

Druid Adept Essay – The Morrigan of Sovereignty in Ukraine

Ovate-Druid Adept - Gregor MacGregor, Ancient Order of Druids in America

Who I Am and Why I Went

Perhaps you will indulge me an introduction before I tell you how I came to be in Ukraine and how being there would be a culminating aspect of my becoming a Druid Adept. My name is Gregor MacGregor and my druid name is Burn Faith – Water Seer, in honor of my long professional, community, spiritual, and ecological ties to the element as the inhabitant of a dry land. I joined AODA in 2017 after, like many of you, I found that I was already walking the green path. My home in the practice has been one of our contemporary interpretations of the Ovate, one who can interpret the natural world around us and situate humanity within it.



My Ovate Companion project was establishing a cottage-food bakery in my home during the pandemic lockdown. It was a commercial venture that quickly grew beyond my expectations. The Ovate work in the back of house was to understand the science of baking: how percentages of protein, the milling coarseness of flour, and the type of eggs impacted the taste and keeping quality of the food. The other goal was to create a local economy which could help sustain other local producers while grounding our customers in the place we lived. I traded bread and coffee cakes for duck eggs from a local farmer, sourced milk from a local dairy, milled heritage grain in-house from a local farm. These sources allowed me to explain how all of these ingredients contributed to the freshness and flavor of the goods to those who ate with us. Sharing that understanding, I could see people shifting their perception of food, what was available locally, and their connection through understanding the process.

Service accompanied education. Those in need reached out, so I fed them. The community donated money to make care packages for firefighters during our most intense wildfire season to date. After Afghanistan fell, I worked with local sponsors to bring care

packages full of Afghan and American baked goods to the refugee families moving into our area, to literally and figuratively break bread. I wanted them to feel welcome, to know in a time of personal turmoil that people were thinking of them. To me, it is this holding, sharing, and acting on deeper knowledge that exemplifies the role of a modern druid in the world. While I would complete my Adept work as an Ovate first, my Companion project very much served as the basis for my Druid Adept project.

I will say here that the Druid path is the one I have struggled with most. I can feel the Nwyfre of the trees, streams, and stones. I can hear how the snow speaks in the high mountain air – warning, “I am not strong enough to bear you safely across.” Much as I can interpret the physical world as an Ovate, I feel I can sense and interpret the flow of energy around me. But, I’ve found it difficult to call upon it much as I’ve found it difficult to call upon any deity. However, the historical aspect of the druid as a leader has always resonated with me.

My own path of leadership progressed from high school sports captain to art school student government, to Army ROTC Cadet and an Army officer career cut short by several disabling conditions. As an attorney and professor, I’ve found my place again leading students and colleagues through community-engaged scholarship and public service. In 2023, I saw an opportunity to develop my spiritual practice, lead others, and connect with my Ovate work by travelling to Ukraine to do humanitarian work.

In war, soldiers suffer alongside the communities touched by the destruction of conflict. The mass dislocation of civilians by combat operations, the destruction of homes, towns, and cities, and a disrupted economy all bring suffering. I was proud of the work I did with Afghan refugees, but I knew there was more need in the world. Physically, I knew I had the courage and knowledge to go into a warzone. I had also developed the skills to feed people. As a leader, I could activate my community to pay the expenses to get there and to provide aid. But what did it mean to go as a Druid, spiritually? What does it mean to work in a warzone when “without peace our work cannot proceed?”

Through introspection, meditation, and reading I found my connection with The Morrigan. From reading the experiences of others, I knew she could be difficult to call upon, that she did not always answer, and that her multitudinous roles and forms could render her difficult to work with. I would also not be calling on her for victory, as I was not going into combat. The more I read, however, the more I came to recognize her complexity was not limited to her forms but also to her relationship with war itself.



Yes, she is associated with war – but this association does not come without consequence. Multiple times she and Cu Chulainn wound one another in situations where conflict could have been avoided. The goddess is not simply one of victory or fierceness but represents the risks and injuries of war that not even she can avoid. This duality, and her aspect of sovereignty, is best encapsulated by her dual prophecy at the conclusion of the Battle of Moytura. The battle won, she foresees an age of plenty and of accomplishments for the victors – of whom she is one. However, she then prophesies an end to the world, full of famine and injustice. I cannot read

this as anything but a cautionary tale of violence, and the ever-present injustice that underlies it.

Druids were leaders in worldly and spiritual matters. In their many roles they could separate armies on the battlefield, join in battle themselves, and lead in their own right. While we no longer lead in battle, I sought to lead my various communities to alleviate the suffering of those under duress and do spiritual work to stand between the armies of Ukraine and Russia. As Brân the Blessed sought to right a wrong in Branwen ferch Llŷr, he said “let he who would be chief first become a bridge for his people.” I went to Ukraine with a wish to be a bridge from conflict to peace, from suffering to relief.

In the Heat, Standing by the Oven

After 49 hours of travel, during which we lost our suitcases, we found ourselves in Kharkiv. The children’s hospital in Kiev had just been bombed before we departed, and the Russian Army opened a new front to capture Ukraine’s second city, our ultimate destination. What had been a relative haven of safety in the far eastern portion of the country was now being bombed daily while the villages on the country’s border were being reduced to rubble. A year earlier, my friend from our Army days, Greg, and I were standing in the streets of Denver when I

told him I felt like I needed to go to Ukraine. I had read articles on schools in Kharkiv being built underground to safeguard the children. I couldn't help but imagine my family in that situation, and how I would hope help would come for them. Greg didn't surprise me when he said he wanted to come with me.

Now we were in a half-basement, former video game and hookah lounge, as the outside 100-degree heat was compounded by the oven, hot water stations, and burners. It felt very much like the name of the organization: Hell's Kitchen. One descends from the street into a combination front office, sitting and coffee area, and general loading zone. In one direction were the changing room, bathroom, small kitchen, and storehouse – loaded by bucket brigade through the front door or the room's window. The other direction housed the kitchen, bakery in the front half and kitchen in the back half. An insulated storage closet with an AC unit served as the refrigerator, as well as a spot to dawdle and cool down. A long staircase lined with potatoes and other sundries led to the back courtyard of the building where vans loaded clothes, medical supplies, and food to send out to the countryside. It was also the home of three cats who could easily charm some chicken from your lunch bowl.

We baked about 1,200 rolls a day to accompany the some 900 meals made by the kitchen crew to distribute to hospitals, church groups, and displaced people. The recipe differed from day-to-day depending on which Ukrainian volunteer was in charge. Sasha preferred a really stiff dough that created chewy rolls. Olena, a pâtissier from across town, was more willing to let you toss a handful of rosemary and thyme into some of the batches. Ulyana loved to blast Ukrainian pop over the sound of mixers, chopping, sinks running, and sheet trays sliding on and off the bakery racks. We laughed and chatted as we measured ingredients, formed the rolls by pinching method (for beginners) or by rounding them under our cupped hands on the stainless-steel work bench.

Hell's Kitchen works with incredible efficiency for an organization completely staffed by volunteers. The founders, a couple who used to work in IT, keep the schedule for Ukrainian volunteers while an American and a Brit manage the roster of foreign volunteers. Most of the regular Ukrainians are women in their 50s and 60s who began working in the kitchen when the war began and found their community in the work. Greg and I came in for the early shift to cut potatoes with Martin, a working-class Scot from Glasgow full of rough and tumble stories from industrial towns in northern England. The ladies in the kitchen didn't speak English but would tug on your sleeve to haul buckets of soup, reach items on the high shelf, or chide you for cutting the potatoes in the wrong size by pantomime. Greg, Martin, and I would each put a potato cube at the top of our cutting boards for reference as Martin regaled us with tales of pub brawls and men of ill-repute being dangled from the roofs.

With seemingly endless potatoes cut, and endless more to go, Greg and I would transition from cook prep to the bakery to begin mixing dough. Our ragtag bakers would arrive around 10am, no middle of the start nights here, because we had to wait for the kitchen staff to finish with the oven before we could begin on the rolls. Depending on their workflow, there could still be chicken baking at 11am and we would have to put our dough in the refrigerated storage room to slow down its fermentation – not that I complained about some extra time cooling down.

There was space for another oven, but the building could not be supplied with enough electricity to handle it, the rest of the equipment, and the apartments above us. Every day there was a delicate balance of what appliances were running at any given time, where even an additional fan to offer the crew some relief risked tripping the building. The benefit was no one had to come in at 3am to “make the donuts” as Fred the baker would say.

The linchpin of our crew was Kate, a former baker and now kitchen remodeler from the Pacific Northwest. She used her scheduling freedom to come to Ukraine for months at a time and tutor the stream of volunteers in the ways of dough. She could form a roll much faster than anyone else in the kitchen, though after a week of competition I could almost catch up with her.



Constantly on the move, she would portion out dough for the other four of us to form until we got backed up. She would then swap duties, making rolls like lightning until the backlog was gone and she got bored with the lack-luster (lack lightening) speed of her portioning replacement. I hung up a strip of paper by the scale to track high scores – how many times in a row could the portioner hit the 58-62 gram target on their first try, who could get as close to the perfect 160 rolls out of a mixer batch. If you’ve worked in a kitchen, you probably know that trash talk and laughter followed.

Some days the kitchen was overstaffed and we would get loaned out to other organizations that needed help and hands. One day we went to a warehouse to help a church group turn their 10,000 tons of aid into bags for the villages near the front. We lined up packages of oatmeal, tuna, cooking oil, and other essentials on tables and crates to form an assembly line. The tote bag got passed down and you fell into a meditative rhythm, counting off the number of each item meant for each bag. Two, one, two, two. In the better part of four hours, we had over 100 of these care packages stacked in the hallway, then into the vans, then unloaded into an unobtrusive storage unit on the edge of town. Later to be reloaded into the vans and taken into the warzone.

One day we loaded up with Mike, an American who had purchased a van in Romania to ride across the country looking for good deeds to be done. Strapped down in the back was 1,000 pounds of flour to deliver southwest of the city. We set out on the highways and passed through the various checkpoints, anti-tank obstacles ready to be drawn into the road, and usual commerce. Outside of the city we moved onto some regional roads through the gently sweeping

landscape. Thousands of acres of sunflowers and grain under an expansive sky formed the Ukrainian flag in panorama. We passed through small villages with monuments to the Soviet soldiers who repelled the Nazis on the Kursk front, as well as the many civilians who were murdered by that evil regime. There were no monuments to those millions starved by Stalin in the Holodomor in 1932, but you could sense the hue of that atrocity coloring the current conflict everywhere.

We arrived at a farm where we expected a crowd of people to distribute the flour to, but only the farmer couple was there. With poor cell service, we were unable to call back to the kitchen to suss out what was happening, but Mike had been to this farm before, so we knew we were in the right place. Finally, we got the okay to load the flour into a storage building for the couple to distribute to the community later. We tossed the bags of flour out of the van, to each other, and then to the man to his own pallet in a little concrete shed. The sun illuminated their garden beyond the house, and the commodity crops beyond that. A cat and three kittens, who all

responded to their names and whistles meandered around. I couldn't help but take a photo of the two of them, tangled up together in the grass with a bag of flour.



Before we left, the couple insisted in Ukrainian and pantomime for us to sit down for a meal. They set up a small folding table between their 1960s era tractor and garden in the shade. Some chairs appeared, as did the most incredible meal of my life. This was true farm to table at a farm and home without electricity or running water. Two kinds of cheese, a pierogi-like dumpling, delicious fried onions, and a raspberry compote drink that tasted like the summer. We took turns reading phrases from the Restaurant section of my phrasebook: “my compliments to the chef,” “what a wonderful atmosphere,” “five stars.” We would make several attempts at our mispronunciation then hand the book to them to read with laughter all-around. Before we left, they showed us a picture of their son who was fighting north of Kharkiv and said he was well. They loaded up bags of potatoes, onions, and racks of eggs into the back of the van for the kitchen and we were on our way. On the drive back I stopped to take a photo of a cow tethered in an apricot orchard, gorgeous in the dappled light.

Our next trip out of the city was perhaps closer to our expectations. We took two vans, Mike and Greg in one; and I drove the other van with Kate and Sletvana in the other. Sletvana

was an OBGYN who had been working in Germany at the time of the invasion who decided to come home to support her community. It wasn't uncommon for her to come into the kitchen in the morning and remark on delivering five babies overnight. How she then managed to work in the kitchen and run its social media was a wonder. She had her little dog that came everywhere with her, a tiny wiry thing, that did manage to remain on very good behavior.

We loaded the vans to the gills with macaroni packs, flour, cooking oil, several massive bags of clothing, and hundreds of pounds of medical supplies. We pulled out from behind the kitchen and started off to the eastern side of the city. I was thankful to be driving on the same right of the road as we pulled out onto the highway after weaving through several more sets of checkpoints. I was also happy to have a Ukrainian in the car in case we were stopped by the police or army. We moved onto a regional road after passing through the suburb of Chuhuiv. Between our departure and return a bomb would heavily damage an apartment block and injure nine people there.



We twisted through the countryside on highways with various lane closures to move traffic around bomb craters or the inevitable decay of a nation without the ability to do routine maintenance. On smaller wooded roads there were massive signs warning drivers not to go off the road to avoid landmines. We passed through one more small city before the road completely crumbled before us. We slowed down to 5 miles per hour and wove across the entire road, or drove with one wheel in the rutted dirt and one on the pavement, to avoid the worst of the potholes. We rolled across an improvised bridge next to a half-constructed one where it was clear the workers had simply evacuated it and left their traffic cones behind. The countryside alternated between swatches of farm and

forest. Mercifully, we were able to detour along some farm roads next to fields of hay and sunflowers for a few miles. But for the most part, we were swerving and bottoming out the struts in the old cargo vans.

What would have been a 45-minute drive before the war had come closer to three hours by the time we pulled in front of a large farm compound, shaded by Ukraine's ubiquitous apricot trees. A large crowd with all manner of vehicles had assembled in the clearing – sedans, scooters, tractors abound. We parked the vans at two ends of the clearing. Sletvana conferred with a local woman who had a few paper lists on a clipboard. For the next several hours the two women simultaneously managed the flow of residents and our efforts between the vans to hand out food

and medical supplies. The local woman seemed to be calling off names alphabetically, and we gave each person a multiple of flour and other goods based on their household size.

In the transitional moments we chatted with some of the younger folks who spoke some English and took selfies with others. It felt almost meager to give someone two bags of flour, a pack of macaroni, a bottle of cooking oil, a first aid kit, and access to the mass of clothing that had been donated to the cause. But the feeling soon went out of me as I saw how excitedly everyone packed up and chatted with one another. I went to use the outhouse behind the farm, owned by the woman who had organized the residents. Sletvana insisted I give her my phone so it didn't fall down the hole, and did it so emphatically I felt sure another volunteer had gone fishing for theirs on another trip.

We packed up and got ready to go. Two old women had laid out their large scarves on the ground, laid their sundries on them, then deftly folded and twisted the cloth over their shoulders. They started down the road the way we had come, I hadn't seen a home in miles and miles down that crumbling way. How isolated a community could be so close to Ukraine's second city – no running water or regular electricity, the nearest town hours away over very rough roads. Sletvana handed us some apricots to eat and instructed us to throw the pits out the windows, "This is how we have fruit in the future." Indeed.

After each shift we managed to find some entertainment around the city. Although the city's population had roughly halved since the start of the war and the Kharkiv offensive, it never felt overtly like the city under fire that it was. In a nearby park, a grandfather played with his grandson every day from 4pm to 6pm under the statue of a famous jurist. We went to a cat café for iced lattes and a chat surrounded by the city's youth. The volunteers liked to go to a hip outdoor area with different restaurants and bars in shipping containers. You could feel a determination for life to continue throughout the city, despite and perhaps in spite of the bombs and the sight of convalescing soldiers and civilians recovering from their wounds.

I don't want to run the risk of overly romanticizing the experience – though Greg and I both found great solace in feeding people in need. Before we left, in addition to getting my general affairs in order, I wrote letters to my wife and children for every major event in their lives that I risked missing. I also wrote a letter to Greg's children praising their father's qualities and accepting the responsibility if something happened to him. Dozens of pages and tens of hours in contemplation of the real risks of doing this work. But how much more responsibly could we use the skills and experience endowed upon us by society as soldiers? How could we look upon the suffering abroad without seeing our own community and children in it? I pray others would do the same for me and mine.



In our final effort, we purchased some much-needed equipment for the kitchen with the money we had raised from our own communities. “Gregor Jr.” was a new dough mixer with a higher capacity and speed than the second-hand, prone to breakdown, one on hand. “Greg Jr.” was a new chest freezer that replaced a broken convenience store ice cream chest that had been serving as an additional table in the kitchen. A \$2,500 equipment investment wasn't big-ticket philanthropy, but it was meaningful in a country with a minimum wage around \$1.50 an hour. Buying \$30 of pastries for all the volunteers was another. If there is one lesson I want to leave with people from my experience, it is this: throughout the world there is a great need, but you don't have to have great means to fill it. Even a small amount of money, helped by the dollar's strength, can ripple through the lives of others. If all you have is your hands, there are many places that need those hands put to work at home or abroad. A million-dollar donation would not have filled those aid bags, driven vans, or formed rolls. You can be the bridge for your people.



After a final dinner with the founders and other foreign volunteers, we set off for Warsaw with a feeling that our time had been too short. On the way to Kiev our train tracks were bombed, leading to a four-hour delay and the most incredible display of customer service. Ukraine Rail put everyone who had missed their connection to Poland, including us, in vans and raced the train to the border. We flew at 80-120mph while our driver happily chatted on his phone and streamed sports broadcasts while

weaving between heavy trucks through the countryside. I had been excited to have the front seat in Kiev, but I soon found myself regretting the position throughout the drive. We arrived at the border station five minutes before the train. What incredible effort for such a comparably minor inconvenience in the midst of a war.

A Druid's Interlude

We didn't return immediately home. Rolling our bags through Llandudno, Wales, Greg teased me that we shouldn't show my wife any of the pictures of the scenic seaside town. She would accuse us of going on a romantic vacation. I walked into Sacred Knot tattoo down a back alley and knew I was in the right place. Sean and Ash specialize in Nordic and Celtic tattoos, with an emphasis on historic and sacred symbols. The studio was filled with gilded skulls, weapons and armor, and the most incredible reference works that collected each variety of knotwork and symbol from the Bronze Age to the Book of Kells.

Ash freehanded a Greenman on my arm, resplendent with oak leaves, acorns, ogham, and the Awen. My decision to travel so far for a tattoo was reinforced by the conversations we could have about Iolo Morganwg, the meaning of the Awen, and what it means to be a Druid as I sat in the chair for two days. The symbols on my arm felt and still feel imbued with the power of our

tradition, emboldened through my living commitment to live a Druid's life for the last eight years.



We drove along the sea to Anglesey, the famed stronghold of Druidry extinguished by the Romans. The island fairly hums with the power of the past, ruined churches lay in meadows with neolithic sites, each shaded over with great gnarled oaks and moss underfoot. Standing in the mist, you can feel the nemeta beyond the veil, frozen in time and in wait, sustained by the incredible nwyfre of centuries old trees and the millenia of the stones. We came out of the woods and down into the pastures of the island. Down a single-lane farm path we found an unlocked gate large enough for a tractor and a pull-off just large enough for a single car. It seemed an unlikely spot for our destination, but a faint tread passed through the blowing grass into the field.

Atop a barely perceptible rise we came upon the Bedd Branwen, a boulder split in two surrounded by a ruined ring of cairns. Water ran on three sides of the field as we surveyed the ring. I posted Greg at the east portal as I opened the grove over this sacred site where Branwen's heart broke over the tumult of war. As I proclaimed peace to the four quarters, I reflected on the folly, pain, and ultimate futility in the war between the Irish and the Island of the Mighty. Two nations were destroyed in folly. I thought of the many crows that accompanied my travel through Ukraine and called upon the Lady of Sovereignty.

I call upon the Morrigan in her aspect of sovereignty to witness the Bedd Branwen. I call upon the Morrigan to bestow her wisdom upon those at war to know that pain and suffering come even in victory. That prophesies of peace and plenty may turn to realities of the world ending. Morrigan, I beseech you to return the spears and shields to their places of strength on the borders, that the valleys no longer clash with the din of battle, that plenty return to the people of Ukraine and Russia who suffer from involuntary aggression and the wasting of life.

Morrigan, in all your aspects, I call upon you to dispatch your powers and wisdom to these matters of sovereignty and war. Release these nations from folly.

