authority, but formed part of the broader ceremonial environment within which hierarchical distinctions were publicly enacted.

9. Conclusions

The analysis of the summer blót at Rökstenen demonstrates that music occupied a prominent position within the ritual and was repeatedly incorporated into key phases of the ceremony. Rather than functioning solely as a carrier of symbolic or textual meaning, music formed part of the broader material and sensory environment through which the ritual unfolded. The ethnographic observations presented here suggest that the significance of music cannot be understood exclusively through reference to lyrics, mythological themes,

or authorial intentions, but must also be examined in relation to the specific contexts in which it is used.

In the case analysed here, reproduced music accompanied several different phases of the ritual, including the opening of the ceremony, the circulation of the offering horn, the sprinkling ritual, and the gradual conclusion of the blót. Its recurring presence provided a degree of continuity across ritual phases that differed considerably in duration, form, and spatial organization. In a large gathering where participants occupied different positions within the ritual space, music constituted one of several elements through which ritual activities became linked across time and space.

The analysis further suggests that the ritual use of music cannot be reduced to questions of symbolism or textual content alone. During the blót, musical recordings were neither explained nor interpreted, and their incorporation into the ceremony did not depend on explicit discussion of their meanings. This observation highlights the importance of considering not only what music may represent, but also how it becomes embedded within ritual practice and how it interacts with other ritual elements, including movement, material objects, spatial arrangements, and organizational structures.

At the same time, the case illustrates the importance of technological mediation in contemporary Pagan ritual settings. The music used during the blót was reproduced through loudspeakers rather than performed live, yet this form of mediation did not appear to generate tension or require explicit justification. Instead, recorded music formed part of the practical organization of the event and coexisted with other ritual elements, including live drumming during the procession, ritual objects, spoken invocations, and offerings.

The blót at Rökstenen can therefore be understood as an example of how music may become integrated into contemporary Pagan ritual practice beyond questions of representation, identity, or historical reconstruction. Its significance emerged not from any inherent property of particular compositions, but from the ways in which those compositions were incorporated into a specific ritual setting. In this respect, shifting analytical attention from what music means to how it is used within ritual contexts offers a productive perspective for the study of the sonic dimensions of contemporary Paganism.

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