

= Heathenry (new religious movement) =

Heathenry , also termed Heathenism or Germanic Neopaganism , is a modern Pagan religion . Classified as a new religious movement , its practitioners model their faith on the pre @-@ Christian belief systems adhered to by the Germanic peoples of Iron Age and Early Medieval Europe . To reconstruct these past belief systems , Heathenry uses surviving historical , archaeological , and folkloric evidence as a basis , although approaches to this material vary considerably . Heathen communities are currently present in various parts of Europe , the Americas , and Australasia .

Although lacking a unified theology , Heathenry is typically polytheistic , centering on a pantheon of deities from pre @-@ Christian Germanic Europe which includes both gods and goddesses . It adopts cosmological views from these pre @-@ Christian religions , including an animistic view of the cosmos in which the natural world is imbued with spirits . The faith 's deities and these spirits are honored in sacrificial rites known as blóts in which food and libations are offered to them . These are often accompanied by symbel , the act of ceremonially toasting the gods with an alcoholic beverage . Some practitioners also engage in rituals designed to induce an altered state of consciousness and visions , most notably seiðr and galdr , with the intent of gaining wisdom and advice from the deities . Although there are many solitary practitioners who follow the religion alone , members of the Heathen community often assemble in small groups , usually known as kindreds or hearths , to perform their rites in specially constructed buildings or outdoors . Heathen ethical systems place great emphasis on honor , personal integrity , and loyalty , while beliefs about an afterlife are varied and rarely emphasized .

The primary division within the Heathen movement surrounds the issue of race . Many groups eschew racist ideas , adopting a universalist perspective which holds that the religion is open to all , irrespective of ethnic or racial identity . Conversely , others adopt a racist attitude ? termed " folkish " within the community ? by viewing Heathenry as a religion with intrinsic links to a Nordic race that should be reserved explicitly for white people of Northern European descent . Some folkish Heathens further combine the religion with explicitly racist and white supremacist perspectives . Although the term " Heathenry " is used widely to describe the religion as a whole , many groups prefer different forms of designation , influenced by their regional focus and their attitude to race . While a number of groups venerating Scandinavian deities use Ásatrú or Forn Sed , those focusing on Anglo @-@ Saxon deities use Theodism , and those adopting folkish perspectives tend to favor the terms Odinism or Wotanism .

The religion 's origins lie in the 19th and early 20th century Romanticist movement which glorified the pre @-@ Christian beliefs of Germanic societies . Organised groups venerating the Germanic gods developed in Germany and Austria , which were often part of the Völkisch movement and which typically exhibited a racist interpretation of the religion , resulting in the movement largely dissolving following the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II . In the 1970s , new Heathen groups emerged in Europe and North America , developing themselves into formalized organizations in order to promote their faith . In recent decades , the Heathen movement has been the subject of academic study by scholars active in the field of Pagan studies .

= = Definition = =

Scholars of religious studies classify Heathenry as a new religious movement , and more specifically as a reconstructionist form of modern Paganism . Heathenry is " movement to revive and / or reinterpret for the present day the practices and worldviews of the pre @-@ Christian cultures of northern Europe (or , more particularly , the Germanic speaking cultures) " , and its practitioners seek to revive these past belief systems using surviving historical source materials . Sources used by Heathens include Scandinavian and Icelandic Old Norse texts like the Prose Edda and the Poetic Edda , as well as texts from continental Europe like the Nibelungenlied and Anglo @-@ Saxon sources like Beowulf . Some also make use of folk tales and folklore from later periods in European history , as well as taking ideas from archaeological evidence . The textual sources used are often fragmentary and composed within Christian contexts , thus making it problematic for Heathens

seeking to use them to "reconstruct" the pre-Christian prehistoric and Medieval belief systems which they discuss. Thus, anthropologist Jenny Blain characterised Heathenry as "a religion constructed from partial material", while religious studies scholar Michael Strmiska referred to it as a "postmodern movement" with beliefs that are "riddled with uncertainty and historical confusion".

The ways in which Heathens use this historical and archaeological material differs; some seek to reconstruct past beliefs and practices as accurately as possible, while others openly experiment with this material and embrace new innovations. Some, for instance, adapt their practices according to "unverified personal gnosis" (UPG) that they have gained through spiritual experiences. Others adopt concepts from the world's surviving ethnic religions as well as modern polytheistic faiths such as Hinduism and Afro-American religions, believing that doing so helps to construct spiritual world views that are akin to those that existed in Europe prior to Christianization. Other practitioners who emphasize a hard reconstructionist approach that relies exclusively on historical and archaeological sources criticize such attitudes, denigrating those who practice them using the pejorative term Neo-Heathen.

Some Heathens seek out common elements that were found throughout Germanic Europe during the Iron Age and Early Medieval periods, using those as the basis for their contemporary beliefs and practices. Conversely, others draw inspiration from the beliefs and practices of a specific area and time, such as Anglo-Saxon England or Viking Age Iceland. Some adherents are deeply knowledgeable as to the specifics of Northern European society in the Iron Age and Early Medieval periods, although most practitioners primarily gain their information about the pre-Christian past from fictional literature and popular accounts of Norse mythology, and sectors of the Heathen movement have perpetuated misconceptions about the past. Many express a romanticized view of Nordic culture, with sociologist of religion Jennifer Snook noting that many practitioners "hearken back to a more epic, anachronistic, and pure age of ancestors and heroes". As religious studies scholar Fredrik Gregorius stated, despite the fact that "no real continuity" exists between Heathenry and the pre-Christian belief systems of Germanic Europe, Heathen practitioners often dislike being considered adherents of a "new religion" and "modern invention" and thus prefer to depict theirs as a "traditional faith". Many practitioners avoid using the etic term "reconstructionism" to describe their practices, preferring to characterize it as an "indigenous religion" with parallels to the traditional belief systems of the world's indigenous peoples.

== Terminology ==

No central religious authority exists to impose a particular terminological designation on all practitioners. Hence, different Heathen groups have used different words to both describe their religion and themselves, with these terms often conveying meaning about the particular pre-Christian Germanic belief systems from which they draw inspiration as well as their socio-political leanings.

Academics studying the religion have typically favoured the terms Heathenry and Heathenism to describe it, for the reason that these words are "inclusive of all varieties" of the movement. This term is the most commonly used option by practitioners in the United Kingdom, with growing usage in North America and elsewhere. These terms are based on the word heathen, which was used by Early Medieval Christian writers to describe non-Christians in Germanic Europe; by using it, practitioners seek to reappropriate it from the Christians as a form of self-designation. Many practitioners favor the term Heathen over Pagan because the former term originated among Germanic languages, whereas Pagan has its origins in Latin.

A further term used in some academic contexts is Germanic Neopaganism, although this is an "artificial term". Alternately, Blain suggested the use of North European Paganism as an overarching etic term for the movement, although Strmiska noted that this would also encompass those practitioners inspired by the belief systems of Northeastern Europe's linguistically Finnic and Slavic societies. He favored Modern Nordic Paganism, although accepted that this term alienated those focusing on Anglo-Saxon and continental Germanic belief systems.

Another name for the faith is the Icelandic Ásatrú , which is more commonly rendered as Asatru in North America ; this term translates as " allegiance to the Æsir " ? the Æsir being a sub @-@ set of deities in Norse mythology ? with practitioners being known as Asatrúer . This term is favored by practitioners who focus on the deities of Scandinavia , although is problematic as many self @-@ identified Asatrúer worship deities and entities other than the Æsir , such as the Vanir , valkyries , elves , and dwarves . Although initially a popular term of designation among practitioners and academics , usage of Ásatrú has declined as the religion has aged . Other practitioners term their religion Vanatrú , meaning " those who honor the Vanir " , or Dísitrú , meaning " those who honor the goddesses " , depending on their particular theological emphasis . Although restricted especially to Scandinavia , since the mid @-@ 2000s a term that has grown in popularity is Forn Siðr or Forn Sed (" the old way ") ; this is also a term reappropriated from Christian usage , having previously been used in a derogatory sense to describe pre @-@ Christian religion in the Old Norse Heimskringla . Other terms used within the community to describe their religion are the Northern Tradition , Norse Paganism , and Saxon Paganism , while in the first third of the 20th century , commonly used terms were German , Nordic , or Germanic Faith .

Many racist @-@ oriented Heathens prefer the terms Odinism or Wotanism to describe their religion . There is thus a general view that all those who use Odinism adopt an explicitly political , right @-@ wing and racist interpretation of the religion , while Asatru is used by more moderate Heathen groups , however no such clear division of these terms ' usage exists in practice . Gregorius noted that Odinism was " highly problematic " because it implies that the god Odin ? who is adopted from Norse mythology ? is central to these groups ' theology , which is often not the case . Moreover , the term is also used by at least one non @-@ racist group , the British Odinshof , who use it in reference to their particular dedication to Odin .

= = Beliefs = =

= = = The gods and spirits = = =

The historian of religion Mattias Gardell noted that there is " no unanimously accepted theology " within the Heathen movement . Older Heathen groups , operating in the early 20th century , were often monotheistic , although today Heathenry is typically polytheistic , exhibiting a theological structure which includes a pantheon of gods and goddesses , with adherents offering their allegiance and worship to some or all of them . Most practitioners are polytheistic realists , believing in the literal existence of the deities as individual entities . Others express a psychological interpretation of the divinities , viewing them for instance as symbols , Jungian archetypes or racial archetypes , with some who adopt this position deeming themselves to be atheists .

Heathenry 's deities are adopted from the pre @-@ Christian belief systems found in the various societies of Germanic Europe ; they include divinities like Týr , Odin , Thor , Frigg and Freyja from Scandinavian sources , Woden , Thunor and ?ostre from Anglo @-@ Saxon sources , and figures such as Nehalennia from continental sources . Some practitioners adopt the belief , taken from Norse mythology , that there are two sets of deities , the Æsir and the Vanir . Certain practitioners blend the different regions and times together , for instance using a mix of Old English and Old Norse names for the deities , while others keep them separate and only venerate deities from a particular region . Some groups focus their veneration on a particular deity ; for instance , the Brotherhood of Wolves , a Czech Heathen group , center their worship on the deity Fenrir . Similarly , many practitioners in the U.S. adopt a particular patron deity for themselves , and describe themselves as that entity 's devotee using terms such as Thorsman or Odinsman .

Heathen deities are not seen as perfect , omnipotent , and omnipresent , and are instead viewed as having their own strengths and weaknesses , with many practitioners believing that these deities will one day die , as did , for instance , the god Baldr in Norse mythology . Heathens view their connection with their deities as not being that of a master and servant but rather an interdependent relationship akin to that of a family . For them , these deities serve as both examples and role

models whose behavior is to be imitated . Many practitioners believe that they can communicate with these deities , as well as negotiate , bargain , and argue with them , and it is hoped that through venerating them , practitioners will gain wisdom , understanding , power , or visionary insights .

Many practitioners combine their polytheistic world @-@ view with a pantheistic conception of the natural world as being sacred and imbued with a divine energy force permeating all life . Heathenry is animistic , with practitioners believing in nonhuman spirit persons commonly known as " wights " (vættir) that inhabit the world , each of whom is believed to have its own personality . Some of these are known as landvættir " land spirits " and inhabit different aspects of the landscape , living alongside humans , whom they can both help and hinder . Others are deemed to be household deities and live within the home , where they can be propitiated with offerings of food . Some Heathens interact with these entities and provide offerings to them more often than they do with the gods and goddesses . Wights are often identified with various creatures from Northwestern European folklore such as elves , dwarves , gnomes , and trolls . However , some of these entities ? such as the Jötunn of Norse mythology ? are deemed to be baleful spirits ; within the community it is often deemed taboo to provide offerings to them , although some practitioners still do so . Many Heathens also believe in and respect ancestral spirits .

= = = Cosmology and afterlife = = =

Heathens commonly adopt a cosmology based in Norse mythology in which our world ? known as Midgard ? is one of nine realms , all of which are part of a cosmological world tree called Yggdrasil . Different types of being are believed to inhabit these different realms ; for instance , humans live on Midgard , while dwarves live on another realm , elves on another , giants on another , and the divinities live on two further realms . Most practitioners believe that this is a poetic or symbolic description of the cosmos , with the different realms representing higher realms beyond the material plane of existence . The World Tree is also interpreted by some in the community as an icon for ecological and social engagement . Some Heathens , such as the psychologist Brian Bates , have adopted an approach to this cosmology rooted in analytical psychology , thereby interpreting the nine worlds and their inhabitants as maps of the human mind .

According to a common Heathen belief based on references in Old Norse sources , three sisters known as the Norns sit at the end of the World Tree 's root . These figures spin Wyrð , which refers to the actions and interrelationships of all beings throughout the cosmos . In the community , these three figures are sometimes termed " Past , Present and Future " , " Being , Becoming , and Obligation " or " Initiation , Becoming , Unfolding " . It is believed that an individual can navigate through the Wyrð , and thus , the Heathen worldview oscillates between concepts of free will and fatalism . Heathens also believe in a personal form of Wyrð known as örlög . This is connected to an emphasis on luck , with Heathens in the U.S. often believing that luck can be earned , passed down generations , or lost .

Various Heathen groups adopt the Norse apocalyptic myth of Ragnarök , however few view it as a literal prophecy of future events . Instead it is often treated as a symbolic warning of the danger that humanity faces if it acts unwisely in relation to both itself and the natural world . The death of the gods at Ragnarok is often viewed as a reminder of the inevitability of death and the importance of living honourably and with integrity until one dies . Alternately , ethnonationalist Heathens have interpreted Ragnarok as a prophecy of a coming apocalypse in which the white race will overthrow what these Heathens perceive as their oppressors and establish a future society based on Heathen religion . Political scientist Jeffrey Kaplan believed that it was the " strongly millenarian and chialistic overtones " of Ragnarok which helped convert American racialists to the right @-@ wing end of the Heathen movement .

Some practitioners do not emphasize belief in an afterlife , instead stressing the importance of behaviour and reputation in this world . In Icelandic Ásatrú , there is no singular dogmatic belief about the afterlife . A common Heathen belief is that a human being has multiple souls , which are separate yet linked together . It is common to find a belief in four or five souls , two of which survive bodily death : one of these , the hugh , travels to the realm of the ancestors , while the other , the

fetch , undergoes a process of reincarnation into a new body . In Heathen belief , there are various realms that the hugh ; can enter , based in part on the worth of the individual 's earthly life ; these include the hall of Valhalla , ruled over by Odin , or Sessrúmnir , the hall of Freyja . Beliefs regarding reincarnation vary widely among Heathens , although one common belief is that individuals are reborn within their family or clan .

= = = Morality and ethics = = =

In Heathenry , moral and ethical views are based on the perceived ethics of Iron Age and Early Medieval North @-@ West Europe , in particular the actions of heroic figures who appear in Old Norse sagas . Evoking a life @-@ affirming ethos , Heathen ethics focus on the ideals of honor , courage , integrity , hospitality , hard work , and strongly emphasize loyalty to family . It is common for practitioners to be expected to keep their word , particularly sworn oaths . There is thus a strong individualist ethos focused around personal responsibility , and a common motto within the Heathen community is that " We are our deeds " .

In North America and elsewhere , some Heathen communities have formalized such values into an ethical code , the Nine Noble Virtues (NNV) , which is based largely on the Hávamál from the Poetic Edda . There are different forms of the NNV , with the number nine having symbolic associations in Norse mythology . There is a divided opinion on the NNV ; some practitioners deem them too dogmatic , while others eschew them for not having authentic roots in historical Germanic culture , negatively viewing them as an attempt to imitate the Judeo @-@ Christian Ten Commandments . The NNV are not universal among Heathens , and it has for instance been noted that they are rare among Swedish practitioners .

Due to its focus on family ties and honest living ? values perceived as socially conservative in Western nations ? it has been noted that American Heathenry 's ethical system is far closer to traditional Christian morals than the ethical systems espoused in many other Western Pagan religions such as Wicca . Within the Heathen community of the United States , gender roles are based upon perceived ideals and norms found in Early Medieval Northwestern Europe , in particular as they are presented in Old Norse sources . Among male American Heathens there is a trend toward hypermasculinized behavior , while a gendered division of labor ? in which men are viewed as providers and women seen as being responsible for home and children ? is also widespread among Heathens in the U.S.

Sociologist Jennifer Snook noted that as with all religions , Heathenry was " intimately connected " to politics , with practitioners ' political and religious beliefs influencing one another . As a result of the religion 's emphasis on honoring the land and its wights , many Heathens take an interest in ecological issues , with many considering their faith to be a nature religion . Heathen groups have participated in tree planting , raising money to purchase woodland , and campaigning against the construction of a railway between London and the Channel Tunnel in Southeastern England . Many Germanic Neopagans are also concerned with the preservation of heritage sites , and some practitioners have expressed concern regarding archaeological excavation of prehistoric and Early Medieval burials , believing that it is disrespectful to the individuals interned , whom Heathens widely see as their ancestors .

Ethical debates within the community also arise when some practitioners believe that the religious practices of certain co @-@ religionists conflict with the religion 's " conservative ideas of proper decorum " . For instance , while many Heathens eschew worship of the Norse god Loki , deeming him a baleful wight , his gender @-@ bending nature has made him attractive to many LGBT Heathens . Those who adopt the former perspective have thus criticized Lokeans as effeminate and sexually deviant . Views on homosexuality and LGBT rights remain a source of tension within the community . Some right @-@ wing Heathen groups view homosexuality as being incompatible with a family @-@ oriented ethos and thus challenge same @-@ sex sexual activity . Other groups legitimize openness toward LGBT practitioners by reference to the gender @-@ bending actions of Thor and Odin in Norse mythology . There are , for instance , homosexual and transgender members of The Troth , a prominent U.S. Heathen organisation , while a group of self @-@

described " Homo @-@ Heathens " marched in the 2008 Stockholm Pride carrying a statue of the god Freyr , and many Scandinavian Heathen groups perform same @-@ sex marriages .

= = Rites and practices = =

In Anglophone countries , Heathen groups are typically called kindreds or hearths , or alternately sometimes as fellowships , tribes , or garths . These are small groups , often family units , and usually consist of between five and fifteen members . They are often bound together by oaths of loyalty , with strict screening procedures regulating the admittance of new members . Prospective members may undergo a probationary period before they are fully accepted and welcomed into the group , while other groups remain closed to all new members . Such groups are largely independent and autonomous , although typically network with other Heathen groups , particularly in their region . There are other followers of the religion who are not affiliated with such groups , operating as solitary practitioners , with these individuals often remaining in contact with other practitioners through social media .

Priests are often termed godhi , while priestesses are gydhja , adopting Old Norse terms meaning " god @-@ man " and " god @-@ woman " respectively , with the plural term being gothar . These individuals are rarely seen as intermediaries between practitioners and deities , instead having the role of facilitating and leading group ceremonies and being learned in the lore and traditions of the religion . Many kindreds believe that anyone can take on the position of priest , with members sharing organisational duties and taking turns in leading the rites . In other groups , it is considered necessary for the individual to gain formal credentials from an accredited Heathen organisation in order to be recognised as a priest . In a small number of groups ? particularly those of the early 20th century which operated as secret societies ? the priesthood is modelled on an initiatory system of ascending degrees akin to Freemasonry .

Heathen rites often take place in non @-@ public spaces , particularly in a practitioner 's home . In other cases , Heathen places of worship have been established on plots of land specifically purchased for the purpose ; these can represent either a hörg , which is a sanctified place within nature like a grove of trees , or a hof , which is a wooden temple . The Heathen community has made various attempts to construct hofs in different parts of the world . In 2014 , the Ásaheimur Temple was opened in Efri Ás , Skagafjörður , Iceland , while in 2015 British Odinists opened a temple in a converted 16th @-@ century chapel in Newark , Nottinghamshire . Heathens have also adopted archaeological sites as places of worship . For instance , British practitioners have assembled for rituals at the Nine Ladies stone circle in Derbyshire , and the Rollright Stones in Warwickshire while Swedish Heathens have done the same at Gamla Uppsala and Icelandic practitioners have met at Þingvellir .

Germanic Neopagan groups assemble for rituals in order to mark rites of passage , seasonal observances , oath takings , rites devoted to a specific deity , and for rites of need . These rites also serve as identity practices which mark the adherents out as Heathens . Strmiska noted that in Iceland , Ásatrú rituals had been deliberately constructed in an attempt to recreate or pay tribute to the ritual practices of pre @-@ Christian Icelanders , although also had space in which to innovate and change to suit the tastes and needs of contemporary practitioners . During religious ceremonies , many adherents choose to wear clothing that imitates the styles of dress worn in Iron Age and Early Medieval Northern Europe . They also often wear symbols indicating their religious allegiance . The most commonly used sign among Heathens is Mjölñir , or Thor 's hammer , which is worn as pendants , featured in Heathen art , and used as a gesture in ritual . It is sometimes used to express a particular affinity with the god Thor , although is also often used as a symbol of Heathenism as a whole , in particular representing the resilience and vitality of the religion . Another commonly used Heathen symbol is the valknut , used to represent the god Odin or Woden .

= = = Blót and sumbel = = =

The most important religious rite for Heathens is called blót , which constitutes a ritual in which

offerings are provided to the gods . Blót typically takes place outdoors , and usually consists of an offering of mead , which is contained within a bowl . The gods are invoked and requests expressed for their aid , as the priest uses a sprig or branch of an evergreen tree to sprinkle mead onto both statues of the deities and the assembled participants . This procedure might be scripted or largely improvised . Finally , the bowl of mead is poured onto a fire , or onto the earth , as a final libation to the gods . Sometimes , a communal meal is held afterward ; in some groups this is incorporated as part of the ritual itself . In other instances , the blót is simpler and less ritualized ; in this case , it can involve a practitioner setting some food aside , sometimes without words , for either gods or wights . Some Heathens perform such rituals on a daily basis , although for others it is a more occasional performance . Aside from honoring deities , communal blóts also serve as a form of group bonding .

In Iron Age and Early Medieval Northern Europe , blót referred to animal sacrifice performed to thank the deities and gain their favor . Such sacrifices have generally proved impractical for most modern practitioners , due to the fact that skills in animal slaughter are not widely taught , while the slaughter of animals is regulated by government in Western countries . However , in 2007 Strmiska noted that a " small but growing " number of Heathen practitioners in the U.S. had begun performing animal sacrifice as a part of blót . Those who do so typically follow the procedure outlined in the *Heimskringla* : the throat of the sacrificial animal is slashed with a sharp knife , and the blood is collected in a bowl before being sprinkled onto both participants of the rite and statues of the gods . Animals used for this purpose have included poultry as well as larger mammals like sheep and pigs , with the meat then being consumed by those attending the rite . Some practitioners have made alterations to this procedure : Strmiska noted two American Heathens who decided to use a rifle shot to the head to kill the animal swiftly , a decision made after they witnessed a blót in which the animal 's throat was cut incorrectly and it slowly died in agony ; they felt that such practices would have displeased the gods and accordingly brought harm upon those carrying out the sacrifice .

Another common ritual in Heathenry is *sumbel* , also spelled *symbol* , a ritual drinking ceremony in which the gods are toasted . *Sumbel* often takes place following a blót . In the U.S. , the *sumbel* commonly involves a drinking horn being filled with mead and passed among the assembled participants , who either drink from it directly , or pour some into their own drinking vessels to consume . During this process , toasts are made , as are verbal tributes to gods , heroes , and ancestors . Then , oaths and boasts (promises of future actions) might be made , both of which are considered binding on the speakers due to the sacred context of the *sumbel* ceremony . According to Snook , the *sumbel* has a strong social role , representing " a game of politicking , of socializing , cementing bonds of peace and friendship and forming new relationships " within the Heathen community . The ethnographer Murphy Pizza observed an example of a *sumbel* that took place in Minnesota in 2006 with the purpose of involving Heathen children ; rather than mead , the drinking horn contained apple juice , and the toasting accompanied the children taping pictures of apples to a poster of a tree that symbolized the apple tree of *Iðunn* from Norse mythology .

= = = Seiðr and galdr = = =

One religious practice sometimes found in Heathenry is *seiðr* , which has been described as " a particular shamanic trance ritual complex " , although the appropriateness of using " shamanism " to describe *seiðr* is debatable . Contemporary *seiðr* developed during the 1990s out of the wider Neo @-@ Shamanic movement , with some practitioners studying the use of trance @-@ states in other faiths , such as Umbanda , first . A prominent form is high @-@ seat or oracular *seiðr* , which is based on the account of Guðriðr in *Eiríks saga* . Although such practices differ between groups , oracular *seiðr* typically involves a *seiðr* @-@ worker sitting on a high seat while songs and chants are performed to invoke gods and wights . Drumming is then performed to induce an altered state of consciousness in the practitioner , who goes on a meditative journey through *Yggdrassil* to *Hel* . The assembled audience then provide questions for the *seiðr* @-@ worker , with the latter offering replies based on information obtained in their trance @-@ state . Some *seiðr* @-@ practitioners make use of entheogenic substances as part of this practice , although others explicitly oppose such usage .

Not all Heathens practice seiðr ; given its associations with both the ambiguity of sexuality and gender and the gods Odin and Loki in their unreliable trickster forms , many on the Heathen movement 's right @-@ wing disapprove of it . Although there are heterosexual male practitioners , seiðr is largely associated with women and gay men . One member of the Troth , Edred Thorsson , experimented with forms of seiðr which involved sex magic utilizing sado @-@ masochistic techniques , something which generated controversy in the community . Part of the discomfort some Heathens feel toward seiðr surrounds the lack of any criteria by which the community can determine whether the seiðr @-@ worker has genuinely received divine communication , and the fear that it will be used by some practitioners merely to bolster their own prestige .

Galdr is another Germanic Neopagan practice involving chanting or singing . As part of a galdr ceremony , runes or rune poems are also sometimes chanted , in order to create a communal mood and allow participants to enter into altered states of consciousness and request communication with deities . Some contemporary galdr chants and songs are influenced by Anglo @-@ Saxon folk magical charms , such as Æcerbot and the Nine Herbs Charm . These poems were originally written in a Christian context , although practitioners believe that they reflect themes present in pre @-@ Christian , shamanistic religion , and thus re @-@ appropriate and " Heathenise " them for contemporary usage .

Some Heathens practice forms of divination using runes ; as part of this , items with runic markings on them might be pulled out of a bag or bundle , and read accordingly . In some cases , different runes are associated with different deities , one of the nine realms , or aspects of life . It is common for Heathens to utilize the Common Germanic Futhark as a runic alphabet , although some practitioners instead adopt the Anglo @-@ Saxon Futhorc or the Younger Futhark . The contemporary use of runes for divinatory purposes is however found more widely than within Heathenry , with books on the subject being common in New Age bookstores . Due to the fact that it was not a factor of common Iron Age and Early Medieval European rituals , magic is not an intrinsic part of Heathenry , although various magical practices are performed by some practitioners .

= = = Festivals = = =

Different Germanic Neopagan groups celebrate different festivals according to their cultural and religious focus . The most widely observed Heathen festivals are Winter Nights , Yule , and Sigrblót , all of which were listed in his Heimskringla and are thus of ancient origin . The first of these marks the start of winter in Northern Europe , while the second marks Midwinter , and the last marks the beginning of summer . Additional festivals are also marked by Heathen practice throughout the year . These often include days which commemorate individuals who fought against the Christianization of Northern Europe , or who led armies and settlers into new lands . Some Heathen groups hold festivals dedicated to a specific deity .

Some Heathens celebrate the eight festivals found in the Wheel of the Year , a tradition that they share with many contemporary Pagans . Others celebrate only six of these festivals , as represented by a six @-@ spoked Wheel of the Year . The use of such festivals is criticized by other practitioners , who highlight that this system is of modern , mid @-@ 20th century origin and does not link with the original religious celebrations of the pre @-@ Christian Germanic world .

Such festivals can be held on the same day each year , although they are often celebrated by Heathen communities on the nearest available weekend , so that those practitioners who work during the week can attend . During these ceremonies , Heathens often recite poetry to honor the deities , which typically draw upon or imitate the Early Medieval poems written in Old Norse or Old English . Mead or ale is also typically drunk , with offerings being given to deities , while fires , torches , or candles are often lit . There are also regional meetings of Heathens known as Things . At these , religious rites are performed , while workshops , stalls , feasts , and competitive games are also present . In the U.S. , there are two national gatherings , Althing and Trothmoot .

= = Racial issues = =

The question of race represents a major source of division among Heathens , particularly in the United States . Within the Heathen community , one viewpoint holds that race is entirely a matter of biological heredity , while the opposing position is that race is a social construct rooted in cultural heritage . In U.S. Heathen discourse , these viewpoints are described as the universalist and the folkish positions , respectively . These two factions ? which Kaplan termed the " racialist " and " nonracialist " camps ? often clash , with Kaplan claiming that a " virtual civil war " existed between them within the American Heathen community . The universalist and folkish division has also spread to other countries , however in contrast to North America and much of Northern Europe , discussions of race rarely arise among the Icelandic Heathen community as a result of the nation @-@ state 's predominantly ethnically homogeneous composition .

Contrasting with this binary division , Gardell categorizes Heathenry in the United States into three groups according to their stance on the issue of race : the " anti @-@ racist " group who denounce any association between the religion and racial identity , the " radical racist " faction who see it as the natural religion of the ' Aryan race ' which cannot rightly be followed by members of any other racial groups , and the " ethnic " faction who seek a middle @-@ path by acknowledging the religion 's roots in Northern Europe and its connection with those of Northern European heritage . Religious studies scholar Egil Asprem deemed Gardell 's threefold typology to be " indispensable to make sense of the diverging positions within the broader discourse " of Heathenry . The religious studies scholar Stefanie von Schnurbein also adopted this tripartite division , although referred to the groups as the " racial @-@ religious " , " a @-@ racist " , and " ethnicist " faction respectively .

Exponents of the universalist , anti @-@ racist approach believe that the deities of Northern Europe can call anyone to their worship , regardless of ethnic background . This group rejects the folkish emphasis on race , believing that even if unintended , it can lead to the adoption of racist attitudes toward those of non @-@ Northern European heritage . Anti @-@ racist practitioners such as Stephan Grundy have emphasized the fact that ancient Northern Europeans were known to marry and have children with members of other ethnic groups , and that in Norse mythology the Æsir also did the same with Vanir , Jötun , and humans , thus using such points to critique the racialist view . Universalists welcome practitioners of Heathenry who are not of Northern European ancestry ; for instance , there are Jewish and African American members of the U.S.-based Troth , while many of its white members are in biracial marriages . While sometimes retaining the idea of Heathenry as an indigenous religion , proponents of this view have sometimes argued that Heathenry is indigenous to the land of Northern Europe , rather than any race .

The folkish sector of the movement deems Heathenry to be the indigenous religion of a biologically distinct Nordic race . Some practitioners explain this by asserting that the religion is intrinsically connected to the collective unconscious of this race , with prominent American Asatruer Stephen McNallen developing this into a concept that he termed " metagenetics " . McNallen and many others in the " ethnic " faction of Heathenry explicitly deny that they are racist , although Gardell noted that their views would be deemed racist under certain definitions of the word . Gardell considered many " ethnic " Heathens to be ethnic nationalists , and many folkish practitioners express disapproval of multiculturalism and the mixture of different races in modern Europe , advocating a position of racial separatism . In this group 's discourse , there is much talk of " ancestors " and " homelands " , although these concepts may be very vaguely defined . Those adopting the " ethnic " folkish position have been criticized by both anti @-@ racist and radical racist factions , the former deeming " ethnic " Heathenry to be a front for racism and the latter deeming its adherents to be race traitors for their failure to fully embrace the white supremacist cause .

Some folkish Heathens are white supremacists and explicit racists , representing a " radical racist " faction that favours the terms " Odinism " and " Wotanism " . Kaplan stated that the " borderline separating racialist Odinism and National Socialism is exceedingly thin " , adding that this racialist wing inhabited " the most distant reaches " of the modern Pagan movement . Practitioners in this sector of the religion have paid tribute to Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany , and claimed that the white race is facing extinction at the hands of a Jewish world conspiracy . Many in the inner circle of The Order , a white supremacist militant group active in the U.S. during the 1980s , were Odinists , and various racist Heathens have espoused the Fourteen Words slogan developed by the Heathen and

Order member David Lane . A number of racist organisations , such as the Order of Nine Angles and the Black Order , combine elements of Heathenism with Satanism , although other racist Heathens , such as Wotansvolk 's Ron McVan , have denounced the integration of these differing religious traditions . Racist Heathens are heavily critical of their anti @-@ racist counterparts , often declaring that the latter have been misled by the New Age movement and political correctness . Snook stated that both mainstream media and early academic studies of American Heathenry had focused primarily on the racist elements within the movement , thus neglecting their anti @-@ racist counterparts .

= = History = =

= = = Romanticist and Völkisch predecessors = = =

During the late 18th and 19th centuries , German Romanticism generated increased attention to the pre @-@ Christian belief systems of Germanic Europe , with various Romanticist intellectuals expressing the opinion that these ancient religions were " more natural , organic and positive " than Christianity . Such an attitude was promoted by the scholarship of Romanticist intellectuals like Johann Gottfried Herder , Jacob Grimm , and Wilhelm Grimm . This development went in tandem with a growth in nationalism and the idea of the volk , contributing to the establishment of the Völkisch movement in German @-@ speaking Europe . Criticising the Jewish roots of Christianity , in 1900 the Germanist Ernst Wachler published a pamphlet calling for the revival of a racialized ancient German religion . Other writers supported his claims , resulting in the formation of both the Bund für Persönlichkeitskultur and the Deutscher Orden in 1911 and then the Germanisch @-@ deutsche Religions @-@ Gemeinschaft in 1912 .

Another development of Heathenry emerged within the occult völkisch movement known as Ariosophy . One of these völkisch Ariosophists was the Austrian occultist Guido von List , who established a religion that he termed " Wotanism " , with an inner core that he referred to as " Armanism " . List 's Wotanism was based heavily on the Eddas , although over time it came to be increasingly influenced by the occult teachings of the Theosophical Society . List 's ideas would be transmitted in Germany by a number of prominent right @-@ wingers , and adherents to his ideas were among the founders of the Reichshammerbund in Leipzig in 1912 , and included individuals who held key positions in the Germanenorden . The Thule Society founded by Rudolf von Sebottendorf developed from the Germanenorden , and displayed a Theosophical influenced interpretation of Norse mythology .

In 1933 , the eclectic German Faith Movement (Deutsche Glaubensbewegung) was founded by the religious studies scholar Jakob Wilhelm Hauer , who wanted to unite the disparate older Heathen groups . Although active throughout the Nazi era , his hopes that his " German Faith " would be declared the official faith of Nazi Germany were thwarted . Although the Heathen movement probably never had more than a few thousand followers during its 1920s heyday , it held the allegiance of many middle @-@ class intellectuals , including journalists , artists , illustrators , scholars , and teachers , and thus exhibited a wider influence on society .

The völkisch occultists ? among them Pagans like List and Christians like Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels ? " contributed importantly to the mood of the Nazi era " . Few however had a direct influence on the Nazi Party leadership , although the prominent exception was Karl Maria Wiligut , who was a friend and key influence on the Schutzstaffel (SS) leader Heinrich Himmler . Wiligut professed ancestral @-@ clairvoyant memories of ancient German society , proclaiming that Wotanism was in conflict with another ancient religion , Irminenschaft , which was devoted to a messianic Germanic figure known as Krist , who was later wrongly transformed into the figure of Jesus . However , many Heathen groups actually disbanded during the Nazi period , and were only able to re @-@ establish themselves after World War II , in West Germany , where freedom of religion had been re @-@ established . After the defeat of Nazi Germany , there was a social stigma surrounding völkisch ideas and groups , along with a common perception that the mythologies of the pre @-@ Christian

Germanic societies had been tainted through their usage by the Nazi administration , an attitude that to some extent persisted into the 21st century .

The *völkisch* movement also emerged in 1930s Norway with the milieu surrounding such groups as the Ragnarok Circle and Hans S. Jacobsen 's *Tidsskriftet Ragnarok* journal ; prominent figures involved in this milieu were the writer Per Imerslund and composer Geirr Tveitt , although it left no successors in post-war Norway . A variant of " Odinism " was developed by the Australian Alexander Rud Mills , who published *The Odinist Religion* (1930) and established the Anglican Church of Odin . Politically racist , Mills viewed Odinism as a religion for what he considered to be the " British race " and deemed it to be in a cosmic battle with Judeo-Christian religion . Having formulated " his own unique blend " of Ariosophy , Mills was heavily influenced by von List 's writings . Some of Heathenry 's roots have been traced to the " back to nature " movement of the early 20th century , among them the Kibbo Kift and the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry .

= = = Modern development = = =

In the early 1970s , Heathen organisations emerged in the United Kingdom , United States , Canada , Australia , and in Iceland , largely independently of each other . This has been partly attributed to the wider growth of the modern Pagan movement in the 1960s and 1970s , as well as the development of the New Age movement , which encouraged the establishment of new religious movements intent on reviving pre-Christian religions . The 1990s and 2000s then saw the emergence of a range of new Heathen groups , many of which distanced themselves from overtly political agendas and placed a stronger emphasis on historical authenticity .

Heathenry emerged in the United States during the 1960s . In 1969 the Danish Odinist Else Christensen established the Odinist Fellowship from her home in Florida , U.S. Heavily influenced by Mills ' writings , she began publication of a magazine , *The Odinist* , although this focused to a greater extent on right-wing and racist ideas than theological ones . Stephen McNallen first founded the Viking Brotherhood in the early 1970s , before creating the Asatru Free Assembly in 1976 , which broke up in 1986 amid widespread political disagreements after McNallen 's repudiation of neo-Nazi within the group . In the 1990s , McNallen founded the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA) , an ethnically oriented Heathen group headquartered in California . Meanwhile , Valgard Murray and his kindred in Arizona founded the Ásatrú Alliance (AA) in the late 1980s , which shared the AFA 's perspectives on race and which published the *Vor Tru* newsletter . In 1987 , Stephen Flowers and James Chisholm founded *The Troth* , which was incorporated in Texas . Taking an inclusive , non-racist view , it soon grew into an international organisation .

In Iceland , the influence of pre-Christian belief systems still pervaded the country 's cultural heritage into the 20th century . There , farmer Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson founded the Heathen group *Ásatrúarfélagið* in 1972 , which initially had 12 members . Beinteinsson served as *Allsherjargodi* (chief priest) until his death in 1993 , when he was succeeded by Jormundur Ingi Hansen . As the group expanded in size , Hansen 's leadership caused schisms , and to retain the unity of the movement , he stepped down and was replaced by Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson in 2003 , by which time *Ásatrúarfélagið* had accumulated 777 members and played a visible role in Icelandic society . In England , the British Committee for the Restoration of the Odinic Rite was established by John Yeowell in 1972 . In 1992 , Mark Mirabello published *Odin Brotherhood* , which claimed the existence of a secret society of Odinists ; most British Heathens doubt its existence .

In Sweden , the first Heathen groups developed in the 1970s ; early examples included the *Breidablikk* Guild (*Gildet*) founded in 1975 and the *Telge Fylking* founded in 1987 , the latter of which diverged from the former by emphasising a non-racist interpretation of the religion . In 1994 , the *Sveriges Asatrosamfund* (Swedish Asatru Assembly) was founded , growing to become the largest Heathen organisation in the country . The first Norwegian Heathen group , *Blindern Asatrulag* , was established as a student group at the University of Oslo in the mid-1980s , while the larger *Åsatrufellesskapet Bifrost* was established in 1996 ; after a schism in that group , the *Foreningen Forn Sed* was formed in 1999 . In

Denmark , a small group was founded near to Copenhagen in 1986 , although as a wider movement Heathenry would not be established until the 1990s , when a group calling itself Forn Siðr developed . In Germany , various groups established that explicitly rejected their religion 's völkisch and right @-@ wing past , most notably Rabenclan (Raven 's Clan) in 1994 and Nornirs Ætt (Kin of the Norns) in 2005 . Several foreign Heathen organisations also established a presence in the German Heathen scene ; in 1994 the Odinic Rite Deutschland (Odinic Rite Germany) was established , although it later declared its independence and became the Verein für germanisches Heidentum VfgH (Society for Germanic Paganism) , while the Troth also established a German group as Eldaring , which declared its independence in 2000 .

Heathen influences were apparent in forms of black metal from the 1990s , where lyrics and themes often expressed a longing for a pre @-@ Christian Northern past ; the mass media , however , typically associated such a genre with Satanism . From the mid @-@ 1990s , the internet greatly aided the propagation of Heathenry in various parts of the world . That decade also saw the strong growth of racist Heathenry among those incarcerated within the U.S. prison system as a result of outreach programs established by various Heathen groups . In this period , many Heathen groups also came to interact increasingly with other ethnic @-@ oriented Pagan groups in Eastern Europe , such as Lithuanian Romuva , and many joined the World Congress of Ethnic Religions on its formation in 1998 .

= = Demographics = =

Adherents of Heathenry can be found in Europe , North America , and Australasia . In 2007 , the religious studies scholar Graham Harvey stated that it was impossible to develop a precise figure for the number of Heathens across the world , however a self @-@ selected census conducted in 2013 found 16 @, @ 700 members in 98 countries , the bulk of whom lived in the United States . In 2016 , Schnurbein stated that there were probably no more than 20 @, @ 000 Heathens globally . She noted that , while there were some exceptions , most Heathen groups were between 60 @-@ 70 % male in their composition .

Many individuals are inspired to join the movement after enjoying German folk tales or Norse myths as children , or after being interested by the depiction of Norse religion in popular culture . Some others claim to have involved themselves in the religion after experiencing direct revelation through dreams , which they interpret as having been provided by the gods . As with other religions , a sensation of " coming home " has also been reported by many Heathens who have converted to the faith . Although practitioners typically live within Christian majority societies , they often express the view that Christianity has little to offer them . During her research , Schnurbein found that during the 1980s many Heathens had been motivated to join the religion in part by their own anti @-@ Christian ethos , but that this attitude had become less prominent among the Heathen community as the significance of the Christian churches had declined in Western nations after that point . Many Heathens are also involved in historical reenactment , focusing on the early medieval societies of Germanic Europe , although others are critical of this practice , believing that it blurs the boundary between life and fantasy .

= = = North America = = =

Although deeming it impossible to calculate the exact size of the Heathen community in the US , sociologist Jeffrey Kaplan estimated that , in the mid @-@ 1990s , there were around 500 active practitioners in the country , with a further thousand individuals on the periphery of the movement . He noted that the overwhelming majority of individuals in the movement were white , male , and young . Most had at least an undergraduate degree , and worked in a mix of white collar and blue collar jobs . The Pagan Census project led by Helen A. Berger , Evan A. Leach , and Leigh S. Shaffer gained 60 responses from Heathens in the U.S. , noting that 65 % were male and 35 % female , which they saw as the " opposite " of the rest of the country 's Pagan community . The majority had a college education , but were generally less well educated than the wider Pagan

community , with a lower median income than the wider Pagan community too . From her experience within the community , Snook concurred that the majority of American Heathens were male , adding that most were white and middle @-@ aged , but believed that there had been a growth in the proportion of female Heathens in the U.S. since the mid @-@ 1990s . Subsequent assessments have suggested a larger support base ; 10 @,@ 000 to 20 @,@ 000 according to McNallen in 2006 , and 7 @,@ 878 according to the 2014 census .

= = = Europe = = =

In the United Kingdom Census 2001 , 300 people registered as Heathen in England and Wales . However , many Heathens followed the advice of the Pagan Federation (PF) and simply described themselves as " Pagan " , while other Heathens did not specify their religious beliefs . In the 2011 census , 1 @,@ 958 people self @-@ identified as Heathen in England and Wales .

By 2003 , the Icelandic Heathen organisation Ásatrúarfélagið had 777 members , and by 2015 , it reported 2 @,@ 400 members . In Iceland , Heathenry has an impact larger than the number of its adherents . Based on his experience researching Danish Heathens , Amster stated that while it was possible to obtain membership figures of Heathen organisations , it was " impossible to estimate " the number of unaffiliated solo practitioners . Conversely , in 2015 , Gregorius estimated that there were at most a thousand Heathens in Sweden ? both affiliated and unaffiliated ? although noted that practitioners themselves often perceived their numbers as being several times higher than this . Although noting that there were no clear figures available for the gender balance within the community , he cited practitioners who claim that there are a greater number of men active within Swedish Heathen organisations . Schnurbein observed that most Heathens in Scandinavia were middle @-@ class professionals aged between thirty and sixty .

= = = Further academic reading = = =