

AN INTRODUCTION TO ÁSATRÚ “THE NORTHERN WAY”

Ásatrú - the name of the people who practice as well as the name of the religion - are known, along with followers of other Northern Traditions, as Heathens. Southern European Traditions, including Wicca are usually called Pagan. (The terms are often used interchangeably.)

Ásatrú call their groups kindreds, and sometimes hearths, hofs, steads, and families. The kindreds celebrate life's joys and share its sorrows. Most Ásatrú and kindred and their activities are family-oriented. Like most modern Pagans, the Ásatrú are interested in working *with* other people and *with* natural energies, not in manipulating or controlling either.

“Ásatrú” means faith in the Æsir (sky god/dessess); “Vanatrú” means faith in the Vanir (earth god/desses), but the term Ásatrú is commonly used for both. Some legitimate Heathens call themselves Odinists because their worship centers on Odin. There are some, though, who claim to be Odinists to hide their racism and other prejudices.

On that subject, let us be quite clear: the “Odinism” practiced by groups like the Aryan Brotherhood is far from the many legitimate Northern Traditions. Aggressive, racist/sexist white supremacy is unwelcome in American Pagan/Heathen communities.

ETHICS

Ásatrú has strong beliefs about community behavior, and strict justice is administered by the god Tyr. Those who act against others are judged harshly: traditionally banished from the community, offenders are expected to make full restitution. Personal accountability is an important aspect of individual honor. How you're remembered in Sumbels, and the reputation you pass on to future generations, are aspects of your immortality.

Ásatrú does not permit, encourage, or tolerate any use of force - physical, psychological, or emotional - to bring people to the faith. We can make a sacrifice of our own time, creativity, inner work, etc., but not of anything from someone else's life.

Magically, as author and priestess Freya Aswynn points out, “nothing can exist in a vacuum, and thus energy invoked has to be compensated for. This is a simple fact of Nature and has nothing to do with the weak creed of reward and punishment,” she explains in *Leaves of Yggdrasil* (a Llewellyn book now titled *Northern Mysteries and Magic*). She goes on to remind us that “the Northern Mysteries are . . . austere and make [heavy] demands on the individual's own strength and commitment.”

ÁSATRÚ COSMOLOGY

The cosmology of the Northern way is organized around the World Tree, named Yggdrasil, which contains nine worlds. One of these is Asgard, where Odin's famed hall, Valhalla, is located. Another is Midgard, which includes all the material universe, our galaxy, and our planet Earth.

All the nine worlds are inhabited with great diversity, and figure prominently in the Eddas and Sagas (poetic records of history and myth, written down in the early Middle Ages when they were already old stories). Some people think of these nine worlds as parallel universes.

This illustration is from a website.



DEITY

The Ásatrú pantheon consists of the Æsir and the Vanir, two groups who work together. Some devotees of the Vanir do like to keep the distinction and call themselves Vanatrú, but Ásatrú has for many years been used to refer to both Traditions - and we use it that way in this brochure.

Modern Ásatrú believe in a divine essence which is usually hidden - not because the gods are secretive, but because divinity is beyond direct human understanding.

This divine essence is expressed through the Goddesses and Gods. Ásatrú lore offers us glimpses of Heathen reality, and shows us how the Ásatrú see the world. Most Ásatrú believe their gods do exist and are involved in our lives on many physical and spiritual levels.

The main Æsir are Odin and Frigga, Tyr and Zisa, and Thor and Sif. The main Vanir are Frey and Freya. (We'll look at some of these God/desses more closely below.) Were these once the pantheons of two different cultures? If so, they merged long, long ago, for ancient Hindu and Hittite literature from the 14th century BCE mentions them as cooperative. (That's about the same time as the pyramids of Egypt and some of Britain's stone monuments were built.)

Some Heathen Traditions focus on the Icelandic versions of the lore, some on the Scandinavian, and some on the Anglo-Saxon, in which Odin becomes Wodin and Wayland the Smith takes a more prominent role.

The Æsir's and Vanir's influence is not limited to Scandinavia and the past: we encounter them several times a week. “Tuesday” means *Tyr's Day*, “Wednesday” is *Wodan's Day*, “Thursday” is *Thor's Day*, and “Friday” is *Freya's Day*.

But . . . who are these gods?

“. . . these energies are cosmic forces,” author/priestess Freya Aswynn believes, and she says, “It is human consciousness . . . which gives them form and eventually their names.” She goes on to assert that “All life forms . . . are extensions of those energies, differentiated at various levels of consciousness.”

“As the consciousness of a people develops and progresses to a greater understanding of the world around it, so its god-form evolves . . .”

Of all the Northern gods, Odin is probably the best known. He’s associated with the element of Air – weather, and thus, harvest. Fire is associated with Odin, too, and though the “raging storm” aspect is certainly part of His character, Fire shows itself in His passion and creativity as well.

Also familiar to most of us is Thor, another weather god with a Fire association. He’s a son of the Earth-goddess Jord (pronounced *yordh*), and a patron of those who work the land. He is, in essence, a fertility god.

“Thor,” Aswynn tells us, “is a friendly, big, soft-hearted character who is known to lose his temper only when danger threatens those in his care.”

Loki is another well-known Norse god: tellingly, His element is *wild* fire. Sometimes called a trickster, Loki’s a shape-shifter, and a catalyst. Take great care invoking Him, for He represents “the impulsive, destructive, immature aspect in human nature,” as Aswynn puts it.

Tyr was the original All-father. In English, his name is Tiw, and Tiw, the law-giver, was as important to Angles and Saxons as Odin was to the Norse. In modern times, Tyr is invoked when there is need of justice – when combat of any kind, including legal disputes, is involved. He’s also an Oath-witness, and invoked as well for courage and for victory.

Frigga is no doubt the best-known of the goddesses. Her name inspired a slang term in our language – and although it can be used quite disrespectfully, it does reflect Frigga’s status as a fertility and mother goddess. Odin’s consort (and just as powerful as Odin, He himself admits), She is invoked for marital fidelity as well as for childbirth.

Freya – her name means Lady – is concerned with love, war, and magic; like Odin, She’s a shaman. Hers is the Brisingamen, a necklace that represents the integration of the five elements. Many believe that the Brisingamen is the

origin of the custom for priestesses to wear necklaces.

Iduna is little-known, but a goddess of some importance. It is She who grows the Apples without which the other gods age and die. She is usually pictured as a maiden, carrying a basket of golden apples. Apples are symbolic of the womb/rebirth, and of wisdom.

ÁSATRÚ CLERGY

Ásatrú clergy are called gothar, which is the plural of the masculine goði (pronounced *go-thii*) and the feminine geðia (say *geeth-yuh*). In Old Norse, these words mean “one/s who speaks the godly tongue.” To attain this clerical status requires a lifetime of study, devotion to the Gods, and great personal sacrifice. (Here too “sacrifice” means time, energy, and attention.) These roles are the highest we can attain in the Ásatrú community.

Gothar are chosen by the members of each kindred; the founder of a kindred sometimes becomes its goði or gyðia, too. There are no formal training courses, no seminaries or academic degrees awarded in the Ásatrú community – except for the schools of experience and self-discipline, and the degrees of acceptance in the Heathen community. True dedication to the Northern Gods and Ways, and genuine service to the community as a priest/ess, are the qualifications for the gothar.

ÁSATRÚ PRACTICE

Most kindreds meet at least once a month (some as often as once a week), and always at the major Holy Days. Ásatrú celebrates two main types of religious services. The most important is called a Blót – *blót* rhymes with *boat*, and literally means “blessing.” Blóts mark the turning of the seasons and celebrate other events as well.

Ceremonial Blóts are conducted by gothar who cleanse the site before opening the service. Often, a story is told about the holiday, and the Valkyrie pours everyone a drink of the consecrated mead (see below). Frequently, everyone taking part is offered a chance to speak about the holiday and its meaning. When the ritual

ends, an offering is always made to the local Land Spirits – also called by their Anglo-Saxon name, *wights*.

A Sumbel is a very different sort of service. It’s a ritual toast, usually in three rounds, and usually around an outdoor fire or hearth. The goði or gyðia announces each round, and the Valkyrie carries the ritual drinking horn to each participant in turn, offering the blessings of the gods with each drink poured.

First, the God/desses are toasted; second, we raise our horns or cups to our ancestors and others who have passed; and on the third round, we toast who- or whatever is important to us as we lift our horns again.

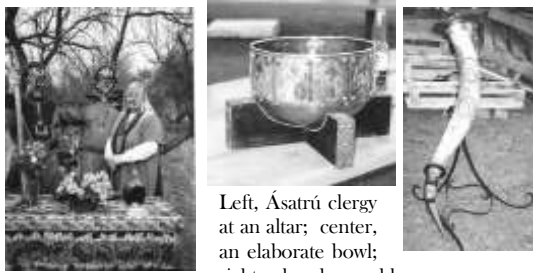
This tradition allows individuals and groups to reflect on lessons learned, express gratitude, and maintain an historic sense of community. It’s customary to toast with mead – a kind of wine made from honey – but fruit juice or even water can be substituted.

At both Blóts and Sumbels those preferring not to drink participate by pouring a few drops on the ground or into a libation bowl. When real mead is not available, a mixture of honey, water, and juice can be used; so can plain juice. Traditionally, the “mead” is consecrated, and everyone’s sprig-sprinkled with it before it’s shared from the Valkyrie’s horn.

ON THE ALTAR

A table (or the seat of a chair) can serve as an altar. On it, there must be a bowl, a drinking horn, and a sprig of evergreen. (Substitutions for the horn and the evergreen sprig can be used.) A Hammer is used to bless the Feast that is declared immediately after a Blót. The Feast, however spare, is Hammer Signed, or blessed by the goði with the Hammer of Thor.

Thor’s Hammer is the primary ritual symbol of Ásatrú and most Ásatrú wear a Hammer necklace both as sign of their faith and to have handy for blessings. Though some kindreds have them, larger hammers are not required, and the smaller, more personal ones are fine for normal use.



Left, Ásatrú clergy at an altar; center, an elaborate bowl; right, a hand-carved horn.

THE HEATHEN AFTERLIFE

You've probably heard of Valhalla, the Viking Hall of the Dead. There, those whose lives have been virtuous continue to experience the challenges, pleasures, and fulfillments that were part of their mortal lives. Those who have lived badly are doomed to a gloomy afterlife, separated from the Ancestors. The Ásatrú feel a strong connection to their ancestors, as well as to their descendants, who haven't been born yet), and separation after death is a serious consequence of unacceptable behavior.

Behavior is governed by several concepts. From the *Havamal* (the sayings of Odin), we learn that every Ásatrú should "know how to write [the Runes], how to read them, how to stain them, and how to understand them." Note Odin's distinction between "reading" and "understanding" the Runes.

An Ásatrú also needs to know how to conduct a Blót - "how to ask, how to offer, how to supplicate, how to sacrifice." Note well that "sacrifice" is not about spilling blood. Odin's greatest sacrifice was of himself to himself, and that's the example Ásatrú follow.

Ritually, "sacrifice" means sharing food and drink with the Gods, the Ancestors, and the local Land Spirits. Following Odin's lead, in practical, personal spiritual terms, "sacrifice" means offering something important to make room for something *else* important to be part of your life. One might "sacrifice" anger to accept wisdom, for example.

THE RUNES

Ásatrú has a runic system of magic, but the Runes are used primarily as tools of, and in magic for, self-exploration. They are generally

presented in three sets or lines of eight Runes, and these sets are called *aetts* (pronounced "eights").

Each Rune corresponds to a letter of the alphabet, but each also carries deeper meaning, wisdom from the cultural experience of the Northern people. In a sense, reading Runes is something like reading Tarot cards, and it takes years of study and "inner work" to become expert at it.

The Runes that follow are from an online font and include letters that do not exist in Old Norse. They are for example and transposition only. The meanings of each Rune are beyond the scope of this brochure.

Ʀ	ᚢ	<	ᚦ	ᚑ	ᚖ	ᚗ	᚛	
a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i
ᚔ	<	ᚠ	ᚡ	ᚢ	ᚣ	ᚤ	ᚥ	ᚦ
j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r
ᚧ	↑	ᚨ	ᚩ	ᚪ	ᚫ	ᚬ	ᚭ	ᚮ
s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	



CHALLENGES

Unfortunately, phony Odinism - sometimes blatant enough to call itself "Nazitru" - has given this wonderful Tradition a very bad name.

Perversion of the Runes and other aspects of Northern lore was Hitler's doing. He investigated the magical systems of a number of cultures - including the Jewish Cabala - but was particularly taken with Aryan lore, which Germans can claim as ancestral.

Nazis bastardized tribal lore, betrayed honor, and scorned both natural diversity and established science. Archaeological evidence was

forged, ignored, and misinterpreted. A noble Tradition was deliberately twisted into a dogma of racial superiority to justify ethnic cleansing.

Ásatrú still has a hard time combating Nazi associations. Neo-Nazi groups still peddle hatred and racism, calling it religion - and real Ásatrú have to cope not only with public fear, but with wanna-be Nazis who think Ásatrú supports them. It doesn't, period.

REAL HISTORY

The aggression and ferocity associated with Viking voyages wasn't all there was to Northern life. The Vikings' society was primarily agrarian, and granted women equal rights to property and political process.

If you read the Eddas and Sagas, you find a celebration of diversity. Demigods, giants, elves, trolls - kings with nicknames like "Half-Dane the Black" - make it clear that the descendants of Odin, Thor, and the Vikings must have been - and still are - a diverse people.

The original Vikings opened trade routes, developed navigation techniques, and contributed much of worth to the cultures they encountered; and they embraced many attributes of those cultures. Today's Ásatrú honor that legendary wanderlust, and their Northern European ancestors for their courage, strength, and willingness to take risks for the benefit of the community.

Iceland recognized Ásatrú as a state religion in 1972; it's a recognized folk religion in other European countries, too. Here in North America (to Ásatrú, Vinland), there are over 100 kindreds. Some of them have incorporated as "churches" and enjoy tax-exempt status through the IRS.

Today, North American Heathenry faces serious challenges, for some racists use Ásatrú as a front. This dishonors the Gods and makes life tougher for all of us. Northern Traditions are centuries old and rich with intriguing mythologies and distinct magical styles. It's the life-energy and the creative side of Northern life - from folk customs to cosmology - that modern "Vikings" embrace.

There is a fine line between cultural pride and racism. Legitimate Ásatrú do not cross it.

SOME ÁSATRÚ HOLY DAYS

Courtesy of the Ásatrú Alliance

January 15	Thorra Blót
February 14	Feast of Vali
March 20	High Feast of Ostara
April 30	Walburg (May Eve)
June 21	High Feast of Baldur
August 18	Freyfaxi (First Harvest)
September 23	High Feast of Odin
October 12	Winter Nights (Harvest)
December 21	Mother Night
December 22	High Feast of Yule

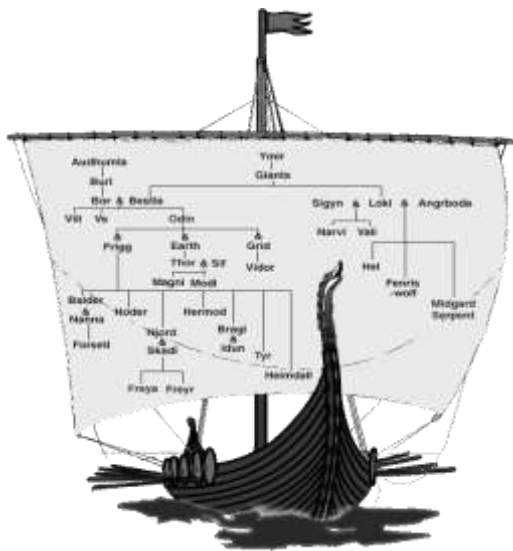
SOME RECOMMENDED READING

There are other good books as well; these are just a few.

Aswynn, Freya, *Northern Mysteries & Magic* (Llewellyn Publications)

Bates, Brian, *The Way of Wyrð: Tales of an Anglo-Saxon Sorcerer* (Book Club Associates, London)

Gundarsson, Kveldulf, *Teutonic Magic: The Magical and Spiritual Practices of the Germanic Peoples* (Llewellyn Publications)

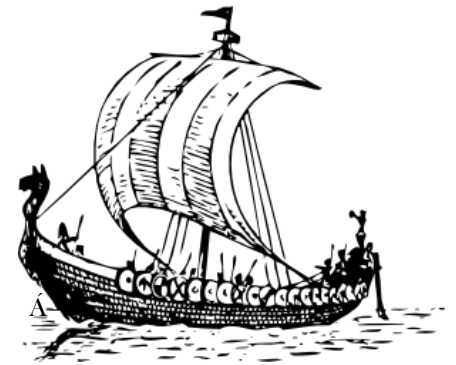


Here's a photo of an Ásatrú altar set up a few years ago, in a public park in Tucson, Arizona, ready for an open ritual. Open Ásatrú rituals - called blóts - are uncommon now, because of the resurgence of "Nazitru" or "Ása-false." Ásatrú tends to be family oriented (though it does not follow that all families must be traditional or conventional), and the stereotypes of Ásatrú/Odinism make it dangerous for families to be public with their religion.

This brochure is provided by
Mother Earth Ministries-ATC
 Post Office Box 35906
 Tucson, Arizona 85740-5906
www.MotherEarthMinistries.org

AN INTRODUCTION TO ÁSATRÚ

"THE NORTHERN WAY"



Ásatrú - an umbrella term that covers various Heathen faiths - is what some people like to call "the Viking religion," and accurately so: Ásatrú by any name *was* the Vikings' religion.

The movies make it easy to believe that Vikings were all brutal, and some gangs make us worry that today's Heathens are, too. We offer this brochure to give you an idea about what Ásatrú is really about.

Heathen religions are pre-Christian, and have contributed much to modern life. Read on for an introduction to modern Heathenism and how Ásatrú is practiced here and now.

