

## Toward a Theory of Pre-industrial European Folk Ritual: The Case of Polish *Wigilia*

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The practice of Christianity throughout European history has been an interaction of popular belief and hierarchical prescription. While church powers influenced governing structures and established legal authority, everyday customs—often leftovers from pagan practice—frequently held more sway in the lives of ordinary people. The makeup of this folk belief for any particular culture, village or family must be examined as a mix of pre-Christian survivals and Christian appropriation. Why did certain pagan practices take such firm hold, weathering the imposition of Christianity? Why did certain Christian practices and beliefs resonate with people so as to merit inclusion in their everyday lives? On a fundamental level, the root of the study of popular belief is a matter of determining what benefit people perceived in the practice of particular customs. Whether for functional, aesthetic, spiritual or other motives, the popular customs of pre-industrial Europeans survived because of their perceived value to their practitioners.

This study seeks to examine the popular customs of pre-industrial Poland,<sup>1</sup> in particular the festal food customs of the *Wigilia* supper, the primary ritual of the winter (Christmas) season. I will investigate these customs using some of the tools provided by scholars in the field of Ritual Studies. However, such an enterprise is not without its problems. This study will address the question of whether methods structured around the live observation of practice can be applied to a historical, and thus non-observable, ritual. The ramifications of conducting the study of ritual practice on historical customs are various. Some historical insight may be gained, but some methodology must be lost and compromises made. We must frame historical ritual differently than contemporary ritual. Reconstructing rituals of the past requires a modified methodological approach. After examining the implications of these modifications, this study will use ritual theory—reconceived for the examination of historical ritual—to study the aforementioned food rituals of pre-industrial Poland. This new

framework of historical Ritual Studies will allow us to piece together the known *Wigilia* customs of the past into a unified ritual, to determine why certain elements, whether pagan survivals or Christian adoptions, persisted among historical Poles, and to speculate on what the elements of this ritual tell us about the everyday concerns and motivations of pre-industrial people.

### **The Study of Historical Rituals**

Scholars in the field of Ritual Studies prize the “text” of observable practice over that of written doctrine. In the study of popular belief, this focus on practice over doctrine can be particularly useful. Any investigation of historical European folk belief will quickly reveal that the practices of ordinary people had only limited connections with prescribed Christian doctrine. However, most of the gains made by scholars of ritual have been achieved through the observation of live practice—a methodological impossibility for the scholar of historical ritual. In many respects, Ritual Studies is built upon the foundation of scholarly presence. By observing spatial environment and action, by questioning participants, by seeing, hearing, and smelling, the scholar of Ritual Studies can capture and decipher those dimensions of ritual practice that written doctrine overlooks. Considering that Ritual Studies is a field predicated on live observation, do its methods have any use for historians? Can ritual practice of the past benefit from the insights uncovered by contemporary observers? We will find that the task of discovering a ritual’s “text” of practice differs vastly in character when perceived historically.

Contemporary scholar of ritual, Ronald Grimes, recognizes the importance of creating a “text” of practice. He argues in *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* that “[i]f we are to understand a rite adequately, the first prerequisite is as full a description as possible” (25). Throughout his second chapter, “Mapping the Field of Ritual,” Grimes outlines the task of arriving at this “full description” by providing a copious number of sample questions and by suggesting avenues to follow and angles to consider. These questions, he assures the scholar of ritual, are not a stone-carved method, but rather “demand constant modification” and “reformulation” (25) depending on the ritual to which they are applied. It would follow, then, that they could be so adjusted for use in “mapping” a historical ritual.

Looking at Grimes’ opening questions through a historian’s lens, we already see the differences between a “full description” of

contemporary and of historical rituals. Taking his first question under the heading of “Ritual Space” and applying it to the investigation of pre-industrial *Wigilia* rituals is straightforward enough: “Where does the ritual enactment occur—indoors, outdoors, in a randomly chosen place, in a special place?” (26). In the case of *Wigilia* suppers and other meal rituals, they typically occurred in the homes of Poles, and specifically seated around the supper table. However, when we meet Grimes’ follow-up questions, the limitations of historical data become clear: “If the place is constructed, what resources were expended to build it? Who designed it? What traditions or guidelines, both practical and symbolic, were followed in building it? What styles of architecture does the building follow or reject?” (26). At first glance, the historian is likely tempted to resolve these questions with further research. Archeological data, if available, of peasant home-building, including materials and techniques, may reveal some useful insights into the ritual space of meals. But the historian lacks live contact with the people and locations involved. We cannot ask the Polish farmer who built any specific dwelling whether he had meal rituals in mind when designing and constructing the room, or even the table; whether he built rooms and furniture to accommodate a specific number of people for holiday occasions, everyday meals, or both; whether he considered seasonal food storage demands when constructing a pantry; whether he planned the dimensions of the room where holiday and/or everyday suppers were served in order to permit certain ranges of movement or space for ritual accessories; whether he sanctified the building of the house, room or furniture with any offerings or rituals.<sup>2</sup> Grimes’ questions may prompt the historian of folk customs to do research into details he might not otherwise have thought to explore. But the most that the historian will likely be able to adduce is how peasant houses were typically built, or what traditions were generally followed. At worst, the historian will find isolated cases, with no way of determining whether such practices were widespread.

Moreover, the historian who uses any materials but the most comprehensive surviving collections of artifacts will not be able to discover “exceptions to the rule” or customs in the minority. While most people might have celebrated festal meals in their homes, others might have had the meal outside or in a common building with neighbors—or perhaps in a location that we as twenty-first century scholars would not even think to consider. While it may have been a very common practice throughout Poland to mark off the space of

the ritual meal by standing *snopy*, or “bundles of wheat, rye, or oats in one or in all the corners of the main room where the *Wigilia* meal was to be eaten” (Knab 35), the custom likely had variation. Did most people put the *snopy* in every corner, or in one corner, or were these variances evenly practiced? Questions over regional variances, types of grain used, convenience of use and ascribed ritual significance may occur to the scholar. While the historian’s research may very well provide answers to any one of these questions, it is unlikely that the research will provide answers to all, or even most of these questions. The scholar of contemporary Ritual Studies practices his craft by seeking answers to such questions in his ethnographic research and participant interviews. The historian of ritual finds answers to these types of questions only through accidents of historical survival. The details of ritual uncovered by the historian are most likely bequeathed to him by a law of averages: he works with the customs of the majority, discovers typical folk beliefs, and where variances occur, most often cannot assign them to specific meanings or contexts.

The historian of ritual must also consider the implications of emic vs. etic perspectives (i.e. the perspective of insider participants versus outsider observers) of the ritual he seeks to reconstruct and analyze. Few historians of pre-modern ritual are lucky enough to find extensive accounts of their ritual, detailed contemporaneously by a traveler from the opposite side of the country, continent, or even the world. In the case of Polish food rituals, most of the primary sources and later ethnographic studies were written by fellow Poles. While the distance of nineteenth and twentieth century studies do provide some measure of etic perspective, the most etic of primary sources for Polish festal food rituals amount to legal statutes or accounts of rural customs encountered and written down by literate city dwellers who likely practiced some version of the ritual themselves.<sup>3</sup> While the historian of ritual can certainly flex his interpretive muscle in analyzing the facts of historical practice, he should also be aware that the ritual he reconstructs on the basis of contemporaneous accounts will be emically slanted. In other words, he will likely not be privy to finer nuances that an etic observer, trained in the modern tradition of scholarship, would notice. In their essay, “Consumption Rituals of Thanksgiving Day,” Melanie Wallendorf and Eric J. Arnould uncover emically-invisible trends in Thanksgiving meal rituals among contemporary Americans. Live ethnographic observation allows them to notice, for example, the commonality of forgetting among the house-

holds observed (539-40). The participants in Thanksgiving rituals, they observe, view forgetting to make or serve certain food items as an anomalous occurrence. Etic field study by the researchers and their assistants, however, reveals that the forgetting of particular meal items is a frequent occurrence among various households—allowing the authors to argue that it is a regular component of the ritual, working to reinforce the central expression of abundance. Observations of this type—in many ways a cornerstone of modern Ritual Studies and ethnographic fieldwork—are impossible by the nature of a historical ritual in all but the rarest cases. Since the sources of research in historical ritual are most often emic, historians endeavoring to apply the methods of Ritual Studies must accept and acknowledge these limitations. The emically-invisible elements of ritual, a dynamic dimension of Ritual Studies research, will often be inaccessible to the historian.

Even when it is possible for the researcher to ask field-work-style questions of the still-living participants of historical rituals, the historian would be wise to regard the resulting data cautiously. In an effort to speculate on answers to the sort of questions not attested in historical sources, I have conducted interviews with older Polish-Americans who practiced survivals of these *Wigilia* customs in the households of their newly immigrated Polish parents in the first half of the twentieth century. In one case, I conducted interviews—at separate times and locations—with three sisters raised by the same parents in the same household, each only fifteen months younger than the next in succession. When asked about the *oplatek*—an unconsecrated bread wafer broken among participants at a *Wigilia* ritual—one recalled that the *oplatek* came in many pastel colors (pink, blue, yellow, etc.), another recalled that the package of *oplatki* always came with a single pink wafer among many white ones, and the third recalled only white wafers. Not only do these interviews point out the ravages of time on the memory of sources removed from the moment of inquiry, but also the generalizing tendency of memory. Let us imagine, for a moment, that there is a scenario under which the memories of all three sisters are correct: the eldest sister (third interviewed) never saw a colored *oplatek* while living at home; the year she moved out to get married the local *oplatek* maker decided to try producing several colors, remembered only by the middle sister because the youngest was sick with the flu and unable to sit down to dinner; after the multi-colored experiment the local *oplatek* maker decided to simplify his job and produce a single pink *oplatek* per package among white. This is

most likely a fictional scenario, admittedly: other interviews corroborate the “pink among white” package of *oplatki*. But if indeed such a peculiar anomaly had occurred among Polish-American *oplatek* producers during the early twentieth century, such particularism would be lost in the memories of the Stefanski sisters.

Being unable to sit down to *Wigilia* supper with the Stefanski family during the years of the sisters’ youth, I cannot say for certain who is remembering the *oplatki* correctly or if the *oplatki* changed from year to year. I also asked each of these sisters, as well as other interviewees, whether the design imprinted on the *oplatki* was the same from year to year. All of the sources interviewed said that they could not remember specifics, only that the imprints were holy pictures, such as the nativity scene, the cross or the Virgin Mary. Wallendorf and Arnould also noticed a tendency among Thanksgiving celebrants interviewed to universalize the family traditions of their memory, generalizing their traditions of past Thanksgivings under the rubric of “always” and resisting questions about the changes that might have happened from one year to the next (Wallendorf and Arnould 544). Even when misremembering is not at issue, many sources of historical ritual are not simply emic, but grounded in memory. The consequence of using testimony as a historical source is the fact that memory produces a generalized view of the past, and this prohibits the sort of particularistic findings discovered by scholars observing contemporary ritual.

With his lengthy lists of suggested questions for fieldwork, Grimes points out some limitations for historical application. However, with some adaptive creativity, as Grimes recommends, the historian can bend these questions to his research. What is more, he may discover new avenues of research by pondering these questions. By looking at what anthropologists and scholars of Ritual Studies can discover with the freedom of live observation and field study, the historian can imagine new dimensions in his ritual of focus, searching out historical sources—whether textual or material—he might otherwise not have thought to explore. In other words, in attempting to replicate for historical rituals what field-researchers find in contemporary rituals, the historian will achieve a more complete reconstruction, and thus a more integrated analysis, of historical rituals. The concern over emic vs. etic perspective can be resolved similarly. Historical research may have limitations when it comes to uncovering the emically-invisible aspects of practice and ritual, but such findings are possible.

Scholars of medieval European folk custom have had no shortage of evidence in arguing that people practiced pagan survivals next to Christian rites without realizing or being bothered by contradiction, as would a schooled churchman. In accepting the task of historical Ritual Studies, the scholar must acknowledge that his job is not neatly equivalent to that of contemporary Ritual Studies. The historian will, in most cases, encounter many more limits to his inquiry. However, the methods of anthropology and of Ritual Studies can undoubtedly create a richer understanding of historical cultures than the practice of more traditional text-centered history alone.

### **Some Aspects of *Wigilia* Supper**

The methods of historical anthropology and of Ritual Studies are well-suited to the investigation of pre-industrial European folk practice. Where official rituals of the Catholic Church have been codified throughout their history by Scriptural precedent and the pronouncements of Church Councils and edicts from Catholic authorities, the practices associated with folk rituals, such as the *Wigilia* supper in Poland, stem from a variety of sources. When examining the components of folk ritual, the historian observes a different dynamic of change than is present in the ritual prescribed by official Church institutions. Without Church or other central authorities to prescribe ritual, we must wonder what sources folk rituals draw from in determining custom and practice, why some customs survive while others are forgotten after a period of active practice, and how these rituals are negotiated by their participants. Looking at the accounts of both contemporary observers and early ethnographers is the only way to apprehend a historical folk ritual with any success.

By investigating the customs associated with *Wigilia* supper, I hope to answer some of the questions posed above by examining selected aspects of the pre-industrial *Wigilia* ritual in order to speculate on its significance for participants; the conclusions of this study should find applicability to pre-industrial European folk ritual more generally. The origins of *Wigilia* practices are various. Many are pagan survivals—some of which acquired a later Christian layer of meaning; still others follow Catholic institutional prescription. Individual customs in this folk ritual survive across time due primarily to their utility. Participants continued to practice certain customs because they found them useful, meaningful, or simply convenient. This hypothesis can be seen in opposition to modern first-world folk cus-

toms where survival is facilitated by other factors such as nostalgia, ethnic performance, and in some cases advertisement and even legislation. While some pre-industrial European folk customs might have survived due to simple duplication from one year to the next, in many cases, customs that had lost their utility were ultimately discarded at a time when participants ceased to find reason for their practice. Determining precise dates for when certain customs were practiced and when their practice ceased is a more complicated, perhaps impossible, procedure. Additionally, certain customs were practiced in selected regions at specific times. As I discussed previously, the study of historical ritual must rely on a generalized picture of its practices. However, by looking at certain widespread customs practiced by pre-industrial Poles, I hope to show that customs survived, often from ancient roots, because the participants saw utility and meaning in keeping them.

I am not primarily concerned in this study with the task of identifying some customs as pagan and others as Christian. Attempting to throw each custom into either a pagan barrel or a Christian barrel creates, at best, an artificial distinction. Linda Ivanits, in her survey *Russian Folk Belief*, points out that “one cannot make direct connections between particular notions of the nineteenth-century peasant and the pagan of, say, tenth century Rus’! Over the centuries ancient beliefs and rituals acquired many additional layers, and it is often difficult to determine what is a later accretion and what is truly ancient” (5). In reality, most folk customs demonstrate a blending of pagan and Christian elements which cannot be fully extricated from one another. However, in arguing that certain customs in late medieval and early modern Poland have a centuries-old record of folk survival, it is useful to identify pagan—and thus more likely older—elements that may inform these customs. Ivanits agrees that later, ethnographically documented “agricultural rituals... provide a valuable, if circuitous, route to... paganism” (5) and while not-Christian does not always correspond to pre-Christian, it is unlikely that folk customs in widespread practice across Poland—lacking in centralized authorization, Christian or otherwise—had a spontaneous or recent genealogy. Jan Bystroń, for instance, details the slow progression of the *choinka* or “Christmas tree” custom into Poland from Germany. The appearance of *rózgi*, or small decorated rods, appeared in Pomorze starting in the eighteenth century; Christmas trees came into use only in the nineteenth century among Poles of German descent, spreading

throughout Poland by the twentieth century (42).

Folk belief does not make rapid movements. Once appropriated for use by a large number of people in a pre-industrial culture, a folk custom has already shown both its use and its “staying power.” Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev make a similar observation about folk culture, specifically folk art and literature. Folktales, in contrast to written literature, do not leap into existence overnight; rather they travel through a lengthy process of retelling, recombination, and reappropriation (32-46). Certain folktales survive only because they are heard and told again, and they only come into prominence in a certain culture when they navigate this process of telling and retelling across a larger population. The authors compare folklore to language in this respect. The state of folklore—just as the state of colloquial speech—in a certain culture is not identical to its predecessors, but it has been shaped from its sources by the people who use it. What is more, “in folklore only those forms will be preserved that prove functional for a given community” (36). In this way, folk customs that can be tied to sources of popular creativity, rather than an apparatus of authority such as the Church, bespeak a long history and a socially-judged value. It is useful, then, in a number of instances to identify pagan folk-meanings and sources in the practices of the *Wigilia* ritual in order to argue survival from an earlier time, even if it is impossible to pinpoint precisely how early its origins are.

Modern scholars of food and consumption find that the source of food—both its origin (foraged in the woods? grown in the fields? bought at the supermarket?) and preparation (who prepares the food? mother in the house? chef in the restaurant?)—for particular meals, festive and everyday, is of central importance to understanding a meal. Sociologist Roy C. Wood has observed, for example, that women may act as food preparers, but give priority to male food preferences, exposing the power dynamics of the household (47). Wallendorf and Arnould observe that a traditionally gendered division of labor is reinforced by contemporary Thanksgiving Day food rituals. Women, for the most part, obtain food and prepare the meal, leaving only the duties of carving and presenting the symbolic “hunted” bird to the men (546).

Likewise, *Wigilia* supper in pre-industrial Poland was most likely prepared by women. This is not, however, a foregone conclusion. It is a detail often taken for granted, and thus left unmentioned, by the descriptions of many Polish ethnographers cited in this study.

It is tempting to presume that women prepared the *Wigilia* meal, as food preparation is traditionally considered women's work. My interviews with Polish Americans who practiced *Wigilia* with immigrant parents early in the twentieth century reveal that mothers typically prepared *Wigilia* meals, sometimes with the help of sisters. One respondent reported that her mother was so central to *Wigilia* celebrations that their family ceased to celebrate this supper after the mother's early death. However, gender roles in food preparation are not historical universals. Elsewhere in pre-industrial Europe, women were sometimes excluded from the task of food preparation. In the manor houses of medieval England, men exclusively dominated every rank of the household staff, including the kitchen departments, and it was not until the sixteenth century that servant populations became dominated by females (Woolgar 202). Lower class city and country households in England, however, did rely on females for basic household tasks, including food preparation.<sup>4</sup> In Tadeusz Seweryn's collection of *Staropolska Grafika Ludowa*,<sup>5</sup> we can see that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Polish women were depicted in all manner of food preparation, including churning butter and milking cows (83, 88-9). We even see a woman tending to potatoes over the fire in a manor-house kitchen (83). Krystyna Bockenheim recalls a legend purporting to date back to the ninth century where the wife of early Polish King Piast prepared a meal for prestigious guests including Slavic Christianizers, Saints Cyril and Methodius (6). Despite the exclusion of their medieval English counterparts from the manor kitchen, the evidence suggests that Polish women—peasant and gentry—bore the responsibility for preparing meals, both on special occasions and every day.<sup>6</sup>

Does the woman's role of food preparer in pre-industrial Poland reinforce power dynamics in the household and does her preparation of *Wigilia* food reinforce gender roles? Clearly, there was a division of labor within the pre-industrial Polish household, even on *Wigilia* day: "Przez cały dzień wigilijny zachowywano ścisły post, tylko mężczyznom ciężko pracującym gotowano w południe żur z grochem" (Ginalska 89).<sup>7</sup> The man's brief exemption from the *Wigilia* day fast may point to a privileging of his role over that of the woman's. His work on *Wigilia* day earns him a reprieve from fasting, a reprieve delivered to him directly by the woman's efforts of food preparation. His reward necessitates her work. It may be that this priority given to the man on *Wigilia* day represented an imbalance of

household power, though the subtleties of gender performance are among those emically-invisible aspects of ritual that are poorly preserved by historical record. Nonetheless, I would argue physical necessity to be a more significant culprit. He does not garner the reward of a hearty meal, only of pea soup. These are not the contemporary American men observed by Wallendorf and Arnould, sitting on the couch watching football while women make the meal. In the case of Thanksgiving, as discussed by Wallendorf and Arnould, men and women perform gender roles to a degree often more pronounced than in everyday life. I have found no evidence to suggest that the gender roles performed on *Wigilia* day by pre-industrial Poles represented any significant difference from the gender roles occupied any other day of the year. The Polish man's work on *Wigilia* day was part of the exhaustive preparations for *Wigilia* evening, preparations believed by the participants to ensure, not simply food for the holiday meal, but nourishment for the entire year (Knab 30-1).<sup>8</sup>

Obtaining and preparing food were the central occupations of most people in pre-industrial societies. Raymond Firth observes the cultural centrality of food in his discussion of pre-industrial Pacific peoples in the mid-twentieth century. The obtaining of food directly from natural resources occupied the time and attention of men, women and children alike (243-6). While gendered division of labor was certainly part of this dynamic, the sense of importance in obtaining and preparing food was a common goal. Likewise, the food takes center stage in the *Wigilia* ritual. Male and female members might have taken on different roles in getting that food to the table, but the endpoint was a shared endeavor. The gender roles reinforced by the division of labor in pre-industrial Europe had less *ritual* meaning than in modern-day meal rituals observed by scholars. The simple origin of the food (i.e. buying from the supermarket) in contemporary Thanksgiving Day rituals, according to Wallendorf and Arnould, is not of central ritual importance, and is a point even of ritual shame; its true origins are hidden by the swift disposal of commercial packaging, its name-brand masked by the pretensions of "home-made" foods (547-8). There is no question in this modern American ritual of whether there will be food—though there may be a question of whether the men will help with the dishes (546). Just as the performance of group and individual identities in contemporary American Thanksgiving meals preempts concerns over whether there will be food on the ta-

ble, the occupation of obtaining and preparing food eclipses the ritual significance attributable to gender roles at *Wigilia* supper. While men and women clearly performed gendered roles in preparation for *Wigilia* supper, the preoccupation with the basic attainment of food took center stage.

To draw a line between the food rituals of contemporary first-world cultures—such as the Thanksgiving ritual studied by Wallendorf and Arnould—and the food rituals of pre-industrial, specifically European cultures, I turn once more to the theories of Grimes. He identifies six “Modes of Ritual,” which he defines as “not so much types of ritual as sensibilities, or embodied attitudes, that may arise in the course of a ritual” (40). While many of these modes, according to Grimes, may be contained in one ritual, rituals may be dominated by one or the other. Using Wallendorf’s and Arnould’s description of Thanksgiving Day meals, I would see its dominant modes according to Grimes’ scheme as “Decorum” (described by Grimes as “interpersonal” and “expected”) and “Celebration” (named by Grimes as “expressive” and “festive”) (57). While the pre-industrial Polish ritual of *Wigilia* may not exclude these modes, I see “Magic”—characterized by anxiety over desired goals, involving causal rites such as healing, fertility and divination—as the dominant Grimesian mode present in *Wigilia* rituals (48-50, 57). Magic plays a minor, if any, role in modern first-world food rituals, such as American holiday feasts, but it was a dominating force in medieval and early modern European ritual due to major cultural and technological differences. “[T]he terrible insecurity of daily life created an unquenchable demand for ritual, for rituals that assisted fertility, succored the afflicted, eased grief. ... Rituals brought the cosmic order into daily life by giving persons access to divine power” (Muir 15-16). For the pre-industrial Pole, *Wigilia* supper and its surrounding rites bore the ritual significance of life and death. The Thanksgiving rituals observed by Wallendorf and Arnould had only a vestigial connection to future food supply and the modern American participants were not concerned with starving over the next year. For participants in the historical *Wigilia*, however, the coming year’s food supply and the health of the household and family were acutely at stake.

#### **Divination and Preventative Magic**

Most of the rites practiced during *Wigilia* supper, and before or after it on *Wigilia* day, show a primary concern with the fate of the

household and its members in the coming year. The stakes of life and death, fertility and sterility, were high for the pre-industrial peasant. Ivanits discusses the utility of similar customs in the Russian context: “One thing is certain: the Russian pagan and his nineteenth century descendent were both farmers whose primary concerns were fertility and bounty. When the harvest failed, the peasant went hungry or, worse, starved” (5). While, over time, the customs of the pagan sometimes proved amenable to Christian meaning, their usefulness to the pre-industrial peasant did not necessitate a Christian symbolism. Rather, new Christian layers of meaning only served to legitimize pre-existing customs:

[N]o matter what the priest said or the canons of the church decreed, the laity seemed to have had a very pragmatic attitude toward ritual that led them to try whatever worked best, making few distinctions between the august rites of the liturgy and the more humble practices they could perform themselves. (Muir 16)

The laity of pre-industrial Poland believed that *Wigilia* night was a time of active spiritual powers: both Christian and natural powers. They believed that nature would recognize the night of Christ’s birth with manifestations of spiritual potency impossible other times of the year, including the ability of animals to speak human languages, the self-transformation of water into wine or honey, stones moving in their beds, trees and flowers blossoming despite the time of year, and that water had healing properties (Bystroń 42; Ginalska 87; Knab 30, 40). While the water into wine certainly has its Christian overtones, it is likely that the spiritual power of this night did not originate with belief in the birth of Christ. Folk beliefs concerning animals, both livestock and wild, likely had a pagan lineage, since the health of one’s livestock and the danger from forest beasts would have been of particular concern to peasants, even before Christianization. Ivanits notices a similar grafting of Christian beliefs onto pagan ones in the Russian tradition; the duties of watching over livestock and controlling forest wolves—duties attended to in pagan belief by the god Volos and the *leshii*, or forest spirit—were reassigned to Saints George and Nicholas (26-9). Wild animals, especially wolves, also played a role in *Wigilia* night. Poles believed that inviting forest wolves to take part in the supper by eating select *Wigilia* leftovers would help ensure a prosperous year, perhaps with specific interest in

protection from predators and calamities (Bystroń 42).

Indeed, *Wigilia* was believed, by pre-industrial Poles, to be ripe for omens, divination, and protective magic because of its spiritual potency. *Wigilia* day was used as a time for visiting neighbors and friends (Bystroń 40). The first visitor of the day was believed to foretell luck for the next year. In some regions, a woman visitor foretold misfortune and a male good luck; in other regions a female visitor was sought after. The gender of the first visitor could also be taken as an indication of the gender of calves born to the farmstead in the coming year (Knab 30). Divinations also took place at supper, such as the candle smoke ritual; family members would blow out a candle flame and the direction of the smoke would tell of health (up) or illness (toward the door) for the coming year (40).

*Wigilia* was, essentially, a landmark day for the pre-industrial Pole—a day where the past and coming year were considered. Not all indicators of the next year's fate were out of the feaster's hands. They had significantly more control over, for example, numerically-based magic. The number of feasters, for instance, around the *Wigilia* table held not only the power for divination, but also for preventative magic. An odd number of feasters was believed to indicate ill fortune or death for one of the feasters in the coming year. In some regions, an equal number of male and female feasters (and thus an even number total) was desirable according to the belief that the extra person of their gender would not marry (Ginalska 88; Knab 36). It is not the particular number (odd vs. even), in this instance, that holds weight, because folk belief called conversely for an odd number of dishes to be served (Ginalska 88; Knab 39), but rather the fact that the feasters had a way to control the magic believed to be afoot during *Wigilia*. As Edward Muir said (qtd. above), the rituals of pre-industrial Europe gave ordinary people access to divine power, and thus some measure of control over the "cosmic order" by means of certain practices they could perform themselves (16). It is this "hands-on" magic that seems most effective, and thus of greater utility to the pre-industrial peasant. An odd number of dishes could easily be ensured by those preparing the meal and an even number of feasters led to the incorporation of additional guests, even beggars, just to get the desired number around the table. The stakes were high in the lives of these pre-industrial peasants, and so they found numerically-based magic useful, perceiving that it could help them avoid the inherent dangers of their lives.

These customs of numerically-based magic did not survive among the Polish Americans I interviewed, despite their contentions of poverty. One respondent insisted many times on the poverty of her family in early twentieth century America, citing as evidence the fact that her family did not have special traditions like certain holiday libations and Santa Claus as her husband's family did. She said that the children of her family got a new outfit of clothes for Christmas, but not much else. While the conditions of this respondent's childhood may look like poverty compared to her current (middle-class) lifestyle or the childhood of her husband (already a third generation Polish American), she did not report the fears of death, starvation, and barrenness that the pre-industrial European Poles took such pains to guard against. Thus, the numerically-based magic of the *Wigilia* supper had ceased to hold the meaning or utility it held for medieval and early modern Poles.

A few of my Polish American respondents had grown up on a small farm with livestock and a personal garden to serve a large portion of their family's nutritional needs. However, they had not retained many of the agricultural customs of preventative magic from pre-industrial Poland. A complicated series of decorations from natural and agricultural products adorned the *Wigilia* supper space in pre-industrial Poland. These decorations were not, however, purely aesthetic, but part of several rituals of preventative magic. Straw scattered across the floor of the *Wigilia* room was handled very carefully, left on the ground for a prescribed period of time (often until St. Stephen's day), and then used for various protective functions, including physical contact with the fields or seed or tied around trees to ensure a good crop for the next year, feeding to the cows to promote health, or even contact with a child's sick bed to aid in recovery from an illness (Ginalska 88-9; Knab 33-5). These traditions were often layered with Christian meaning. The grains and straw were thought to make the *Wigilia* supper room resemble the manger (Bystroń 40). Oats from one of the *snopy* were sometimes taken to Christmas Day mass for a blessing from the priest, and then brought home and fed to the livestock, mixed in with the next year's seeds, or hung in the pantry for protection of the grains stored there (Knab 43). A similar custom was practiced with the *oplatek* bread and leftovers from each dish at *Wigilia* supper: they were taken after supper to feed the livestock in hopes of assuring health and protecting against sorcery (Bystroń 41; Knab 40). More straw was spread on the *Wigilia* supper

table and under the tablecloth (Bystroń 40; Knab 35-6). A loaf of bread was often placed on the table *Wigilia* night and left there for twelve days in the hopes of assuring enough bread for the next twelve months (Knab 36). The symbols of bread and straw certainly have their Christian applicability, but scholars of *Wigilia* are quick to note their pagan roots. Ginalska sees the straw under the tablecloth as a survival of offerings to an Earth goddess (88). The *snopy* and bread rituals, Knab contends, are leftovers from winter solstice rituals meant to ensure fertility for a bountiful harvest (35). Bystroń cites a seventeenth century account from Protestant observer Adam Gdaczusz, who rebukes the *Wigilia* custom of straw and grains for decoration because he perceives its origins as pagan (41). These likely pagan roots attest to the long-surviving nature of these customs, and the Christian layers of meaning provided continuing relevance, especially to wealthier manor houses which might not have been as gravely concerned about their fortunes for the next year.<sup>9</sup> The careful use, however, of these agricultural products for protection through preventative magic shows the immediate relevance and utility of these customs for pre-industrial Poles. The fear of family members and farmstead products falling victim to illness, infertility, or even sorcery was a pressing concern for *Wigilia* practitioners. The magical properties conferred to the straw and grains and bread used in the *Wigilia* supper were perceived as present in the hands of the participants. These magically infused items gave the householder a hand in preventing hardship on his farm in a way he found both useful and necessary.

Why, then, didn't these customs survive among the Polish Americans I interviewed? It would be understandable for such traditions to be lost among urban Polish Americans, but many retained a farmstead even in America. For the Polish Americans I interviewed, their personal farmstead might have been an economical way to provide for the family, but according to one respondent from a larger, nearby town, food was readily available in grocery stores during this time. In fact, this more urban respondent was the only one who had even heard of the custom of spreading straw under the tablecloth of the *Wigilia* table, a custom, she reported, that was preserved by one of the families in town, but not by her own family. The preservation of customs in twentieth-century America is necessarily different than in pre-industrial Poland. Poles in America did preserve a number of these customs.<sup>10</sup> However, since they often lacked a practical utility,

the customs were preserved for different reasons, and thus depended on the randomness of memory for survival. Many customs were preserved for purposes of nostalgia, or for the performance of cultural identity as a means of contrast to other ethnic identities. Pre-industrial Poles did not live in cities and towns with a variety of immigrants from other European countries and thus cultural performance was not meaningful. Their neighbors practiced the same customs. Regional and temporal variation was gradual. Recall the *choinka* or “Christmas tree” example mentioned by Bystroń, a custom that traveled slowly from Germany into Poland, catching on as close-by neighbors picked up on the custom (42). Bystroń must point out, even to a twentieth century Polish audience, that it was originally a German tradition because it became so widespread in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bystroń also points out that *kucja*, a *Wigilia* dish mentioned by historical source Niemcewicz, was actually a Russian or Lithuanian tradition. But Niemcewicz does not see it as foreign to the rest of his *Wigilia* traditions, and even a few of my Polish American respondents reported eating *kucja*. Bystroń, living in the nationalistically-oriented twentieth century, may see a cultural distinction, but if self-identified Poles did not see it as “un-Polish,” then it would have been ineffective for any sort of cultural performance in pre-industrial times, especially mixed in with customs that even Bystroń admits to being widespread in Poland. The preservation of folk customs in pre-industrial Poland happened because of practical utility. Householders saw these customs of protective magic as immediately effective to their lives in the coming year; Polish immigrants to America preserved customs based on nostalgia and memory for the purpose of cultural performance—improved economic conditions and access to food rendered the magical functions irrelevant.

At this point in my study, an obvious question may be: Why did the *Wigilia* holiday wield such potent power as to affect fortunes for an entire year? Certainly, *Wigilia* was not the only day of the pre-industrial Polish calendar where divinations and protective magic were preformed. However, its importance as a ritual time is especially curious when we consider that Christmas Day, the focal holiday of the winter season, came immediately afterwards, and that *Wigilia* “was considered more important than Christmas Day itself” (Knab 29). Christmas day had comparatively fewer folk traditions. Why celebrate the “day before” with greater emphasis than the focal holiday?

Anna Brzozowska-Krajka argues that nightfall is an important

indicator of ritual transition, marking the beginning of festal time associated with an anticipated holiday, even if midnight marks the official arrival. Celebrating the “night before” anticipates the climactic arrival of the focal holiday (116). Indeed, many of the Polish scholars cited in this study characterize the time leading to *Wigilia* as a gradual building toward the culmination of the Christmas holiday. Bystroń describes a time of fastidious household work during the time after harvest and before the Christmas holiday, when the weather was prohibitive for much else, until preparations began for *Wigilia* (39). But this description still does not explain the emphasis on *Wigilia*, rather than on Christmas Day. Ginalska describes *Wigilia*'s focus as the “welcoming” of the Christmas holiday. Could it be, quite simply, that the pre-industrial Polish winter holiday season was like an average novel—most exciting right before its climactic moment?

More convincing, I believe, is Ginalska's discussion of *Wigilia*'s original pagan importance. Certainly, the winter holidays in most of pagan Europe revolved around the winter solstice, a holiday with striking agricultural significance (i.e. marking the return of increased daylight and the promise of another growing season)—a holiday to which a Christian layer was later applied (Muir 60). Again, though, this fact does not explain why *Wigilia* was celebrated with greater intricacy and attention than Christmas Day. Ginalska describes the particular significance of the winter solstice to pre-Christian Poles. The solstice holiday was observed with the importance of a New Year's holiday, and the evening of the longest night was seen by pagan Poles as a night when the spirits of the dead were particularly active. In this way, it not only marked the promise of returned fertility, but it was also a key time for ancient ancestral cults. The longest night, the “night before” the return of the sun, was the one most conducive to contact and interaction with the dead, thus it was the time when magic of life and death was at its most potent, omens and divination at their most ripe, and fertility and sterility most at consequence (Ginalska 84-5).

Remembrance of the dead occupied a central position in Polish *Wigilia*, even into Christian times. Dead family members were perceived as taking part in the meal itself: “Pamiętano o nieobecnych; wspomniano ich and zostawiano dla nich wolne siedzenia przy stole ... pozostawiano więc czasem jadło na stole przez noc dla duchów zmarłych” (Bystroń 41).<sup>11</sup> Fires were tended by some throughout the night so the spirits would have a place to escape the winter chill; some

even prepared a hot bath for the spirits of their family dead and invited them to spend the night resting at their former residence. Spirits were even said to be active during *Wigilia* day, when certain behaviors ensured that the living would not offend or get in the way of the spirits of the dead (Ginalska 86). Such fastidious attention to the dead may first seem impractical, or nostalgic and of little utilitarian value to the pre-industrial peasant. We may wonder why Poles would spend the most magically potent day of the year tending to the already dead members of their families when they could be tapping into magic to keep the current family members alive for another year. It is likely that pre-industrial Poles believed that the spirits of their ancestors had more immediate access to magical powers and thus logically had a hand in their everyday fortunes. Ivanits discusses an analogous example in Russian folk belief: the *domovoi*, a spirit connected to the house, believed in some regions to be a dead ancestor. Folklore surrounding the *domovoi* characterizes him as a member of the household and family, expressing his opinions on the running of the household, caring for livestock, defending produce and property from neighboring *domoye* and other malicious spirits, and showing his finicky tastes in accepting food offerings.<sup>12</sup> Dead ancestors likely seemed more accessible than God or Christ because of their natural interest in a particular family. Apart from beseeching dead ancestors for magical help, early Poles likely found customs and beliefs involving ancestral spirits more relevant than Christian doctrines. Where Christian doctrines proved analogous (i.e. dying and rising Christ) to preexisting beliefs in life after death, they were relevant. Ultimately, however, if a Polish farmer was faced with life and death throughout the year, his most pressing spiritual concern was more likely the fate of himself, his living family and his ancestors after death—not, for instance, the salvation of mankind or Trinitarian theology.

### **Feast meets Fast**

Perhaps the most puzzling question surrounding the celebration of *Wigilia* is: Why have the holiday feast on a day of fast? Ginalska's assertions about dead ancestors may explain why *Wigilia* was so spiritually powerful, why so much preventative magic and divination happened on that day, but such magical potency did not necessitate a large holiday meal. We may wonder why the Poles did not have a fast meal on *Wigilia*, and then a larger fast-breaking meal on Christmas

Day.

The *Wigilia* supper was, in many ways, a culmination of a fasting season and it is important to note that *Wigilia* day was not as severe as many of the fasting days that came before it. During Advent, “[a] strict fast almost as severe as that of Lent was observed, omitting meat, fats and milk on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays” (Knab 21). In earlier medieval times, a similar fasting schedule was likely followed throughout the year.<sup>13</sup> “W średniowieczu było 192 dni postu rocznie. Bardziej gorliwi pościli jeszcze w liczne wigilie dni poświęconych popularnym świętym, czasem poniedziałki i piątki, tak że ilość postów było rosła. Oprócz mięsa w ciągu 51 dni nie wolno było spożywać również mleka, masła i jaj” (Bockenheim 13).<sup>14</sup> The status of Christmas Eve as vigil (hence “*Wigilia*” in Polish) marked it as a day of fast, and in earlier times it was also called *postnik* or *pośnik* from the Slavic “post” meaning fast (Ginalska 87). The *Wigilia* supper—as we know it from later, early modern accounts—was not as strict as the fasts prescribed above, which excluded eggs and milk (Bystroń 40; Knab 39). Though it was preceded with a stricter fast during the day, discussed earlier, and the *Wigilia* meal was solidly meatless, well-off households celebrated with twelve different fish dishes to match their wealth (Bystroń 40).

Ultimately, I believe that the puzzle of *Wigilia*’s festive fast lies in matters of economy and convenience. To the majority of medieval and early modern Poles, the fast had little effect on their eating habits because they could ill afford any type of meat or fish; Knab notes that most *Wigilia* meals consisted of the fruit and vegetable products of the family’s farmstead, and fish did not even reach the majority of tables in regions where fish were not readily available (Knab 39). Even those who could afford more than their own land produced ate meat only rarely: “Mięso pojawiało się na stole rzadko, częściej natomiast trafiały się ryby” (Bockenheim 12).<sup>15</sup> Those who raised livestock were probably loath to slaughter the animals for themselves, their greater value being the milk and eggs produced for daily consumption. The Polish Americans I interviewed who grew up in a household that raised some livestock recalled that cream and butter were always plentiful because of the cow’s daily milk production. It was not economically feasible for most pre-industrial Polish farmsteaders to eliminate a daily source of needed fat and protein in order to slaughter their cow for holiday supper. Fish, on the other hand, did not come with the same expenses, either of

providing feed or losing out on valuable food production. Thus, it was enough of a luxury for most Poles to make it a sufficient holiday treat. Meat was not a distinguishing feature in the diet of most Poles, and so this contrast of fast and feast was not apparent to them. Since the feast would have been meatless anyway, for most Poles, it made practical sense to have it at the more magically potent time.

### Conclusion

This study of *Wigilia* customs is admittedly limited—it does not constitute the sort of “full description” of the ritual as Grimes would advocate. However, by keeping Grimes’ field-work questions in mind, this study has managed to pose and speculate upon similar questions relevant to the historical context of Polish *Wigilia*. By employing the methods of scholars of contemporary ritual, such as Wallendorf and Arnould, and attempting to parallel their findings, this study has arrived at an analysis which addresses issues of practice. While the historical *Wigilia* ritual is not immediately observable, this study has managed to put forth a conclusion that would not be possible by focusing on traditional textual sources alone—a study that approximates as closely as possible for historical ritual what Ritual Studies scholars have accomplished for observable ritual. Following the methodological example of Ritual Studies has allowed us to “observe,” to the extent it is possible, a historical ritual.

Despite the limitations on “observing” historical ritual, a distinction between the patterns of pre-industrial European folk ritual and the patterns of modern folk ritual has emerged. The predominant feature of pre-industrial customs was their perceived usefulness for the participants. While modern, first-world customs may also have some practical value or perceived usefulness, they are complicated by a number of additional factors that do not feature in the pre-industrial customs. In the modern era, participants may preserve or even reintroduce older customs into holiday rituals out of nostalgia for an earlier time remembered or read about in books, or they may preserve customs in order to mark cultural identities, whether to stand out in melting-pot America or to define national culture in Europe. It is unlikely in an age of technology that advertisers would allow us to forget costumes for Halloween, turkey for Thanksgiving, the gifts and tree for Christmas, or champagne for New Year. The yearly occurrence of Thanksgiving is even legislated by civil governments, marking a certain date nationally for Canada, and a different date for the

United States. Governments, private businesses, schools, and universities codify it by closing, enforcing for employees and students a day of rest.

These factors did not play into pre-industrial folk ritual. Absent of a technologically promulgated popular culture, folk custom lived and died on practical meaning, utility and convenience. Preparing food for the supper, obtaining straw and *snopy* and *oplatek* for the *Wigilia* space, all fed into larger concerns of bounty and fertility for the year ahead. Christian layers of belief and church dictates were accommodated when they suited—or at least did not clash—with the practical agricultural magic that was essential to the pre-industrial people who participated in this ritual. The folk ritual of *Wigilia* followed a similar pattern to folk literature, as observed by Jakobson and Bogatyrev. Elements of the ritual were preserved because they proved functional to the participants while customs and beliefs bore out a tangible result in the perception of those who kept them. The immediacy of their relevance kept certain *Wigilia* customs in practice for pre-industrial Poles.

### Notes

1. I realize that in using the name of the modern nation state of Poland to diachronically designate a historical culture is something of a fiction. While the land-area currently named Poland has been partitioned in various ways throughout its history, I have made the decision to use this somewhat fictional designation because the modern state is roughly equivalent to the geographical space occupied by the original medieval kingdom of Poland. See Szczerpański, p. 6.
2. See Ivanits, p. 59, for a discussion of folk customs for making Russian bathhouses acceptable to the *bannik*, or bath-house spirit. One such custom was the burial of a black hen under the threshold of a newly rebuilt bathhouse.
3. See Chapter 2 of *Bystroń*.
4. See Bennett.
5. Old Polish Folk Art.
6. If gentrywomen did not always bear the sole responsibility for preparing the food, it is likely that they oversaw its preparation. See *Bystroń*, p. 39 for a description of the role of well-to-do women in overseeing homestead chores.
7. “Throughout all of *Wigilia* day, a strict fast was observed; soup with peas was prepared at noon only for men working hard.”

8. Since physical labor was forbidden on the three days following *Wigilia*, it fell to the man of the household to stock up on household and farmstead inventory, as well as to do the heavy work of collecting magically necessary decorations for the *Wigilia* supper.
9. See Bystroń, p. 40 for some discussion of *Wigilia* in wealthier Polish courts and manors.
10. See Silverman for a more detailed discussion of Polish folklore as it survived the migration to America.
11. "Those not present were remembered; they were recalled and an empty place was left for them at the table .... often food was left on the table through the night for the spirits of the death."
12. See Ivanits, Chapter 4 for a discussion of spirits of the home and farmstead, including the *domovoi*.
13. See *The Household Book of Dame Alice de Bryene of Acton Hall, September 1412 to September 1413 with Appendices* for the year-round fasting schedule of a small English manor house. Meatless fasts were followed on Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and the vigils of major Christian feast days. This fits the Polish data I have found, so it is likely that Poles followed a similar schedule during earlier times, perhaps with variations on the weekly days of fast depending on region.
14. "In the Middle Ages there were 192 days of fast yearly. More zealously they fasted on numerous vigil days of devotion for popular holidays, sometimes Mondays and Fridays, and so the fast days were numerous. Besides meat, during 51 of these days, one was not free to eat varieties of milk, butter and eggs."
15. "Meat appeared rarely on the table, more often conversely they had fish."

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