

Asatru, Heathenry and Germanic Polytheism

By Nicholas T. Martin

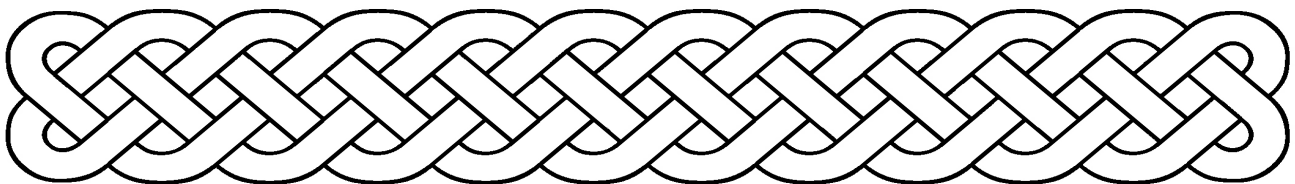


Asatru: a modern Icelandic word used by many to describe the reconstructed religion of the ancient Norse and Germanic people. This term is most commonly used in North America.

- "Asa": "Aesir" in Icelandic
- "tru": "faith" or "belief" in Icelandic
- "Asatru": "faith in the Aesir"

Heathen: a Germanic word for "country-dweller" or "lives on the heath". This term was used by early European Christians to describe those who lived in rural areas and still practiced the old traditions and spirituality. The word has since been appropriated by modern practitioners to describe the ancient Germanic religions (Heathenry).

Forn Sidr: an Old Norse term meaning "Ancient Custom". It's most commonly used in Europe, especially among the Scandinavian countries.

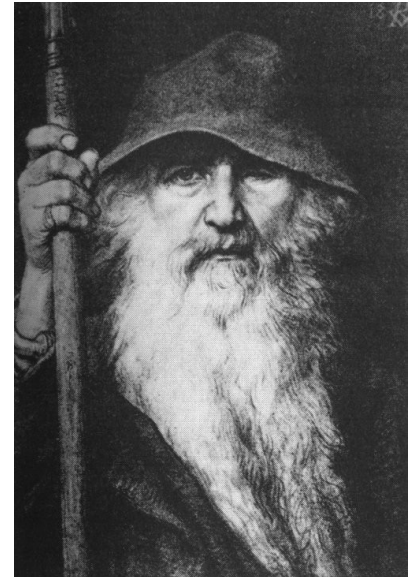


An Introduction to Divinity

The pantheon of gods and goddesses come from two distinct families; the Aesir and the Vanir. Stories in the Prose and Poetic eddas describe a war between these families that results in a truce and an exchange of hostages.

The Aesir

The gods and goddesses of the Aesir are predominantly focused on wisdom, war and order. Notable figures among the Aesir include:



Odin

Commonly regarded as the chief of the gods, and referred to as the "Allfather" due to his contributions in the creation of the cosmos and humans. The most popular stories of Odin include the sacrifice of his eye to gain great knowledge and foresight, as well as him hanging on Yggdrasil to understand the runes.

Thor

Thor is known as the "Thunderer", and is the son of Odin. With his hammer, Mjolnir, he fights off the chaotic forces of the Jotnar to maintain peace and order in the realms of the gods and humans. Most stories of Thor include various contests and duels with Jotuns, as well as giving aid to humans.

Frigg

Frigg is the wife of Odin, and often called the "Queen of Asgard". Stories of Frigg are scarce, but many associate Frigg with birth, marriage, nurture and love. When mentioned, she is commonly there to advise Odin and other gods, and acts as a motherly figure.

The Vanir

The gods and goddesses of the Vanir are greatly associated with fertility, abundance, and natural phenomena. The various stories written of the Vanir mainly speak about the hostages that were sent to live among the Aesir. Notable figures among the Vanir include:

Freyja

A goddess of great beauty, lust, and feminine energy. She is also a chief figure of war and combat. Half of the slain warriors that are carried to Asgard by the Valkyries go to reside with Freyja in her hall. She is also known as a great practitioner of the magic "seidr", and teaches Odin to wield it's power.



Freyr

Freyr is a greatly revered god that provides warm weather and bountiful harvests. He is also associated with power and male potency. The stories of Freyr describe him as the most handsome of gods. He was depicted alongside Thor and Odin at the ancient temple of Uppsala.

Njord

Njord is the father of Freyr and Freyja. He is mostly associated with seafaring, fishing, coasts and inland waters. It is believed that those who lose their lives at sea go to live with Njord in his hall, and is called upon by those embarking on journeys over water.

The Jotnar

The Jotnar is a third family of beings that are unruly and chaotic. The gods of the Aesir and Vanir often battle with these beings, though some are known as friends of the gods. Skadi is a prime example. She is an honorary goddess of skiing, hunting, and winter. All of the gods are descended from the Jotnar, and were preceded by them.

The Vaettir

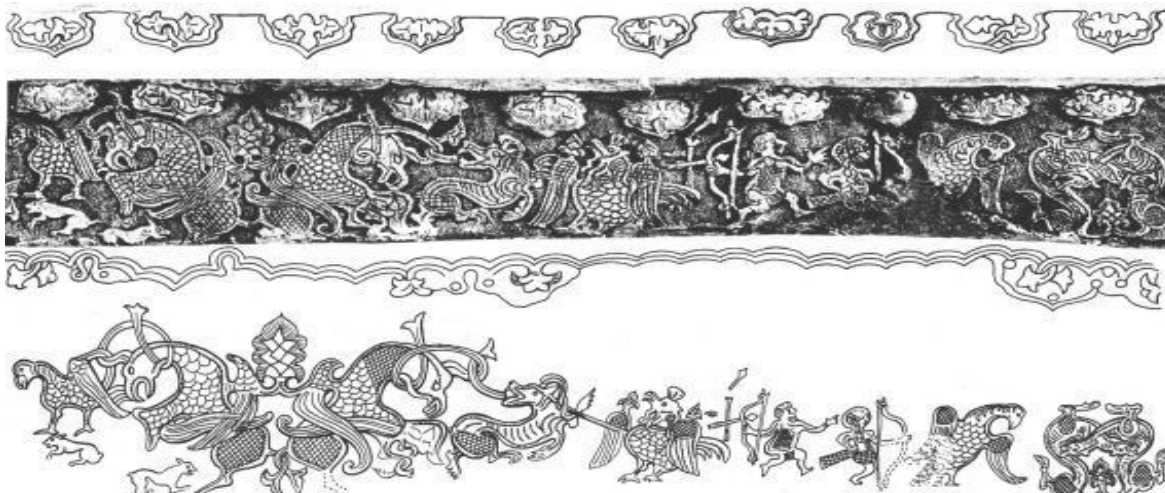
Vaettir, or wights, are lesser beings that reside in homes and in the natural world. These figures can be benevolent or malicious, and are seen as guardians of the area they dwell in. In the Viking age, travelers returning from sea would remove the dragon head from the bow of their ships to not offend the vaettir. People appease the vaettir in their homes and on their land with small offerings, and they are known to bring good luck and fortune when treated well.



The Ancestors

Ancestor veneration was a large practice in pre-Christian spirituality, and it is today. Other than physiological characteristics, our ancestors pass on other things to us such as luck and fortune. The act of remembering and telling stories of those that came before is a great honor to their memory,

and serves to continue the lessons that can be learned from their lives. Many modern Heathens believe in a concept of reincarnation, though not quite like the idea of rebirth in Eastern traditions. Various aspects of ourselves may be inserted into our descendants. It is a theory that the tradition of naming children after their parents and grandparents has its origins in the idea that the child may inherit positive qualities of that ancestor.





Oaths, Toasts, and Boasts

Heathen Ritual Practice

The stories told in the sagas and eddas speak of many forms of ritual. Baptisms, naming rites, marriages, and death burials are all spoke about, though little is recorded about how they were performed. Many modern Heathens practice these ceremonies using formulas synthesized from the source material available. Two specific ceremonies are widely practiced by Heathens today; Blots and Sumbels.

Sumbel

The Sumbel is perhaps one of the longest surviving traditions of our pagan past. Essentially, a Sumbel is ritualized drinking and toasting. Participants pass around a large drinking horn and make proclamations, tell stories or poems, and make oaths. Mead is the traditional beverage used, though alcohol can be replaced by a cider or juice. A typical format for a Sumbel is three rounds. The first for the gods and goddesses, the second to ancestors and heroes, and the last is a round for oath making and boasting.

Blot

Blots are more formal ceremonies that involve the giving the gifts to the gods and receiving gifts from the gods. A priest (gothi) leads the assembly through the ceremony that involves hallowing the space, readings from the lore, chanting runes, and exchanging offerings with the divine. There is great variation on how Blots are performed, but the idea of reciprocity with the gods is always the central focus. Blots are typically performed during key holidays, and are often ended with a Sumbel.

The Golden Rule?

Morality and Ethics

Virtually all societies and traditions have their own "Golden Rules". Many people subscribe to the affirmation of "Do unto others as you would have other do unto you". This concept can certainly fit in the Heathen worldview, though the motto "Do unto others as they do unto you" fits more accurately.



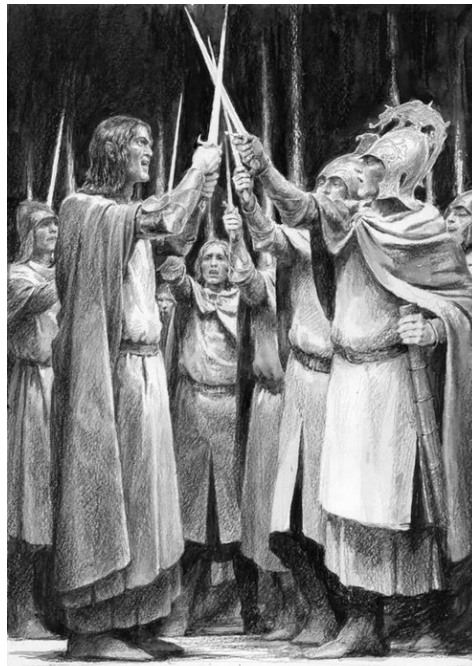
Wyrd and Orlog

Many view the concepts of Orlog and Wyrd as past and future respectively, though much nuance is lost in this explanation. These concepts are used to describe our lives, our interconnection with the beings around us, and our death. Orlog is translated as "first law" or "primal layer". Essentially, Orlog is the circumstances that came before us that are unchangeable. Economic class, to whom and where we are born, physical ailments we are born with, etc. Orlog also goes beyond our births. Each passing moment leaves a trail of Orlog behind us. Circumstances that have come and gone that cannot be altered but do effect the future. Wyrd, on the other hand, represents the present. The choices we make in the present steer our Wyrd, and intertwines with the Wyrd and Orlog of those that surround us.

Admittedly, these concepts are complex. Many people use metaphors to explain Wyrd and Orlog, typically as a web or a tapestry. Our life represents an individual strand in the larger tapestry. Our choices, and the choices of those we associate with, pull at our strand in various directions which adds to the tapestry. The oaths we make, and the endeavors and tribulations we face all alter the trend of our Wyrd and ultimately the Wyrd of all of the cosmos.

Frith

Frith, loosely translated as “peace”, is a core facet of the Heathen worldview and how we interact with the people around us. Frith is much like a contract we form with people we love and cherish. To be “Frith-bound” to someone is to promise to not harm or dishonor them, protect them, and seek vengeance in their demise. Most people demonstrate this concept though they are not aware of it. The dedication, or Frith, we hold for our families and loved one effects every decision we make. Our relationships of Frith are not limited to other people but with the gods, spirits, and our ancestors. Due to the importance of Frith, those that break their Frith bonds are seen as the lowest of people. In Antiquity, those that violated the Frith of their families or tribes were at best exiled from the community.



Reciprocity and Gifting

A large way in which Heathens build Frith is the act of gift giving. Though it seems natural to many to repay a gift with a gift, the act of reciprocity is seen as very sacred to modern Heathens. One gives a gift as a method of creating a debt on the other person. This isn't done maliciously, but as a way to build relationships and create Frith bonds. Once the gift is repaid, the cycle continues and binds people together. There is important etiquette with gifting. It can be seen as insulting to give a gift that the receiver could never repay.

The Nine Noble Virtues (NNV)

The NNV is a modern code of conduct used by many Heathens. The teachings in the lore, namely the Havamal, were analyzed and simplified into central tenets. These are not to be seen as commandments or laws, and the usage of the NNV is hotly debated.



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