

*May you find a path that fills your heart,  
and sanctuary wherever you go.*

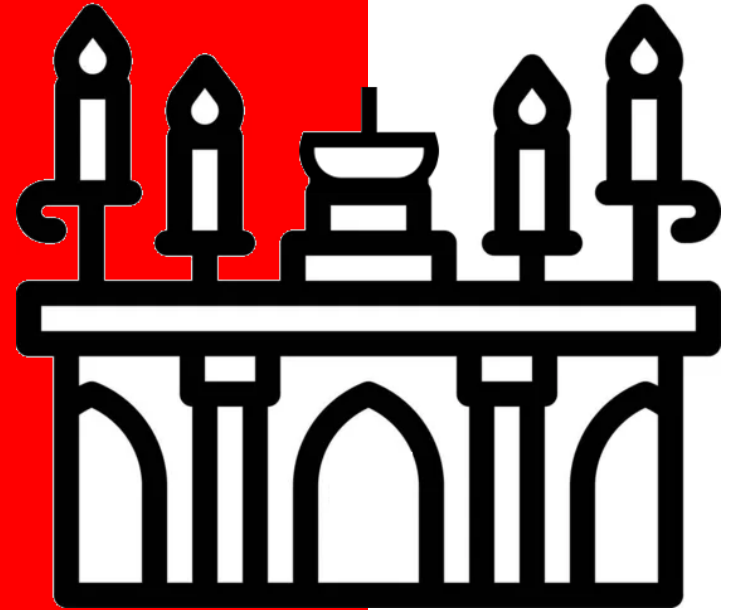


*Bright Blessings, and Safe Travels!*

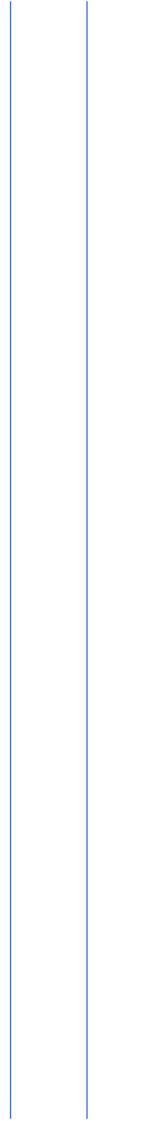
Altars  
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# Altars

## Sacred Spaces



By Ryan Robinson



## Liminality

A concept closely related to sacredness in Paganism is liminality. The concept of liminality was developed to describe the quality of ambiguity or disorientation in the middle stage of a rite of passage; when participants no longer have their pre-ritual status but have not yet achieved the status they will hold when the rite is complete.

Much of religion is focused on the liminal. The places and times where people find themselves separated from their previous identity, status, time, community, way of thinking, or set of beliefs. In this space, we can find ourselves seeking and it is often through a sense of the spiritual that we find ourselves in that something new. Everyone experiences events that place them in this state. New births, the grief of loss, and every transition in between can have a liminal quality. Often this is the state where humans are most likely to experience a sense of the divine in whatever form.

The various branches of Paganism focus on transformation and discovery and often spend more focus on directly exploring liminality than other religions. Ritual is a way to help bring us into that state, perhaps to help us with the transitions of the moment, to make it easier when life puts us in that state, or simply to seek experiences with the divine.



At their most basic level, an altar is a feature to indicate a space has been set aside for sacred purposes.

They may stand alone in the world such as a roadside shrine or be part of a larger space like a temple. They generally have a place of special importance.

Some version of an altar appears in nearly every religion or mystic practice. The design and specifics vary significantly based on the tradition and the space's purpose.

In Wicca and other mystical traditions, altars may be very specific types of workspace with particular tools and arrangements. Even in Abrahamic traditions an altar serves as a workspace for rites such as communion.

Another major type of altar is for the display of icons, images, and symbols of importance, often to provide offerings or be an offering itself. The ofrenda for Mexican Dios de los Muertos is a well-known example of this.

Most often, altars serve some combination of these purposes. For every person who will set up an altar, there are multiple ways to do so. How an individual sets up altars will vary as they develop their practice, intent, and life circumstances.

## Sacred Spaces

An altar serves to set a space aside for sacred purposes. Part of how it does this is establishing a place as liminal. Altars seek to create a sense of spiritual or religious emotion by inspiring a sense of mystery or awe, to make a space both and neither part of the physical world and the spiritual world. Liminal spaces facilitate transition and transformation, so they are where we go to seek the divine within and outside of ourselves.

Naturally liminal spaces exist between one destination and the next. They are edges, boundaries, or fault lines between where we normally experience reality. Places identified as liminal include borders, frontiers, disputed territories, crossroads, doorways, airports, train and bus stations, hotels, springs, caves, shores, rivers, volcanic craters, fords, passes, crossroads, bridges, and marshes. Places can become liminal at specific times outside their common context, such as the hallways of office buildings and schools at night. We find ourselves slipping into the liminal in places where people become disconnected and disassociated from their normal experiences.

When building sacred space we are seeking to create this sense of having broken away from our everyday reality. While the ideal is that every aspect of an area feeds into this, a well-constructed altar is a key piece.

### A Word on Altars

The modern English word altar derives from the Latin *altare* ("altar"). This is believed to be related to the word *adolere* ("burn"), making it a "burning place," and influenced by *altus* ("high").

The word *altare* displaced the native Old English word for such places; *wēofod*. That term came from pre-Old English *wīohbēod*; which was a combination of *wēoh* ("idol, image") + *bēod* ("offering stage, dish").

## Cleansing

Generally speaking, Pagans see very little in the world as "evil" or "dirty." Most often, cleansing is a shift between a sense of the world as mundane versus spiritual, or different aspects and experiences of the spiritual. This becomes important because specific aspects are sometimes not what we want at a specific moment.

If someone is cooking spicy food and switches to baking cookies they will wash their hands and clean their work space. This is a purification, and they do it not because they dislike spicy foods or think any of the components are dirty. They do it because, generally, you don't make cookies with the same things you make spicy food with. These things aren't "wrong" they're just "wrong for this situation," so we remove them.

At worst, the Pagan view of existing in the physical world is like gardening; you may be covered in dirt and sweaty, but there is nothing inherently wrong with that and it is the effect of a deliberate process towards a positive end. This dirt, sweat, and *life* collected while gardening is the equivalent of *miasma* on a human for living in the world. Much as we might wash off that dirt and sweat when going inside to sit down for dinner; we seek to cleanse ourselves of *miasma* when approaching spiritual beings or seeking spiritual states. Again, not because these things are bad, but because they are inappropriate for the situation.

Similarly, when leaving sacred spaces, it is often helpful to cleanse ourselves of the sense of heightened spirituality. To return ourselves to our mundane sense and awareness. We want to change out of the type of delicate, decorative clothes we wear to fancy places before we go back to the garden. When we do so, we bring those spiritual experiences, perspectives, and lessons with us – but it's still the wrong item for the wrong place.

## Sacred, Mundane, and Profane

The technical definition of being sacred is that something is set apart for special use or purpose. Typically, the intent is for use in connecting with or worshiping the divine or spiritual. The dictionary definitions of “sacred” and “profane” are antonyms; the original meaning of profane is simply to have a secular purpose. Over time, profane has taken on a sense of “desecrating that which is holy,” while the original concept may be more clearly described as simply “mundane.”

This difference between profane and sacred is key in Abrahamic and Gnostic religions. In these religions, the everyday world is perceived as mundane at best, if not blasphemously profane. For these religions, the spiritual world is an isolated, more pure experience which is the only pathway towards divine experience.

For many types of Pagan, there is less separation between the everyday, physical world and the spiritual world, and the divine is experienced through both. No part of either is considered innately blasphemous. However, aspects of both may become mundane through experience and complacency.

Pagans seek spiritual experiences, but this is not done to reject the physical. The intent is to experience another aspect of the world. To break down barriers to our experience of the divine. This process may require cleansing away spiritual manifestations just as much as aspects of the physical world. This is an effort to separate ourselves from the mundane or shape our experiences with the divine.

## Altar Activities

Once an altar is put together it exists to be used, even if that use does not involve being touched as with shrines. A single individual may have different types of practices that use different altars.

Many of the uses of altars are described by non-Pagans as “worship.” However, there is a significant amount of tension in the Pagan community around that term. The word alone can provoke religious trauma for many people. Even without specific trauma, “worship” is nearly always burdened with assumptions and presumptions. Pagans will explicitly and almost universally reject ideas like adulation, prostration, glorification, and submission. These are common and frequently highlighted aspects of “worship” in other religions.

When describing their activities Pagans tend to prefer words like honor and veneration. Individuals frequently perform devotions or devotional acts. Pagans often think of relationships with the divine and spiritual in terms of acknowledgment and relationships. These aspects of the broad concept of “worship” are common uses for altars.

Another common use for altars in Pagan religions are types of mysticism and other methods of gnosis. Spells, divination, and other forms of magic are used to connect with the spiritual and divine. There is a wide range of beliefs about the nature of magic and how it is approached and enacted. These differences lead to very different styles of altars.

The fundamental purpose of all these activities is connecting with the divine within and without, immaterial and manifest.

## Shrines

The most common type of altar in most religions is used for the display of symbols of importance, often to provide offerings or be an offering itself. These may be referred to as shrines. The term shrine comes from the Latin *scrinium*, "case or chest for books or papers." Shrines are spaces designed for connecting with specific deities, ancestors, heroes, martyrs, saints, daemons, spirits, elements, local spirits, fae, concepts, or other figures of respect.

It is common to describe shrines as "houses for the gods." This is a reasonable approach. However, all types of altars are designed to provide sacred space for spiritual work. Workspace altars provide an area to perform physical actions in search of spiritual effects. Shrines may be structured for mental and spiritual access without being touched or moved, but they are still spaces for spiritual work. Shrines may contain physical objects to be manipulated, often including offerings and votives of various types. However, spaces for physical work are typically very limited. They are often physically separated from a shrine entirely, creating a nearby and clearly associated, but physically distinct altar.

While many shrine-altars are dedicated to specific gods, spirits, and other beings, shrines can also be focused on ideals, concepts, or desired outcomes. These may invoke specific deities, particularly those appropriate to the enshrined intent. These can range from seasonal altars, marriage altars, health altars, or any other sort of ongoing spell-like intent that an individual wishes to build a specific space for.

## Fire Safety

When designing, constructing, or using an altar of any sort it is important not to lose track of mundane concerns. One of the biggest concerns is that heat in various forms is extremely common in altars. Open flames such as candles or lamps, heaters for wax melts, and smoldering incense can all result in fires. Remember that anything above such a heat source will be directly exposed. The first signs of a problem may be scorch marks or ash/soot deposits. However, the first sign may also be something lighting on fire.

Leaving fires burning unsupervised can quickly lead to larger fires. Even as small and contained as a tea light candle can become an out-of-control fire. For example, if something on a wall falls off and into the flame. Do not light candles or other fires under shelves; if a shelf has been above a flame check it for signs of soot or charring.

Even sources you don't expect can result in problems. A piece of advice given to some who purchase transparent crystal balls is to ensure they are covered when not in use. While there are metaphysical and psychological reasons why this might be important, the single biggest reason is they serve as strong lenses and can focus light sources into points of extreme heat.

One common set of altar instructions directs that altars should be built facing north and placing the element of fire in the south. These instructions are as valid as others and required in particular traditions. However, altars designed in this way can create an immediate and obvious burn and fire risk if not constructed and used with care, caution, understanding, and foresight.

If you use fire with your altar, keeping a fire extinguisher nearby is advisable. This may be one purchased at the store, a bucket of sand, or a large container of water.



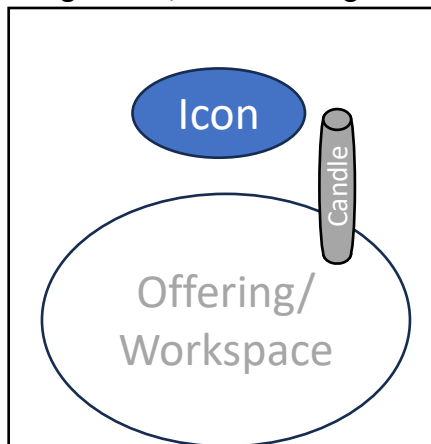
## Your First Altar

While many traditions have specific directions in how they build altars, the simplest altar is a flat space with some form of icon and a candle or incense. The icon should be whatever represents the aspects of the divine you feel drawn to; an ancestor, deity, the universe, your higher self, or something else.

This area should generally feel warm and welcoming. Depending on the subject, there may be other feelings. A loving mother goddess figure will often feel more welcoming and calm. Gods of conflict and passion may present that feeling of confrontation. Nothing needs to feel perfect; altar cloths can be changed, icons can be added and removed, candles and incense will burn away.

There isn't a need to perform a particular ritual to bless an altar. Preparing the place sets it aside for spiritual use as long as its sanctity is respected. Clearing, cleaning, and maintaining the altar can be ritual enough. However, many practitioners find benefit in performing a ceremony. Many sources provide complex, detailed rituals for such blessings. However, any basic cleansing followed by invocations of protection and welcome will serve.

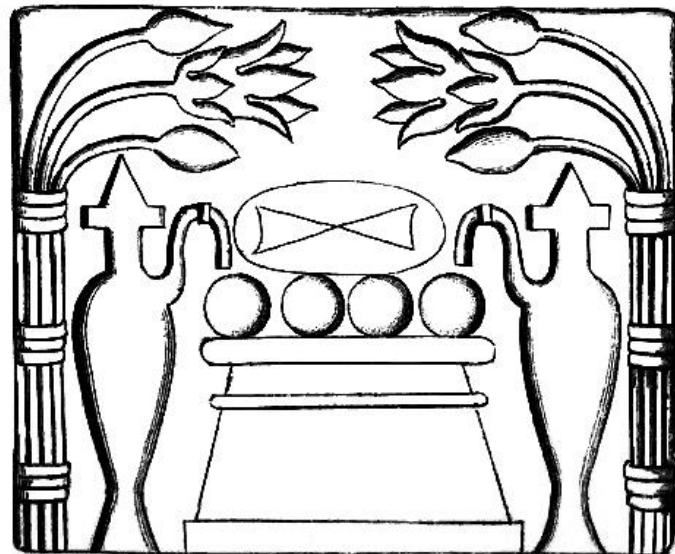
Once an altar is established, you can use it for any appropriate purpose. Use it to perform mystical workings, or use the icon as a token to talk to if you want to build a rapport with a deity or other aspect of the divine.



## Workspaces

This is the type of altar that most practitioners of Wicca and other mystical traditions focus on. Many Traditions provide very highly defined layouts and organization in terms of how working altar space is constructed. For more eclectic practitioners, a working altar's configuration may vary from activity to activity or have a specific design. Ultimately, these spaces are utilitarian; they have an open space to perform physical procedures, key tools within easy reach, and these aspects, along with the tools themselves, are designed to help provide a sense of sanctification for the activities being performed.

While this is most common in mystical Traditions like Wicca and those influenced by Hermetics, other Traditions use workspace-altars as well. Some Christian denominations perform communion consecration on altars; meaning these serve as a ritual workspace. Other Traditions include mundane activities as part of their practice, common examples are woodworking and metalworking. In these Traditions, a workbench may have shrine-components added to it to better serve to unify the mundane and sacred aspects of these devotional activities.



## Beginnings and Endings

Before you use your altar, you should take some time to place yourself and your space in the right frame. Seeking that sense of sacredness and liminality. Many traditions have specific exercises and methods for setting space. This includes practices like clearing and cleansing a space, setting circles, and calling basic blessings. The central theme of these practices is removing those stray distractions and threads of life from yourself and your space and setting to a single intent and purpose for the time.

Similarly to the opening of your practice at an altar, you should find a way to close the space when you are done. For each of the activities used to enter activity at an altar there are ways to exit, and the processes should be mirrors of one another. Thanking spiritual and divine aspects that you have sought interaction with and releasing them from your attention. Lowering and dismissing circles. Clearing away your work at the altar to return to the mundane.

These processes help even the most skeptical practitioner find that psychological and physical sense of the spiritual. For those who are focused on the mythic and mystic aspects of spirituality, transitioning into and out of sacred space in this way is both respectful to the spiritual and divine and maintains safe and clear boundaries between the material and immaterial worlds.

**Disposal** – This is probably the single most common disposition for offerings. Libations poured into the ground or fire, food left in the woods, placed into compost, poured down the drain, or put into the trash are all disposed of. Different methods have different types of impact including how much is simply waste. However, sometimes simply throwing things away is the only available option. Especially for those who practice in an urban environment.

**Donation** – In many cultures and religions, this is the preferred disposition. Giving offerings, whether food, material objects, or time to individuals or organizations helps build up the community in multiple ways. Items offered to beneficial spirits may be considered to carry incidental blessings to new owners as well as those who offered them. Key questions when considering donating offerings are; what is being offered, particularly whether it is appropriate for donation, whether the method of offering will change its fitness to be donated, and where the item will be donated.

**Self-consumption** – Many new practitioners are confused at this option. However, it is far more common, and less wasteful, than many other options. This is a particularly common method if a food item has been opened, is not able to be left to nature for safety reasons, and will not be safe or sanitary to give away. In group settings, self-consumption may include giving it to invited people in need of a meal and has been a major way that priests and clergy of certain religions received donations of food. In the Roman Catholic Christian tradition, it is tradition for the priest to drink any wine left in the communal cup after communion to prevent waste of the liquid they had sanctified. In private, personal practice, this may feel particularly strange. However, any offering is as much the consideration, thought, and action as the material itself.



## After Offerings

A common question in Pagan practice is how to deal with offerings after ritual. Items of particular concern are things like food and drink which will spoil if left. This becomes particularly important when leaving offerings on an indoor altar rather than pouring libations or leaving food outside. Part of preparing any offering is identifying what will happen after the ritual where it is given.

The first consideration should always be the actual item being used as an offering. Many things that humans consider safe to eat and drink can be harmful to animals and plants that are likely to be exposed to them. Chocolate is a common item valued by humans that can be extremely harmful to many animals. Even bread can harm many birds and other animals.

Items that aren't edible should be evaluated for how long they will last. If the purpose is an enduring shrine, offering items that persist for use at that shrine may be acceptable. However, leaving plastic and other items that don't break down can quickly make a sacred, natural space feel like a trash pit. Worse, these items may still directly interact with the animals and plants in an area. Tying items that don't degrade to trees can damage the plant as it tries to continue growing and animals will eat many things that aren't safe.

When you identify offerings that will not be left behind, the question of what to do with those offerings becomes important. A common idea among religions that provide offerings is that when the item is offered the spirits take what they want from it, leaving a mundane, empty item behind. This leaves the remainder to be dealt with properly for the mundane object. This generally falls into three categories; self-consumption, donation, and disposal. The important part is to identify the best afterlife for an offering before it is given.

## Individual and Shared Altars

When building an altar many things must be considered. The most fundamental is the purpose of the altar. We typically think of this in terms of the beings, forces, or ideas it is dedicated to. However, the question of who will be using it is equally important. There are three major styles of altar. The first is the personal altar, then there are two major styles of shared altar, the family altar and the public altar.

A personal altar is the simplest altar to make decisions about. The consideration is the distinctive knowledge, interests, and practice of the individual using it. It will likely evolve as the owner grows, learns, and makes appropriate changes to reflect their new perspectives and practices. However, the only part that might conflict with those changes is that individual. A personal altar is established in a private space. This may be a private office, sleeping area, or part of a shared space set aside for individual use. Some personal altars are outdoors, but these are nearly always on private land or in places that are difficult to find or reach.

As the name suggests, public altars are the other extreme from the privacy of personal altars. These are frequently outdoors or in shared and open spaces indoors. These altars are relatively likely to attract contributions from others who may not be known to the creator. While creators and maintainers of public altars aren't bound by the desires, beliefs, and practices of others – other people who have access to these altars will look for the things they expect, use them in their own way, and possibly make adjustments based on their traditions. The challenge of shared altars of any type is the push and pull of different people's expectations.

Family, household, or semi-public altars are shared by a small group. They are generally kept in spaces that have limited access to the public but open access to members of that group. Typically, these types of altars are found in shared spaces like a family home or a religious organization's building. Like public altars, these may experience tension between participants with their own expectations, ideas, desires, and specific practices. Families and groups that share practice reduce that tension, but it is never entirely eliminated.

## Movable Altars

The common image of an altar is a permanent table you use in a special room designated for spiritual work. However, the truth is, they come in all shapes and sizes depending on the practitioner's needs.

There are many reasons altars need to be movable. A common reason is for practice while traveling. Another is simply having limited space and not being able to dedicate it full-time to an altar. Unfortunately, it is also common for altars to need to be hidden because the practitioner is "in the broom closet," and those close to them may react poorly, destroying parts of the altar or even making the practitioner unsafe.

Movable altars can be as large as an entire collapsable table, put up for use and taken down after. Many objects used for an altar pass easily for decorations when separated, though others may need to be hidden.

Another type is a container altar. These have some sort of box or case that the altar objects are placed into for protection, transport, and sometimes hiding. These can be as large as a briefcase or suitcase or as small as a Mentos tin; commonly called pocket altars. There are a variety of sizes and shapes in between, including jewelry boxes, nightstands, and more. These altars may remain set up inside their case, use the case as a base on which to build the altar, or require some other surface to display the contents for use. Often, the practitioner wants this container to be something beautiful and special to represent the importance of the contents. This is especially true if the case is expected to serve as the altar. Sometimes, the container simply needs to be sturdy, protective, and otherwise unremarkable. In these cases, one of the significant altar pieces may be a cloth to cover that case when it is serving as an altar.

## Offerings and Votives

A common practice involving altars is the giving of offerings. Offerings may be enduring objects, such as figurines, pictures, books, and amulets, or they may be more temporary, such as food, drink, or candles. Another type of offering is devotional acts; behaviors or actions which have value to the subject. In all cases, practitioners see these offerings as imbued with worth to the transcendent, and that value or substance is given over to divine or spiritual beings.

These offerings are typically provided without the intention to be recovered or used; they have become sacred. They are regarded as gifts to those they are offered to, for use as they see fit. Crafted, enduring objects typically take the forms of icons, idols, or ritual implements dedicated to work with that being. More temporary material offerings like food and drink or devotional acts are best when considered in the context of what will be done with them or what they will produce after they have been offered.

Another type of offering is the votive. Most offerings are not linked to any particular need and represent a normal exchange. Votive offerings are provided anticipating a particular desire. These offerings may be provided either before the event or promised before an event and fulfilled after. A modern example of a votive given before action is the practice in broader society of tossing coins into a wishing well or fountain. Classical examples are Greek curse tablets; prepared and offered to the dead in exchange for action against others. For those votives provided after an event, this is like any object or action offered in fulfillment of a vow.

The term votive comes from the Latin *votum*. This word originally had the sense of 'expressing a desire.' This is the same root as vote, like in an election.

# Devotional Objects

## Icons, Relics, and Idols

These types of object are representational religious items with a religious purpose, subject, or connection. Icons and Idols are works of visual art; icons typically being paintings and while idols are sculpture. By contrast, a relic an object left behind rather than crafted. Typically, they are the physical remains or personal effects of an individual of significance.

A common misconception is that these items are themselves the focus of religious worship. However, these items serve one of two purposes; to help focus the awareness of an individual (practitioner, worshipper) on the subject (deity, spirit, concept, etc) or to draw the awareness/essence of the subject to the individual. Either way, the action makes the user feel closer to the aspect of divinity, spirituality, or concepts associated with that object.

Because of specific translations and interpretations of monotheistic beliefs the term “idol” generally feels derogatory. This has been characterized as the difference between icons and idols being that “our” religion uses icons while “their” religion uses idols. For those religions which condemn idolatry there are unending arguments about what qualifies. Orthodox Christians make regular use of icons, and share the use of relics with the Roman Catholic church. Even the crosses and crucifixes common in churches have been viewed as a type of idol; a sculpted representation towards and through which reverence is paid.

## Virtual Altars

Another option is a virtual altar. For some, the non-physical nature of an altar is part of their practice. Using intangible tools serves as a bridge for seeking interaction with intangible ideas, forces, and beings. Virtual altars are also used for many of the same reasons people have moveable altars.

Many people assume that virtual altars are an entirely new phenomenon; that they are the result of to digital age. However, constructed mental spaces, including virtual altars, were present in occult and spiritual circles for at least a hundred years before the dawn of electric computers.

Digital altars have become widely available in the information age. These can be created and accessed in numerous ways. Constructed pictures are used as backgrounds on a computer or saved in a hidden file. Online sites provide options to design, host, and use these options. Many modern games serve to provide people with space and materials they don’t have in the physical world and can host altars ranging from simple text-based designs to 3D renderings.

Using a virtual altar is only slightly different from using a physical altar. Often, the more a practitioner connects with the mental, spiritual, and mystical aspects of a practice the more they are able to feel embodiment through these virtual spaces.

## Altar Design

There are many ways the items and materials on an altar can be arranged. Some traditions have highly specific settings, with every totem and tool given a set place. What belongs on an altar is determined by the person using it and the practice it is being used for.

Traditions that have specific arrangements often do so because they are instructing particular, precise methods. Other, equally precise traditions have variations that may be minor or may be entirely different. When being taught a particular style of spiritual work, those types of detailed directions will be part of that instruction.

In general, altars where physical work is done should be designed with practical consideration. For example, items of respect and veneration that will not be physically touched go towards the back. They can be observed and observe what you are doing from these places of honor. They will also not be in the way of any movement you perform. If there is a physical workspace, it is typically at the front of an altar. Any objects placed between you and this space are likely to be bumped and possibly knocked over or disrupt your actions. This is equally true of statues and tools. Small tools that fit on an altar often go to the sides or between the workspace and items of veneration. This can include wands, knives, small cauldrons, sand, salt, libations, offerings, incense, extra candles, and other similar materials. They are reachable in these positions, but out of the way. If larger tools are used with work at the altar, like a besom or larger cauldron, they are generally kept either to the side or somewhere else within reach. They are unlikely to be on the altar unless their presence is the main focus.

**Tools** – The ritual tools a practitioner has depend heavily on their training and tradition. These tools commonly remain on or near their altar unless they are actively carried and used on a day-to-day basis.

**Knife** – There are a variety of ritual knives across Pagan practices. One of the best known is the athame; in some traditions, this is an object entirely sanctified to mystical use, not used for physical cutting, and largely considered part of an altar's working pieces. Some traditions have a second knife, called a boline. This knife is specifically intended for physical cutting. However, it may also only be used during ritual.

**Wand** – A common tool in Western mysticism, wands come in a great variety of forms based on owner and purpose. They are fundamentally sacred objects – useful only in the context of arcane, esoteric, and spiritual activities. It is very common for wands to be used at altars, and to remain with them when not in use.

**Lighter or Matches** – This can be a deeply mundane item, and kept off the altar. However, a source of fire can be an important ritual tool when lighting candles, incense, or other materials during ritual.

**Books** – Christians frequently display their sacred book as a centerpiece of shrine-style altars. Many workspace-style altars keep a place of honor and function for a Book of Shadows or other grimoire to be referenced during ritual.

**Crystals** – A common ritual object, many types of crystals and stones have significance to practitioners.

**Hammer** – Probably most familiar among Heathens, symbolizing a connection with Thor and the Aesir; hammers can be ritual tools with a variety of uses from binding to breaking.

## Altar Materials

Every altar is unique based on the practitioner constructing it and the purpose they build it for. An altar doesn't need any particular set of items to be legitimate or complete. However, some items are commonly used.

**Altar Cloth** – It is common to lay some sort of material over an altar. This serves various purposes. A practical and durable covering can protect working altars from wax, liquids, and other materials. Decorative cloths provide a visual and emotional base to build symbolism. Cloths can be changed based on the type of work currently being done, specific intent, the current season, or a holiday.

**Candles** – Often used in ceremony and ritual. Candles serve as points of focus and energy. There are many styles of candles; from tea lights and tapers to pillar and jar candles. Each has different uses. Different colors and scents are frequently used to represent different intents and purposes.

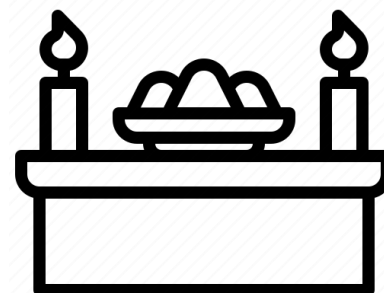
**Incense / Incense Holder** – The use of incense is common across religions. Scent is a powerful tool in finding different mental and spiritual spaces. A well-chosen incense holder provides another opportunity for symbolism and inspiring statuary.

**Devotional Objects** – Icons, relics, idols, and other items that provide inspiration and spiritual symbolism.

**Bowls, Cups, Cauldrons, and Chalice** – Containers of different styles serve a range of functions on an altar. They may be containers or active ritual tools. Bowls, cups, and chalices are often used to hold offerings, symbolic materials, or components of ritual. Cauldrons are designed to mix ingredients over heat, while chalices provide additional emphasis and splendor for offerings and libations. It is common to use a set of cups or bowls to contain representations of elements.

Altars that serve as shrines may be arranged in whatever manner suits the practices it is designed to support. Without a physical workspace, the direct practicalities of movement are less important. Ideas of framing and sight lines used in photography and theater staging can be useful when designing a shrine. Venerated figures should be easily visible and not blocked by others. However, specific items may be obscured and visible only from specific sight lines if there is a reason. Partially obscured trickster figures are not uncommon as are symbols representing lessons that are private or require initiation to learn.

Regardless of the design it is important that an individual building an altar understands the meanings of the symbols and arrangements. When using shared or public altars maintained by others some reliance can be made on the keeper of the space. However, anyone using it should be able to understand the basics of its intent.





## All the Pretty Things

There is a common experience practitioners have with altars, where we want them to be “perfect.” At some point we find ourselves wanting our altars to be “social media ready” - fit for glamorous pictures. We think we need all the specially made items that are sold at custom shops. We think our altars need to be designed and laid out to mathematical perfection based on the strictures of ancient orders.

What we need to remember is the purpose of our altar is to be a space for our spiritual work; whatever that is and wherever we are on that journey.

In all their forms, altars serve as a place and means to connect with the spiritual, whatever your sense of it. Sometimes, beautifully crafted and expensive tools used in exacting ways help serve the sense of wonder, magic, and myth within us. But that is not the only way to do so. It is easy for practitioners to be derailed by the demands of consumerism, social media comparisons, and attempts at “spiritual purity.”

All the things that are “required” for altars and are done with altars are optional and able to be modified based on your spiritual needs.



## But an altar has to be set up exactly...

No, it really doesn't.

Most types of modern Paganism have roots that include ceremonial high magic. Groups like Golden Dawn and Thelema have very specific, well-established, and widely known associations for elements, directions, and other considerations. They have specific tools that they direct to be arranged in specific ways. These associations can be very powerful and useful for those who connect with them.

It's not the only way.

A vast body of water setting to the physical north of your altar is as valid and can have as much power as knowing that the Hermetic astral temple constructs the watchtower of water in the west.

There are many “right” ways to set up and use an altar. The quickest way for an altar to be “wrong” is to be convinced there exists “the one and only true way.”

