

TOWARD A THEORY OF PRE-MODERN EUROPEAN FOLK RITUAL: THE CASE OF
POLISH *WIGILIA*

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This study aims to formulate and evaluate a methodology for the study of rituals in historical time periods. The methods developed in the field of Ritual Studies for the investigation of present-day, observable rituals are assessed in terms of their usefulness for studying rituals practiced in the past, and these methods are adapted to the particular needs of historical study using the pre-modern Polish custom of *Wigilia*, a Christmas Eve supper ritual, as a case study. This paper suggests that despite the limitations in applying Ritual Studies methodology to rituals practiced in the past, these methods are useful for helping to construct a generalized reconstruction of historical rituals and in using that reconstruction to understand dimensions of popular religion in historical time periods. In looking specifically at *Wigilia*, this study argues that the customs associated with this ritual are perceived by participants to have effective utility in their everyday lives.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0 Introduction	1
2.0 Ritual Studies Methods and Historical Ritual	4
2.1 Historical Anthropology and the Study of Historical Rituals	4
2.2 Ritual Studies and the Reconstruction of Historical Rituals	7
2.2.1 Taking the Example of Ritual Studies	8
2.2.2 Ethnography of Near-past Rituals	12
2.3 Conclusion: Working Beyond the Limitations	15
3.0 The Study of Historical Folk Ritual: Some Aspects of <i>Wigilia</i> Supper	17
3.1 Investigating <i>Wigilia</i>	17
3.1.1 Pre-Modern Folk Ritual and Perceived Effectiveness	18
3.1.2 Determining Long-standing Tradition in Folklore	20
3.2 Preparation for <i>Wigilia</i> and the Role of Women	22
3.3 The Effectiveness of Divination and Preventative Magic	27
3.4 Consequential Significance of Ritual Time	35
3.4.1 <i>Wigilia</i> Origins in Winter Solstice Night	36
3.4.2. Feasting on a Day of Fast	38
4.0 Conclusion	41
List of Interviews	43
Bibliography	44

1.0 Introduction

Examining the popular practice of religion among historical¹ people raises questions of method, accessibility and even feasibility. How can we understand the role of religion in the everyday lives of historical people? Is there even enough surviving evidence to attempt such a study? I will argue that the investigation of everyday religion in the lives of historical people can, indeed, be accomplished by formulating a methodology based on the example of scholars of contemporary popular religion, namely, those who employ the methods of Ritual Studies. While these reformulated methods may not be without their problems, the limitation of the task ought not to stop the careful scholar from developing a reasonable reconstruction of historical practice, nor from asserting a likely hypothesis based on the varieties of available evidence. In an effort to test this assertion, I will propose a reformulated methodology for the study of historical ritual based on that of contemporary Ritual Studies, and I will use this methodology to examine select elements of the Polish² Christmas Eve supper ritual of *Wigilia*. As a result of this examination, I will theorize that elements of pre-modern folk rituals are perpetuated by means of their effective utility as perceived by participants.

What might the ritual of *Wigilia* have looked like in an early modern Polish home? There is no concrete answer to this question, but a likely reconstruction would include a variety of the

¹ For the purposes of this discussion, the term "historical" when used in reference to people will be taken to mean those who are no longer alive. When used in reference to ritual, "historical" will be taken to refer to a ritual that was practiced in the past but not in present day, or practiced in a specified time period in the past, or a version of a present-day ritual practiced long enough ago such that it cannot be presumed to have continuity with the currently-practiced version. Thus, historical people would have engaged in historical ritual, though people alive today may have also engaged in historical ritual presuming they are old enough to have done so.

² When using the terms "Poland" and "Polish" in the course of this paper, I am referring to the geographical area occupied by the modern nation state of Poland; the original medieval kingdom of Poland occupied roughly the same area as the modern state. See Jan Szczerpański, *Polish Society*, 6.

most widely attested practices. During the day preceding *Wigilia* supper, the members of the household would be hard at work, both in the home and on the farmstead. Visitors would be welcomed on this day, and the happenstances surrounding their arrival might have signified fortune or misfortune for the household called upon. In preparation for the *Wigilia* supper, many households would have taken special care in decorating the supper table and the surrounding areas. Straw might be spread across the floor or under the tablecloth, and *snopy*—that is, bundles of grain—might be placed in the corners of the room. Such decorations held symbolic significance and were imbued in the minds of practitioners with magic of great consequence. Before supper, the members of the household would have engaged in a ritual sharing of the *oplatek*, a type of blessed, but unconsecrated bread wafer.³ Starting with the head of the household, the *oplatek* wafer would be offered, shared and broken with each person at the table as participants exchanged good wishes for the coming year. The number of guests sitting down to supper was believed to have consequential significance, as did the number of dishes served. There might be places set at the table for deceased family members and food left on the table for their spirits after supper was concluded. The supper was most commonly a meatless one, and while fish is a common *Wigilia* dish, the number of fish dishes and the plentifulness of fish on the *Wigilia* table were dependent upon the wealth of the household. Following supper, leftover food, including *oplatki*, straw from the table, and the contents of the *snopy* were often fed to the animals of the farmstead and sometimes kept for magical medicinal uses throughout the year. A variety of divinations were performed during *Wigilia* evening and a variety of considerations

³ The *oplatek* wafer is "blessed" in the sense that it would receive a blessing from clergy before distribution at church, however it is "unconsecrated" in the sense that, unlike communion wafers, it does not undergo the ritual process believed by Catholics to result in transubstantiation. See Sophie Hodorowicz Knab, *Polish Customs, Traditions and Folklore*, 36-40.

might be performed for the spirits of deceased relatives who were thought by many to visit the household on this night.⁴

Any particular *Wigilia* celebration in a certain household or in a certain year might have contained all or some of these elements, or perhaps additional elements that are not widely attested. The picture of this or any historical ritual that we can cull from available evidence must necessarily be a generalized one.⁵ Any generalized reconstruction is admittedly an informed guess on the part of the scholar. Such a reconstruction of a historical ritual is a broad glance, and cannot be presumed to have a specific correlation to any given household, family or community. By creating a generalized reconstruction of a historical ritual, the scholar has a tool with which to apprehend the practice of popular religion as it was likely or commonly experienced among historical people.⁶ In other words, since we are no longer able to observe a pre-modern or early modern *Wigilia* ritual as it was practiced in particular homes, among particular families, our best alternative for understanding the practice of popular custom at that time is to posit a generalized reconstruction based upon assembled historical evidence from a variety of sources.

⁴ This reconstruction is a compilation of accounts given in secondary sources, which were in turn compiled from ethnographic studies and archival documents; these include Sophie Hodorwicz Knab, Maria Ginalska, Jan Bystroń, Anna Brzozowska-Krajka and Krystyna Bockenheimer.

⁵ Being that the aims of this study are primarily programmatic, the sources used in the reconstruction of pre-modern *Wigilia* are secondary sources. This reconstruction is admittedly a preliminary one, and further archival research would be needed to test this reconstruction.

⁶ This argument can be understood in the same vein as the argument made by Peter Bogatyřev and Roman Jacobson when they assert that folktales can be studied in terms of abstract types, exemplifying what a scholarly-determined class of tales have in common, rather than being studied only as isolated, singular events. See notes 31 & 32 below.

2.0 Ritual Studies Methods and Historical Ritual

This study seeks to investigate the usefulness of the methodological tools provided by scholars in the field of Ritual Studies for the study of historical rituals, like *Wigilia*. However, such an enterprise is not without its problems. I will address the question of whether methods devised for the live observation of practice can be applied to a ritual in the past, which is by definition non-observable to the scholar. The ramifications of conducting the study of ritual practice on historical customs are various. Some insight may be gained, but some methods 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 Studies methods—reconceived for the examination of historical ritual—to consider the food rituals of pre-modern Poland and thus test the applicability of these methods. This framework of Ritual Studies will allow us to piece together the known *Wigilia* customs of the past, to determine why certain elements persisted among Poles who practiced them, and to advance a preliminary theory on what the elements of this ritual tell us about the everyday concerns and motivations of pre-modern people.

2.1 Historical Anthropology and the Study of Historical Rituals

Many 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 ritual will quickly reveal that the practices of ordinary people had limited connections with prescribed Christian doctrine. However, many of the gains made by scholars of ritual have been achieved through the

observation of live practice—a methodological impossibility for scholarship of most historical rituals. In some 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?

Recent scholarship has already approached the study of historical ritual practice. In his book, *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe*, Ivan G. Marcus argues that historical anthropology is useful for the study of ritual. He first seeks support from James A. Boon, who has advocated a demystification of anthropological monographs based upon field work, claiming that they are subject to just as many trends and genre conventions as literary writings, and thus demand the reader's critical and interpretive eye as much as a novel.⁷ Marcus also invokes the arguments of Gillian Feely-Harnik, who addresses the question of historical anthropology more directly. She contends that "the presence of the living flesh no more guarantees an appreciation of the subtlety and variability of human life in the ethnographer than it guarantees loquaciousness in his subject," pointing out that the questions posed by ethnographers change at such a rapid pace, and evidence is always insufficient.⁸ At the core of this argument is the fact that anthropological monographs describing the findings of fieldwork are written sometimes years or decades after the fieldwork itself, requiring the researcher to rely on written field notes and to translate those data to his audience—an interpretive task not to be

⁷ James A. Boon, *Other Tribes, Other Scribes*, 3-26.

⁸ Gillian Feely-Harnik, "Is Historical Anthropology Possible? The case of a runaway slave," 99.

prized above other techniques for studying culture. The technique that Marcus has in mind, of course, is the use of medieval texts and material culture as a historical stand-in for field notes.

Marcus takes the argument for historical anthropology a step further by suggesting that "highly textual" faith traditions, such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam, have ritual dimensions often neglected in favor of their wealth of textual sources.⁹ In medieval Judaism, Marcus' culture and tradition of focus, the previous scholarship has privileged "prescriptive written sources" penned by "rabbinic elites," and in doing so—he argues—has missed the wider experience of medieval Jewish culture.¹⁰ By analyzing the initiation rites practiced by Ashkenazic Jews on the first day of a boy's Torah study, Marcus argues that Jewish practices were influenced by the surrounding Christian culture in a variety of ways—an argument impossible from prescriptive textual sources alone. Focusing on the actions and objects of this ritual, Marcus is able to posit an understanding among medieval Jews of their place within a larger Latin Christendom. Other historians in recent years have been taking similar, multi-source approaches. Natalie Zemon Davis, for instance, takes a like approach when investigating rioting behavior among Protestants and Catholics in early modern France.¹¹ She reconstructs particular incidents where violence erupted using accounts written by both Catholic and Protestant contemporaries. By comparing the accounts of the Protestant observers to those of the Catholic observers (as well as comparing all accounts to one another) she postulates what is "likely fact" about the incident and what was likely fabricated by the observer.¹² Edward Muir examines early modern European ritual by compiling data from a wide breadth of archives, combining obscure insights culled from well-known archival sources with data provided by sources that were seldom consulted by previous

⁹ Ivan G. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe*, 2-3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence."

¹² *Ibid.*, 155.

scholars.¹³ Philip Buc advocates caution in prizing the textual prescriptions and descriptions of ritual over other evidence when examining historical practice, arguing that texts can be used in the reconstruction of historical ritual, as long as the historian never loses sight of their status as texts, and thus an interpretation and, themselves, a reconstruction of the event.¹⁴ He is critical of historians who make an anthropological reading of a ritual as it is depicted in a particular medieval text, as if that text were a conduit for direct observation of the ritual.¹⁵

While a simultaneously historical and anthropological approach to ritual seems poised to provide new insights into pre-modern European cultures, I believe this approach must first be defined in relation and in contrast to the current field of Ritual Studies—a field in which many scholars advocate the value of fieldwork. Just as contemporary anthropology is necessarily different from historical anthropology, so Ritual Studies must be differentiated from its historical counterpart. The spirit and basic mission of Ritual Studies, to privilege practice over doctrine, remains intact, and the tools for analyzing a ritual come from the same box in both cases. But if we start by seeking practice and end with an examination of practice, it is the middle task of apprehending practice that distinguishes contemporary from historical study of ritual. We will find that the task of discovering a ritual's "text" of practice differs vastly in character when perceived historically.

2.2 Ritual Studies and the Reconstruction of Historical Rituals

A 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

¹³ Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*.

¹⁴ Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

adequately, the first prerequisite is as full a description as possible."¹⁶ 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"¹⁷ 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.

2.2.1 Taking the Example of Ritual Studies. 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-modern *Wigilia* rituals is straightforward enough: "Where does the ritual enactment occur—indoors, outdoors, in a randomly chosen place, in a special place?"¹⁸ In the case of *Wigilia* suppers and other meal rituals, they typically occurred in the homes of Poles, and specifically 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?"¹⁹ 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.

¹⁶ Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

Another Ritual Studies scholar, Jonathan Z. Smith, uses historical documents in order to arrive at a reconstruction of ritual space. He uses the biblical text of Ezekiel, specifically the temple visions described in Chapters 40-48, in order to analyze the significance of spatial dimensions in an area envisioned for ritual activity.²⁰ While it is unclear whether these temple descriptions ever corresponded to an existing structure,²¹ the detail of the descriptions allows Smith to theorize on the ritual significance of location and space for the historical culture from which this description emerged. Still, Smith cannot test these theories with live observation, nor can he discover new information not revealed in the documentary record.

The historian of ritual lacks live contact with the people and locations involved. In the case of *Wigilia*, 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.²² Grimes' questions and Smith's exemplary reconstruction 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. The historian's reconstruction of traditions will be necessarily generalized, like my reconstruction of *Wigilia* at the opening of this study. At worst,

²⁰ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place*, Chapter 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

²² See Linda Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*, 59; 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.

the historian will find isolated cases, with no way of determining whether such practices were widespread and thus no basis for inclusion in a generalized reconstruction.

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*, "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,"²³ the custom likely had some variation. Did most people put the *snopy* in every corner, or in one corner, or were these variances evenly practiced? Did these practices vary from one village to the next? Questions about variances over time, 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 of the ritual he seeks to reconstruct and analyze. The terminology of "emic" and "etic" defined as

²³ Knab, 35.

the perspectives of insider participants versus outsider observers can be problematic. However, I find this distinction useful in the sense that "etic" perspectives offer a greater opportunity to observe aspects of a ritual that may be ignored by the participants. A sharp distinction between insider and outsider is not possible—few potential observers are definitively one or the other. The most important dimension of "etic" perspective, in my estimation, is the quality of conscious or active observation—after all, it is unlikely that even an outsider will take note of anything of importance if he is not specifically engaged in the task of doing so. Thus, "etic" perspectives can range from those of foreign travelers encountering a new culture to those of scholars turning a critical eye to their own culture.

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, the 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.²⁴ While the historian of ritual can certainly flex his interpretive muscle in analyzing the evidence of historical practice, he should also be aware that the ritual he reconstructs on the basis of contemporaneous accounts will most likely be emically slanted. In other words, he will likely not be privy to finer nuances that an observer, actively engaged in appraisal of the ritual, might notice. For instance, 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

²⁴ See Jan Stanisław Bystron, *Dzieje Obyczajów w Dawnej Polsce: Wiek XVI-XVIII Tom II* [The Practice of Customs in Long-Ago Poland: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries, Volume 2], Chapter 2.

ethnographic observation allows them to notice, for example, the commonality of forgetting among the households observed.²⁵ 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 usually not possible for historical ritual. Depending on the historical records available for a particular ritual, historians endeavoring to apply the methods of Ritual Studies must accept and acknowledge these limitations. Those elements of ritual that go unnoticed by participants, a dynamic dimension of Ritual Studies research, will often be inaccessible to the historian.

2.2.2 Ethnography of Near-past Rituals. Even when it is possible for researchers engaged in oral history to ask fieldwork-style questions of the still-living participants of near-past rituals, the historian would be wise to regard the resulting data cautiously. On the one hand, interviewing people about rituals they practiced in the past gives the historian of ritual an advantageous middle ground. While the scholar cannot apprehend a past ritual through direct observation, that scholar can glean ethnographic information about near-past historical rituals by asking questions of the participants who remember them. This type of ethnography of historical ritual among living participants does not allow the historian to verify the informants' account of the ritual through direct observation, but it does provide the scholar with a secondary lens on the ritual. In other words, the historian may not be able to observe the ritual, but he can gain answers to

²⁵ Melanie Wallendorf and Eric J. Arnould, "Consumption Rituals of Thanksgiving Day," 539-40.

specific inquiries for needed data by asking those who did observe it. This ethnography of near-past ritual may also be of some use for speculating on distant-past historical ritual for which no living participants remain. While the generalization of ethnographic information backward in time is a risky endeavor, it may in some instances prove helpful in corroborating historical evidence in order to hypothesize on how to fill in the gaps left by historical records. Ethnography of later ritual may also be useful for understanding earlier historical ritual by way of the contrasts it provides.

In an effort to evaluate the usefulness of using ethnography of near-past ritual for understanding distant-past ritual, 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. These interviews have yielded important points of contrast with the evidence of pre-modern *Wigilia*; in select cases they have provided corroborative insights for understanding pre-modern *Wigilia*; and more generally they have illuminated both the benefits and problems of pursuing the study of historical ritual through this middle ground of living participant interviews.

One problem in using this method is the necessary reliance on the memories of interviewees. The ethnographer of historical ritual who collects the testimony of informants who have not practiced a ritual in some years—or have practiced it only in modified form—cannot verify the accounts given with direct observation. Thus, the ethnography of historical ritual must consider the testimonies collected as coming through the filter of memory. While this method gives the scholar considerable advantage and flexibility over a method of relying on historical records alone, testimonies from such informants are often subject to the same gaps, emic-slanting and generalizing tendencies as other historical accounts.

For example, 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*—the 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. These interviews point out not only the ravages of time on the memory of informants so far removed from the moment of inquiry, but it also reveals 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 that particular year; after the multi-colored experiment the local *oplatek* maker decided to simplify his job by producing a single pink *oplatek* per package among white. This is admittedly a fictional scenario—other interviews from the same geographical area 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 these sisters.

Being unable to sit down to *Wigilia* supper with this family during the years of the sisters' youth, I cannot say for certain who is remembering the *oplatki* correctly or whether 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.²⁶ Even when misremembering is not at issue, the testimonies of informants of near-past historical ritual are not only emic, but grounded in memory. The consequence of using informant 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. The scholar pursuing an ethnographic method to study historical ritual must keep these qualifications in mind when analyzing any data collected in this way, but opportunities created by this method certainly seem worth the care it takes to filter our understanding of them. Without pursuing an ethnographic investigation where living participants of historical ritual are available, the historian of ritual would be missing dimensions not attested by historical records alone.

2.3 Conclusion: Working Beyond the Limitations.

Ronald Grimes' lengthy lists of suggested questions for fieldwork point out limitations for the historical application of his methods. However, with some adaptive creativity, as Grimes recommends, the historian can bend these questions to his own research. What is more, the scholar 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 or still-living informants—he might otherwise

²⁶ Wallendorf and Arnould, 544.

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 a schooled churchman would be. 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.

3.0 The Study of Historical Folk Ritual: Some Aspects of *Wigilia* Supper

The methods of historical anthropology and of Ritual Studies will prove useful to the investigation of pre-modern 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 wider variety of sources. Without Church or other central authorities to prescribe ritual, we must wonder what 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 contemporaneous observers and early ethnographers is the only way to apprehend a historical folk ritual with any success.

3.1 Investigating *Wigilia*

By investigating the customs associated with *Wigilia* supper, I will address the questions posed above in an attempt to replicate for this historical ritual the sort of study that a Ritual Studies researcher would seek to do on a contemporary ritual. I will examine selected aspects of the pre-modern *Wigilia* ritual in order to speculate on its significance for participants; it is my hope that these conclusions will provide a useful starting point for studies of other pre-modern European folk rituals. 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. In reconstructing and examining elements of the pre-modern *Wigilia* ritual, we will see that individual customs in this folk ritual survive across time due primarily to their perceived

effectiveness—participants continued to practice certain customs because they found them to have discernable consequences to basic needs and survival. This hypothesis can be seen in opposition to modern first-world folk customs where continuation is facilitated by factors with less immediate functionality, for example by nostalgia, ethnic performance, and in some cases advertisement and even legislation.

3.1.1 Pre-Modern Folk Ritual and Perceived Effectiveness. In forming this hypothesis about the nature of pre-modern folk ritual, I hope to distinguish the dynamics of survival for pre-modern folk customs in contrast to those of modern folk customs. Polish peasants who practiced *Wigilia* in pre-modern times continued the performance of particular associated folk customs because these customs had perceived value, for example, in protecting the farm animals from harm or in promoting the health of crops in the year to come. Modern practitioners of food ritual, such as the Polish-Americans who keep vestiges of *Wigilia* or the Thanksgiving ritual participants interviewed by Wallendorf and Arnould, also perceive value in their practices, even if their motivations differ. While we can argue that pre-modern Poles found their customs valuable for ensuring health and survival in a new year, we can also argue that modern Polish-Americans find their *Wigilia* vestiges valuable as reminders of by-gone days or deceased relatives, or that modern celebrants of Thanksgiving may value the legislated government holiday as a needed respite, or as an excuse to visit with extended family.

If the elements of these food rituals hold perceived value for their participants in both the pre-modern and modern contexts, then in order to arrive at an apt understanding of pre-modern folk ritual, and how the constitution of its customs differs from modern folk ritual, we cannot speak simply of the perceived value or usefulness of particular customs, but rather we must

distinguish between modes of value or utility. Based on my reconstruction and examination of pre-modern *Wigilia* customs, I theorize that the survival of these customs was based on a consequential or *effective* mode of utility. Customs were preserved because ritual participants perceived them to have an *effective utility*, that is, they perceived the customs to effect tangible—and hopefully positive—consequences. Placing straw under the *Wigilia* tablecloth and then giving it to the farm animals was perceived to effect a positive change for the coming year—e.g. farm animals would resist illness, be more productive, be less vulnerable to hidden dangers such as evil spirits, etc. Performance equals consequence. This dynamic can be seen in opposition to modern folk ritual, where the survival of customs stems from a variety of motives, but rarely from *effective utility*. I will leave the task of theorizing upon a modern mode of utility to scholarship on modern folk ritual, however, the absence of *effective utility* in the performance of modern customs has been evident to me, both in my interviews with Polish-Americans and in the studies of other scholars, such as Wallendorf and Arnould. For example, a pre-modern Pole would have seen an odd number of guests around the *Wigilia* table as potentially hazardous, *effecting* a potentially negative outcome for one or more of the guests; in contrast, a modern American college student unable to fly home from an overseas university to attend Thanksgiving dinner would be simply disappointed, and unlikely to perceive this absence as effecting negative consequences in his or her life.

My preliminary theory based on the reconstruction in this study of *Wigilia* elements is that the customs of pre-modern folk rituals survived from year-to-year largely due to their perceived *effective utility*. While some pre-modern European folk customs might have survived due to simple duplication from one year to the next, in most cases, customs that had lost their

effective utility were ultimately discarded at a time when participants ceased to find compelling 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 oftentimes rely on a generalized picture of its practices, unless particularistic data is available. However, by reconstructing certain widespread customs practiced by pre-modern Poles, I intend to show that customs survived, often from ancient roots, because the participants saw effective utility in them for yearly prosperity and endurance.

3.1.2 Determining Long-standing Tradition in Folklore. 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 or Christian basket 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."²⁷ In fact, most folk customs demonstrate a blending of pagan and Christian elements that 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 inform these customs. Ivanits agrees that later, ethnographically documented "agricultural rituals... provide a valuable, if circuitous, route to...

²⁷ Ivanits, 5.

paganism"²⁸ 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 early modern Poland from Germany. The appearance of *różgi*, 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.²⁹

Folk belief does not make rapid movements. Once appropriated for use by a large number of people, a folk custom has already shown both its use and its staying power. Roman Jakobson and Peter Bogatyrëv 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.³⁰ 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.³¹ The state of folklore—just as the state of colloquial speech—in a certain cultures is not identical to its predecessors, but it has been shaped from its sources by the people who use it. 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

²⁸ Ibid., 5.

²⁹ Bystroń, 42.

³⁰ Peter Bogatyrëv and Roman Jakobson, "Folklore as a Special Form of Creativity," 32-46.

³¹ The authors make a structuralist argument that folklore performance can be equated to language performance. Just as language can be understood as having dimensions of *langue* (the concept of a particular language as an abstract construct or system) and *parole* (the concrete and individual performance of a speech act, the sum of these making the abstraction *langue* possible to conceive of), so can we understand folklore as having an abstract dimension of folktales or tale types and a concrete dimension of individual oral performances. Only in understanding and acknowledging the abstract form as a valid object of study can it be used as a window to the vast sum of oral performances which have led to its attested form.

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.

3.2 Preparation for Wigilia and the Role of Women

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.³² 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 to the men the duties of carving and presenting the symbolic "hunted" bird.³³

Likewise, *Wigilia* supper in pre-modern 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 Polish accounts cited in this study. In situations where the sources at hand are unclear, the historian of ritual must attempt to complete the reconstruction of the historical ritual by theorizing based on what sources are available. Thus, in attempting to reconstruct pre-modern Polish *Wigilia*, we will have to consult a wider variety of sources in order to posit who was most likely responsible for meal preparation.

³² Roy C. Wood, *The Sociology of the Meal*, 47.

³³ Wallendorf and Arnould, 546.

It is tempting to presume that women prepared the *Wigilia* meal, as food preparation is traditionally considered women's work. However, gender roles in food preparation are not historical universals. Elsewhere in pre-modern 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.³⁴ Lower-class city and country households in England, however, did rely on females for basic household tasks, including food preparation.³⁵ In Tadeusz Seweryn's collection of *Old Polish Folk Art*, 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.³⁶ We even see a women tending to a stew over the fire in a manor-house kitchen.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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, on occasions both special and everyday.³⁹

In this instance, it may also be useful to consider evidence from near-past ritual in order to confirm our posited reconstruction wherein women are the most likely preparers of *Wigilia* supper. My interviews with Polish Americans who practiced *Wigilia* with immigrant parents early in the twentieth century reveal that mothers typically prepared *Wigilia* meals, sometimes

³⁴ C.M. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England*, 202.

³⁵ See Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside*.

³⁶ Tadeusz Seweryn, *Staropolska Grafika Ludowa* [Old Polish Folk Art], 83, 88-89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁸ Krystyna Bockenheim, *Przy Polskim Stole* [At the Polish Table], 6.

³⁹ If gentrywomen did not always bear the sole responsibility for preparing the food, it is likely that they oversaw its preparation. See Bystron, 39 for a description of the role of well-to-do women in overseeing homestead chores.

with the help of sisters.⁴⁰ One respondent reported that her mother was so central to *Wigilia* celebrations that their family ceased to celebrate this ritual after the mother's early death. While it would be a mistake to take this information from early twentieth century *Wigilia* as proof alone of women's role in supper preparation, the fact that it confirms available evidence from earlier times allows for a triangular argument: if evidence shows that women were primary food preparers in pre-modern Poland (both on peasant and manor house levels) and evidence shows that women were primary food preparers for *Wigilia* suppers in later times, it is likely that women did indeed act as primary food preparers for pre-modern *Wigilia* suppers.

Having established a reconstruction of *Wigilia* in pre-modern times that puts women in the role of food preparer, we may want to try replicating Wallendorf's and Arnould's analysis of gender roles in contemporary Thanksgiving rituals for our reconstructed case. In other words, we can take the methodology of contemporary Ritual Studies scholars and try applying it to our reconstructed pre-modern ritual.

So, how does it work out? Does the role of the woman as food preparer in pre-modern 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-modern Polish household, even on *Wigilia* day: "Throughout *Wigilia* day a strict fast was observed; pea soup was prepared at noon only for men hard at work."⁴¹ 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

⁴⁰ Deborah Anders Silverman, in her study *Polish American Folklore*, has also observed that women are responsible for *Wigilia* food preparation in Polish-American households, though she notes that many of these women depart from old country traditions of exclusively from-scratch cooking by obtaining many *Wigilia* items pre-made at Polish markets or grocery stores. See page 44.

⁴¹ "Przez cały dzień wigilijny zachowywano ścisły post, tylko mężczyznom ciężko pracującym gotowano w południe żur z grochem." Maria Ginalska, *Polskie Boże Narodzenie* [Polish Christmas], 89.

food preparation. His work necessitates her rewarding him. 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-modern 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 have effective utility in ensuring, not simply food for the holiday meal, but nourishment for the entire year.⁴²

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.⁴³ 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.

⁴² Knab, 30-31. 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.

⁴³ Raymond Firth, *Symbol, Myth and Ritual*, 243-6.

Catherine Bell discusses the dynamics of performance as a ritual component in *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. In her chapter on "Characteristics of Ritual-like Activity," Bell discusses the importance of performance as a frame for participant understanding of the ritual's significance. "[D]istinctions between sacred and profane, the special and the routine, transcendent ideals and concrete realities can all be evoked by how some activities, places, or people are set off from others... . By virtue of this framing, performance is understood to be something other than routine reality; it is a specific type of demonstration."⁴⁴ Male and female members of Polish households might have taken on different roles in getting food to the table for *Wigilia* supper, but the endpoint was a shared endeavor and they enacted roles no different than everyday life—the performance that would have been apparent to participants as an event out of the ordinary was the extraordinary effort of obtaining and preparation of food for the holiday and the eating of a larger-than-usual meal, not who was doing the work to obtain and prepare it.

The gender roles reinforced by the division of labor in pre-modern Europe had less performative 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; the true origins of the food are hidden by the swift disposal of commercial packaging, name-brands masked by the pretensions of "home-made" foods.⁴⁵ Following Bell's conception of "performance," we can understand that the obtaining of food for modern-day Thanksgiving dinner has less ritual significance because buying food at a grocery store does not represent a departure from everyday practice. 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

⁴⁴ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 160.

⁴⁵ Wallendorf and Arnould, 547-8.

help with the dishes.⁴⁶ Just as the performance of group and individual identities in contemporary American Thanksgiving meals preempts concerns over whether there will be food on the table, the occupation of obtaining and preparing food eclipses the performative significance attributable to gender roles at pre-modern *Wigilia* supper. While men and women clearly performed gendered roles in preparation for *Wigilia* supper, no evidence suggests that *Wigilia* highlighted a performance of roles that differed from other days of the year. The evidence does suggest that the preoccupation with the basic attainment of food took center stage.

3.3 The Effectiveness of Divination and Preventative Magic

To draw a contrast 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-modern 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."⁴⁷ 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 argue that its dominant modes according to Grimes' scheme are "Decorum" (described by Grimes as "interpersonal" and "expected") and "Celebration" (called by Grimes as "expressive" and "festive").⁴⁸ While the pre-modern Polish ritual of *Wigilia* may not exclude these modes, my reconstruction points to "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.⁴⁹ Magic is an essential

⁴⁶ Ibid., 546.

⁴⁷ Grimes, 40.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 48-50, 57.

dimension of understanding pre-modern ritual because most of the perceived effective utility among participants hinges on the magical quality of ritual items. It was, after all, the belief that magical power could be conferred to the table straw or the *oplatek* or the *snopy* that bestowed any sense of effective utility on their use. 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."⁵⁰ For the pre-modern Pole, *Wigilia* supper and its surrounding rites bore the 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 pre-modern *Wigilia*, however, the coming year's food supply and the health of the household and family were acutely, and immediately, at stake.

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-modern peasant. Linda Ivanits discusses the role 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."⁵¹ While, over time, the customs of the pagan sometimes proved amenable to Christian meaning, their effective utility to the pre-modern peasant did not necessitate a Christian symbolism.

⁵⁰ Muir, 15-16.

⁵¹ Ivanits, 5.

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."⁵²

The laity of pre-modern 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 and its being imbued with healing properties, stones moving in their beds, and trees and flowers blossoming despite the time of year.⁵³ While the transformation of 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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

⁵² Muir, 16.

⁵³ Bystroń, 42; Ginalska, 87; Knab, 30, 40.

⁵⁴ Ivanits, 26-9.

⁵⁵ Bystroń, 42.

Indeed, *Wigilia* was believed by pre-modern 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.⁵⁶ 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 considered fortunate. This first visitor could also be taken as an indication of whether more male or more female calves would be born to the farmstead in the coming year.⁵⁷ Divinations, such as the candle smoke ritual, took place at supper, as well; 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.⁵⁸ The results indicated by these divinations were believed to have an effective correlation with the practitioners' fortunes in the coming year.

Wigilia was, essentially, a landmark day for the pre-modern Pole—a day where the past and coming year were considered and acutely at stake. Not all indicators of the next year's fate were beyond the feasters' control. They had significant control over, for example, numerically based magic. The number of feasters, for instance, around the *Wigilia* table held the power not only for divination, but also for preventative magic—effective utility in the practitioner's very hands. 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 man or woman would not marry.⁵⁹ 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,⁶⁰ but

⁵⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁷ Knab, 30.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁹ Ginalska, 88; Knab, 36.

⁶⁰ Ginalska, 88; Knab, 39; Silverman notes in her interviews with Polish Americans who practiced *Wigilia* customs before immigration, that some reported even numbers of dishes served while others reported odd numbers. In both cases, the chosen number was a regularized custom. See page 41.

rather the fact that the feasters had a way to control the magic believed to be afoot during *Wigilia*. The indicators differ, but the intention does not—the customs were believed effective to a specific result in the coming year. As Edward Muir argues (quoted above), the rituals of pre-modern 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.⁶¹ It is this hands-on magic that seems most effective, and thus of greater value to the pre-modern 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 peasants, and so they found numerically based magic useful, perceiving that it could help them avoid the inherent dangers of their lives by effecting a positive change.

These customs of numerically based magic did not survive among the Polish Americans I interviewed, despite the interviewees' contentions of poverty.⁶² 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 such as 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 to 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-modern European Poles took such pains to guard against. The

⁶¹ Muir, 16.

⁶² Silverman also notes that divinations and *Wigilia* rituals involving livestock did not survive among the Polish Americans she interviewed. See pages 43-44.

numerically based magic of the *Wigilia* supper had ceased to have the effective utility it held for medieval and early modern Poles.⁶³

A few of my Polish American respondents grew up on small farms 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-modern Poland. A complicated series of decorations from natural and agricultural products adorned the *Wigilia* supper space in pre-modern 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.⁶⁴ These traditions were often layered with Christian meaning. The grains and straw were thought to make the *Wigilia* supper room resemble the manger.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ More straw was spread on the *Wigilia*

⁶³ The contrast of life in America for European immigrants during the modern period in terms of plentitude is also observed by Hasia Diner, who has investigated the immigration transition for Irish, Italian and Jewish immigrants. See pages 45-6, 48-9.

⁶⁴ Ginalska, 88-89; Knab, 33-35.

⁶⁵ Bystroń, 40.

⁶⁶ Knab, 43.

⁶⁷ Bystroń, 41; Knab, 40.

supper table and under the tablecloth.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ The *snopy* and *opłatek* rituals, Knab contends, are leftovers from winter solstice rituals meant to ensure fertility for a bountiful harvest.⁷¹ Bystroń cites a seventeenth-century account from Protestant observer Adam Gdacjusz, who rebukes the *Wigilia* custom of straw and grains for decoration because he perceives its origins as pagan.⁷² 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.⁷³ The careful use, however, of these agricultural products for protection through preventative magic shows the immediate relevance and effective utility of these customs for most pre-modern 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 directly effective.

Why, then, did not the majority of these customs survive among the Polish Americans I interviewed? It would be understandable for such traditions to be lost among urban Polish

⁶⁸ Bystroń, 40; Knab, 35-6.

⁶⁹ Knab, 36.

⁷⁰ Ginalska, 88.

⁷¹ Knab, 35.

⁷² Bystroń, 41.

⁷³ See Bystroń, 40 for a discussion of *Wigilia* in wealthier Polish courts and manors.

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.⁷⁴ The preservation of customs in twentieth-century America is necessarily different than in pre-modern Poland. Poles in America did preserve a number of these customs.⁷⁵ However, since they often lacked a causal or effective utility, the customs were preserved for different reasons, and thus depended on memory for survival. Many customs were perhaps preserved for purposes of nostalgia, or for the performance of cultural identity as a means of contrast to neighboring ethnicities. Pre-modern Poles did not live in cities and towns with a variety of immigrants from other European countries and thus the performance of *Wigilia* customs was not a meaningful method of cultural distinction. 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 adopted the practice.⁷⁶ Because it became so widespread in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Bystroń must point out, even to a twentieth century Polish audience, that it was originally a German tradition. Bystroń also points out that *kucja*, a *Wigilia* dish mentioned by Niemcewicz, a minor nobleman in the eighteenth century, 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,

⁷⁴ Silverman notes that this custom was preserved among a goodly number of her respondents. See page 44.

⁷⁵ See Silverman, for a more detailed discussion of Polish folklore as it survived the migration to America.

⁷⁶ Bystroń, 42.

living in the twentieth century in the age of a modern Polish nation state, may see a cultural distinction, but if self-identified Poles did not see it as "un-Polish," then it would have been ineffective for marking ethnic distinction in pre-modern times, especially mixed in with customs that even Bystron admits to being widespread in Poland. The preservation of folk customs in pre-modern Poland happened because of effective utility. Householders saw these customs of protective magic as directly effective to their lives in the coming year; Polish immigrants to America may have preserved customs based on nostalgia and memory for the purpose of ethnically distinguishing performance—improved economic conditions and access to food rendered the magically effective functions irrelevant.

3.4 Consequential Significance of Ritual Time

At this point in the elaboration of *Wigilia* customs, 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-modern 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."⁷⁷ 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. Celebrating the "night before" anticipates the climactic arrival of the focal holiday.⁷⁸ Indeed,

⁷⁷ Knab, 29.

⁷⁸ Anna Brzozowska-Krajka, *Polish Traditional Folklore: The Magic of Time*, 116.

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*.⁷⁹ 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-modern Polish winter holiday season was like an average novel—most exciting right before its climactic moment?

3.4.1 Wigilia Origins in Winter Solstice Night. 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 yearly festival to which the Christian holiday of Christmas was later appended.⁸⁰ 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

⁷⁹ Bystroń, 39.

⁸⁰ Muir, 60.

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.⁸¹

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: "Those not present were remembered; they were recalled and empty places were left for them at the table... often food was left on the table through the night for the spirits of the dead."⁸² 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 said to be active even during *Wigilia* day, when certain behaviors ensured that the living would not offend or get in the way of the spirits of the dead.⁸³ Such fastidious attention to the dead may first seem nostalgic and of little effective value to the pre-modern 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-modern 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 many 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 *domovye* and other malicious

⁸¹ Ginalska, 84-85.

⁸² "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.

⁸³ Ginalska, 86.

spirits, and showing his finicky tastes in accepting food offerings.⁸⁴ Dead ancestors likely seemed more accessible than the Christian God 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 to preexisting beliefs in life after death (i.e. dying and rising Christ), 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.

3.4.2. Feasting on a Day of 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* 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."⁸⁵ In earlier medieval times, a similar fasting schedule was likely followed throughout the year.⁸⁶ "In the Middle Ages there were 192 fast

⁸⁴ See Ivanits, Chapter 4 for a discussion of spirits of the home and farmstead, including the *domovoi*.

⁸⁵ Knab, 21.

⁸⁶ 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.

days a year. The more zealous fasted additionally on numerous vigil days dedicated to popular saints, sometimes Mondays and Fridays, and so the fast days were numerous. Besides meat, during 51 of these days, one was also not free to eat milk, butter or eggs."⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰

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.⁹¹ Even those who could afford more than their own land produced ate meat only rarely: "Meat appeared rarely on the table, but they did more often have fish."⁹² Even those who raised livestock were probably loath to slaughter the animals, their greater value being the milk and eggs produced for daily consumption. While interviewing Polish-Americans who grew up in households that raised livestock, I gained some important insights into the value of animal resources—a value likely appreciated by earlier Polish farmsteaders, as well. Many of my Polish-American respondents

⁸⁷ "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.

⁸⁸ Ginalska, 87.

⁸⁹ Bystroń, 40; Knab, 39.

⁹⁰ Bystroń, 40.

⁹¹ Knab, 39.

⁹² "Mięso pojawiało się na stole rzadko, częściej natomiast trafiały się ryby." Bockenheim, 12.

recalled that, despite a limited amount of other resources, cream and butter were always plentiful because of the cow's daily milk production. It would follow, then that it was not economically feasible for most pre-modern 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. And 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 might not have been acute to them. Since the feast would have been meatless anyway, for most Poles, then it made practical sense to have it at the more magically potent time. In the end, it was the timing of the meal that held effective value in the minds of pre-modern Poles; the eating of meat did not have this effective value, and had many practical considerations to select against it.

4.0 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' fieldwork questions in mind, this study poses and speculates upon similar questions relevant to the historical context of pre-modern 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 that addresses issues of historical ritual practice. While the historical *Wigilia* ritual is not immediately observable, this study puts forth a conclusion that would not be possible by focusing on doctrinal 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, aspects of this historical ritual.

Despite the limitations on "observing" historical ritual, a preliminary distinction between the patterns of pre-modern European folk ritual and the patterns of modern folk ritual has emerged. Based on the elements of *Wigilia* I have reconstructed in this study, I argue that the predominant reason for survival of pre-modern customs was their effective utility or value for the participants. While modern, first-world customs may also have some practical value or perceived effectiveness, they are complicated by a number of additional factors that do not feature in the pre-modern 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, for example, to define

themselves within melting-pot America. 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, which form a complicated dynamic in modern folk ritual, did not play into pre-modern folk ritual. Folk custom was determined by effective utility as perceived by its participants. Preparing food for the supper and obtaining straw and *snopy* and *oplatek* for the *Wigilia* space and supper table all fed into larger concerns of bounty and fertility for the year ahead—when followed correctly, these customs were believed to effect fortune for the household in the coming year. Christian layers of belief and church dictates were accommodated when they suited—or at least did not clash with—the causal agricultural magic that was essential to the pre-modern people who participated in this ritual. Elements of the ritual were preserved because they bore a tangible result in the perceptions of those who kept them, and the effectiveness of their perceived value and relevance kept certain *Wigilia* customs in practice for pre-modern Poles.

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