

A [sample entry](#) from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

(London & New York: Continuum, 2005)

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Odinism

Odinism refers to the modern reconstruction and revival of pre-Christian Germanic heathenism centered on the pantheon of ancient northern deities in which the god Odin (variously called Óðinn, Woden, Wodan, etc., in the different older Germanic languages) is a principal figure. Odinism is only one of a number of generic designations that might be used by practitioners to describe their beliefs; the term *Ásatrú* (“loyalty to the gods,” a modern coinage derived from Old Norse) is in equally widespread use today. Odinism may in some instances refer to a less ritual-oriented and more philosophical variant of Germanic heathenism than *Ásatrú*, or one that places a marked importance on racialism, but such distinctions are rarely consistent or precise within a sub-culture that generally eschews dogmatism.

Odinism is a polytheistic religious system that also emphasizes the reverence of past ancestors, the acknowledgment of archaic wisdom contained in mythological tales, respect for ethnic heritage and the continuance of folk traditions, and the maintenance of a heroic bearing toward life’s challenges. Some prominent practitioners have described Odinism as a “nature religion”; this is not surprising given that in all its important aspects – cosmology, outlook, and practice – strong connections to the natural world and its forces are evident.

A central feature in Odinist cosmology is *Yggdrasil*, the World Tree (usually conceived of as an ash or yew), which symbolically connects the nine worlds that are variously inhabited by gods, giants, humans, and other beings. A number of animals also live within the tree; their activities seem mythically to represent the dynamic interactive forces of what could be termed the greater “multiverse.” It was also on the tree of *Yggdrasil* that Odin hung himself in a ritual of self-sacrifice, thereby gaining his powerful understanding of the mysteries of the runes: primordial Germanic linguistic, cultural, and magical symbols, many of which directly relate to aspects of the physical world (various rune names refer to trees, animals, and natural phenomena). In Germanic creation mythology, the first human beings were created when Odin and his brothers took two trees, *Askr* and *Embla*, and bestowed consciousness upon them.

Odinism posits a cosmos full of divine and natural energies, operating both within *Midgard* (from Old Norse, *Midgarðr*), the world inhabited by humans, as well as in transcendent domains where the gods and other non-

human entities reside. The gods travel freely between these worlds and thus can and do interact with humans. Gods and humans are also subject to their position within both a personal and a collective *Wyrd* (from Old Norse *urðr*), or “fate”; this does not predetermine every lesser action, but rather exerts influence upon the overall course of life. Although it is believed that the distinctive essence or soul of a human being will depart for another realm after death (various specific possibilities are described in the mythological literature), the primary emphasis of the religion is not other-worldly; instead it focuses upon right conduct in the here-and-now. Virtues such as honor, courage, and hospitality are highly valued, and an awareness of humankind’s place in the natural world is also cultivated.

While there are differing beliefs as to the exact nature of the gods, the latter are generally seen as real and knowable, and their mythological depictions simply as means to illustrate or understand various aspects of their character and function. The primary deities fall into two clans or groups, the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*. The *Æsir* consist of Odin, *Frigga*, *Thor*, *Tyr*, *Balder*, and others; they are often associated with important societal functions such as war, sovereignty, and law. Certain atmospheric events may also be associated with these deities (e.g., the thunder and rain caused by *Thor* wielding his mighty hammer in the heavens, hence his importance to the peasantry as both a defensive protector and a fertility god). Of the *Vanir* gods, *Frey* and *Freyja* are the best known. These deities generally exhibit stronger connections to “earthly” realms of fertility and sensuality, both of which are important categories to many Odinists. Fertility is not only recognized in relationship to agricultural crops and a healthy natural environment, but also in the continuance of familial lineages which are central in a religion emphasizing ancestral culture and ethnic heritage. Sensuality is welcomed as a vital and stimulating ingredient for the full enjoyment of human existence.

In addition to gods and humans, other entities such as elves, dwarves, and land-wights (from Old Norse *land-vættir*) receive important consideration. These beings may be acknowledged in rituals, and in some cases offerings of food or drink are made to ensure their good favor. Land-wights are the unseen residents of a given geographical location, capable of bestowing blessings or misfortune on the humans who live in their proximity. In the Viking period in Iceland their importance was such that an early law ordered boats to remove the fearsome carved dragon heads from their prows as they approached shore, so as not

to frighten these spirits; a modern vestige of this tradition still exists whereby ships entering Icelandic harbors are officially requested briefly to lower their flags as a gesture of respect to the land spirits.

In addition to living in harmony with the ethical principles of the religion, organized rituals and feasts are celebrated by Odinists at varying times throughout the year. The primary religious festivals can be located at specific points of the seasonal solar or agricultural calendar; these include mid-winter (Yule) and mid-summer, as well as specialized occasions in the spring and fall. Other formal rituals are performed for specific purposes, or to honor specific deities. The general term *blót* (from the Old Norse word for “sacrifice”) is used to refer to any one of the aforementioned ceremonies. Such a sacrifice is frequently symbolic in nature, and usually features a libation in the form of mead or ale. The most appropriate location for major ceremonies is generally considered to be outdoors, a tendency that resonates with historical accounts of various ancient Germanic tribes practicing their rites in “sacred groves.” The implements utilized in Odinist rituals – drinking horns, hammers (potently connected to Thor; many Odinists also wear a talismanic hammer pendant to indicate their allegiance to the religion), carved wooden staffs, wooden or metal bowls – are fashioned from natural materials, ideally by the practitioners themselves. A small branch cut from a living tree is commonly used to sprinkle mead as a blessing on the participants of a ceremony, and at the conclusion of a ritual any remaining libation will often be poured onto the ground as an offering of respect for the land-wights. A further ceremony is a *sumbel*, a structured session of ritualized drinking in which participants offer up toasts to deities, heroes, human ancestors, or spiritual principles. It might also be an occasion for making personal boasts or oaths. While the formats of rituals vary between groups, generally they are studiously reconstructed from archaic references in older Germanic literature (usually Old Norse and Scandinavian sources, as these contain the largest body of pre-Christian lore), often combined with aspects of folk traditions that have survived into more recent times and appear to have a basis in older beliefs.

A balanced scholarly study of the emergence of Odinism in the modern era has yet to be written, but various stages can be discerned. Although the revival of interest in ancient Germanic culture can already be seen in the seventeenth-century Swedish Storgoticist movement and the figure of Johannes Bureus (1568–1652), more concrete indications are evident in late eighteenth-century Germany, when specific efforts were made to stir popular interest in the newly rediscovered religion of Odin and the elder Germanic deities. Among *Sturm und Drang* intellectuals, the philosopher J.G. Herder (1744–1803) extolled the legacy of the pre-Christian Germanic north as an important ingredient for building an organic national

culture. A 1775 book called *Wodan, der Sachsen Held und Gott* (*Wodan, the Hero and God of the Saxons*) by H.W. Behrisch (1744–1825) declared Odin the “light of the world” and loftiest exemplar for the modern Germans of Saxony, and urged them to rediscover the true nature of their beginnings in the “sacred darkness of the northerly forests.” A century later, the burgeoning Germanic national romanticism coalesced into pan-Germanist and *völkisch* movements with visible alternative religious elements. By the early 1900s, overtly neo-heathen groups had established themselves. These included the Armanenschaft, led by the Austrian mystic and author Guido von List (1848–1919), and the Germanische Glaubens-Gemeinschaft, led by the German painter Ludwig Fahrenkrog (1867–1952). This flowering was relatively short-lived, however, as the incipient National Socialist regime would eventually curtail or forbid nearly all such groups, forcing them to go underground or disband.

An Australian lawyer and writer, Alexander Rud Mills (1885–1964), appears to have been the first person publicly to promote Odinism in the English-speaking world. By the 1930s Rud Mills was advocating a movement firmly opposed to Christianity and featuring a strident anti-Jewish component, and in 1936 he published a substantial handbook detailing the philosophy and rituals of this highly idiosyncratic “Anglecyn Church of Odin.” Despite issuing publications over a period of three decades, Rud Mills never found any significant support for his efforts, and his work has largely faded into obscurity.

In the aftermath of World War II, with lingering public perceptions that National Socialism had been a “pagan” movement (an inaccurate perception, as official Third Reich policy endorsed “positive Christianity”), over twenty years would pass before Germanic neo-heathenism began to flourish again, and now in new areas. In the United States a number of small groups emerged unbeknown to one another, such as the Odinist Fellowship, formed by Else Christensen in 1971 (and influenced to some degree by the preceding efforts of Rud Mills), the Viking Brotherhood, formed by Stephen A. McNallen in 1971–1972, and the Northernway, founded by Robert and Karen Taylor in 1974. The Viking Brotherhood would later develop into the Ásatrú Free Assembly, the first national Odinist organization to gain any momentum in America. During the mid-1980s the A.F.A. went into a hiatus – out of which emerged two significant and still active groups, the Ásatrú Alliance and the Ring of Troth – before reconstituting itself as the Ásatrú Folk Assembly. In England similar initiatives had arisen independently, such as the Committee for the Restoration of the Odinic Rite (later shortened to the Odinic Rite) established in 1973 by John Yeowell; a variety of other groups have also sprung up there over the last quarter-century. In Iceland, the home of the Old Norse sagas, Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson (1924–1993) formed the Ásatrúarfélag in 1973 and succeeded in having heathenism

legally recognized. Other small groups have been active since at least the 1970s in most Scandinavian countries. Beyond the growing list of national Odinist organizations, many smaller, localized independent associations exist, as do untold numbers of solitary practitioners.

Odinism remains largely a sub-cultural phenomenon, although in recent decades it has gained increasing recognition in the wider landscape of neo-paganism and new religious movements. In contrast to some other branches of neo-paganism, Odinist groups may tend toward traditionalist viewpoints, and in certain instances this can include strong racial beliefs. A number of organizations believe that the religion is most suited for the descendants of its original, ancient practitioners; this has been described as “ethnic” or “folkish” Odinism or Ásatrú, and does not generally imply supremacist notions. Other groups are vocally universalistic, and would not concede the legitimacy of any ethnic criterion in regard to prospective members. Distanced from both views are those who interpret the religion foremost as a racial, or even racist, vehicle. In order to draw a distinction from mainstream Odinist or Ásatrú groups, some racially motivated practitioners may refer to themselves as “Wotanists” (according to racialist ideologue David Lane, the name Wotan is an acronym for “Will of the Aryan Nation”). Groups associated with this hard-line position have a constituency consisting primarily of incarcerated males, and tend to be volatile and incapable of maintaining significant longevity.

Most mainstream heathen groups avoid taking overt political positions, and will tolerate a wide range of personal beliefs among their membership. Libertarian values of personal freedom are commonly found among practitioners, and are often viewed as being in line with older Germanic attitudes. Most groups promote ecological awareness; some have encouraged their members to become involved with environmental activities, or have organized campaigns to protest the destruction of historic sites in England and elsewhere. Although the religion is sometimes viewed as heavily emphasizing “masculine” deities and virtues, the importance of and lore concerning the female goddesses is often underscored in contemporary Odinist literature, and a number of women have taken on leadership roles in both the U.S. and Iceland in recent years. These developments, along with the diversity of socio-political beliefs found among its practitioners, all point toward the long-term viability of Odinism or Ásatrú in the postmodern age.

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Further Reading

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See also: Elves and Land Spirits in Pagan Norse Religion; Fascism; Heathenry – Ásatrú; Neo-paganism and Ethnic Nationalism in Eastern Europe; Paganism and Judaism; Paganism – A Jewish Perspective; Paganism – Contemporary; Trees (Northern and Middle Europe); Trees – Sacred.

Oikos

Oikos is a Greek word used to describe a variety of often overlapping structures and the basis for a number of compound words central to classical Western thinking. Its basic translation is “house.” In ancient texts it can refer to a physical dwelling, but also to a family, clan, a smaller economic unit including land, owners, animals, slaves and servants, as well as products. Ancient Greek sources often oppose it to or distinguish it from the term *polis*, which describes a more “public,” potentially urban relational civic structure. In most ancient sources, though gender roles could at times involve some slippage, the *polis* was often described as the designated realm for masculine civic and legal activity and the *oikos* as the proper realm for women’s activity, dedicated to the production and management of land, humans, animals, food. It is important to remember that *oikos* in those times did not refer to a one family nuclear household, but is better compared to a small family business that was often overseen by a woman.

The compound *oikonomos* signifies a steward or manager of the system of the *oikos*, who would often be a slave (see for example Jesus’ parables). This term has found application both in the Christian notion of (creation) stewardship and in modern economic science. *Oikonomia* can describe any kind of management structure or plan, on large and smaller scales. Thus it could refer to ancient state management, the notion of a divine plan within creation (*oikonomia theou*), as well as the management of a variety of economic units. The term’s application is clearly anthropocentric, centering on human structures of organization of communal and civic life and anthropomorphic concepts of divine agency.