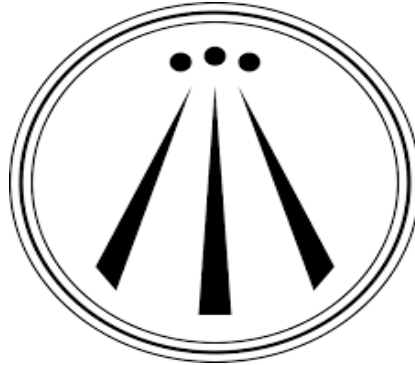




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A Brief Introduction to Paganism: Druidry and Heathenry

What is Paganism?

The term Pagan is derived from the Latin term 'paganus', which is often translated to mean 'country-dweller', but might have meant something more like 'parishioner'. Pagans were those who worshipped the Gods of the 'pagus' – the locality. Modern Paganism, in keeping with this definition, is a religious movement very much tied to ideas of place and Nature. As such, over the past few decades, specific forms of Paganism have been arising in different countries around the world as people have sought to retrieve what they perceive to be a religious tradition closely tied with the culture and mythology of their location or nation. In the UK, the most popular ancient traditions drawn upon are those of the Celts and of the Norse and Anglo-Saxons.

What is Druidry?

It is generally accepted that the Druids were the priestly class of Celtic society that flourished in Britain before the arrival of the Romans. The inspiration for Druidry is therefore drawn from the traditions and mythologies of the Celts. A revival of Druidry began in the 18th century when the idea that the Druids were responsible for building such monuments as Stonehenge and Avebury became popular. This revival took the form of an interest in studying ancient Celtic (usually Welsh) literature and culture and was not necessarily religious in nature. For example, the Ancient Order of Druids, founded in London in 1781, is a non-religious benevolent society which still exists today. Not long after, the first modern Eisteddfod was held on Primrose Hill in London in 1792. The National Eisteddfod, held annually in Wales, is described 'a celebration of the culture and language in Wales'. It is a continuation of this

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revivalist tradition but is not connected to modern Pagan Druidry. Indeed, today there are secular, Christian and Buddhist Druids. The majority of contemporary Druids, however, are Pagan. Some see their tradition as the native, pre-Christian spirituality of Britain.

How is Druidry organised?

There is no formal organisation within Druidry and no overarching body to which all Druids belong. Rather there are a number of national and international Druid orders to which individual Druids can choose to affiliate. In the UK, these include:

- The British Druid Order (<https://www.druidry.co.uk/>), founded in 1979 by Philip Shallcrass (aka Greywolf)
- The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (<https://druidry.org/>), founded in the 1960s by Ross Nichols
- The Council of British Druids Orders (<http://www.cobdo.org.uk/>), established in the late 1980s, primarily to facilitate ceremonies at Stonehenge
- The Druid Network (<https://druidnetwork.org/>) established by Emma Restall Orr (aka Bobcat) in 2003. In September 2010, the Druid Network became the first Pagan organisation to be accepted as a charity by the Charity Commission. In 2016, it became a full member of the Inter Faith Network.
- The Druid Order (<http://thedruidorder.org/>) which claims to trace its lineage back to the early 18th century.

As there is no single organisation to which Druids belong, it is difficult to know the number of Druids in the UK. Over 4,000 individuals identified specifically as Druid in the 2011 Census of England and Wales – but it is likely that many Druids listed their religion as Pagan (over 56,000 individuals identified as Pagan in this Census). The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids claims 20,000 members in 50 countries worldwide. There are also likely to be countless number of Druids or Celtic Pagans who do not join an established group.

Many Druid orders follow three levels of initiation: those of Bard, Ovate and Druid. At each level different aspects of the Druidic tradition are taught. Druidic training begins with the stage of the Bard in which creative skills such as poetry, storytelling, music and art, are developed. The Ovate learns the skills of divination, prophecy and healing. The Druid combines these skills to become a priest/ess and a teacher. A Druid may lead a grove (a small gathering for ritual practice). Some Druid orders, however, see these stages as just different types of practise or expertise.

What do Druids believe?

Druidry, like other Pagan traditions, emphasises practice and ethical living over religious beliefs, which vary between individuals. It is a tradition tied to land and place, including sacred sites, and to an engagement with the past. In common with most other traditions within Paganism, Druidry is a polytheistic religion that sees nature as sacred – the divine is immanent within nature. The deities it works with are most often those of the Celtic tradition, such as the Welsh and Irish pantheons. Many Druids believe in the transmigration of souls, an idea similar to the Eastern concept of reincarnation. This is based on the Welsh idea that there are three circles of existence. Life begins in the realm of Annwn; once the spirit takes a physical form it enters the

realm of Abred, the realm of life as we know it. The spirit may then return to Annwn to be reborn, or continue to the realm of Gwynvid, the dwelling place of the enlightened ones. Ceugant is the realm of the great spirit, the one source of all being, to which all will eventually return.

What do Druids practice?

A central teaching of Druidry is the 'quest for inspiration' (Awen). Awen is a Welsh word described as 'flowing spirit' or 'breath', and it is often considered the source of poetic inspiration. Much of Druid ritual practice is concerned with connecting with Awen, for some creating a relationship with the divine. During ritual, this force can be invoked through the recitation of the word Awen (pronounced Ah-oo-en) as a mantra. It can then be directed towards such practices as healing, divination, or creative performance in the form of music and poetry.

Many Druids engage in some solitary practice on a day-to-day basis. This may involve a ritual to greet the sun, creating an altar to chosen deities, composing a piece of creative work, or meditation. As with other Pagan traditions, Druids also hold rituals with fellow practitioners. The life cycle is marked in rites of passage and the seasonal cycle is marked with the eight festivals of the Year Wheel (see the Inform leaflet on Wicca). Some Druid groups hold their seasonal celebrations at ancient sites around the UK and are well known for their gatherings at Stonehenge (and occasional clashes with the authorities over right of access). At these open rituals, many Druids will dress in long ceremonial robes - frequently white in colour. Rituals may also be performed for such specific purposes as healing, a request for inspiration or divination. A Druid form of divination uses the Ogham (the Celtic tree alphabet), and the oak tree is an important symbol to many Druids.

Like Wiccans, Druids have no fixed place of worship, preferring to hold rituals outside. A sacred space is created in the form of a circle and the elements of Nature as well as the deities are invoked for protection and blessing. A central act of most Druid rituals is the *eisteddfod*, a sharing of creativity in the form of poetry and song.

What is Heathenry?

Heathenry is a branch of Paganism inspired by the pre-Christian traditions of Northern Europe. It draws upon Anglo-Saxon and Norse mythology as recorded in such texts as the 13th century Icelandic *Eddas*. Heathenry is sometimes known as Odinism, Asatru and, less commonly, Vanatru, depending on which group of deities are venerated. It is also sometimes referred to as the Northern Tradition. It is a polytheistic religious tradition.

How is Heathenry organised?

As with other traditions of Paganism, there is no formal organisation within Heathenry. Individual practitioners may choose to affiliate to a number of national or international groups. In the UK, networking groups include Asatru UK (<https://www.asatruuk.org/>), which began as a Facebook group and held its first 'moot' (meeting) in 2013; and The Confederation of UK Heathen Kindreds, which can be found on Facebook. There also exist regional groups, such as Heathens of Yorkshire

(<https://www.heathensofyorkshire.com/>). The Asgardian Heathen Festival, an annual summer camp that began in 2016, is now the UK's largest Heathen festival.

As there is no single organisation to which Heathens belong, it is difficult to know the number of Heathens in the UK. Just under 2,000 people self-identified as Heathen in the 2011 Census of England and Wales, although it is likely that some of the 56,000 people who identified as Pagan would follow the Heathen tradition. Asatru UK, arguably the largest Heathen networking group in the UK, had over 2,600 Facebook followers in 2020 (not all of whom would be UK based).

Some groups require the prospective member to make the Pledge of Faith in which allegiance to the tradition is sworn upon an oath-ring. This is kept on the altar and, when sworn upon, the Gods act as witness.

A group of about 10 to 12 practitioners may be referred to as a 'hearth', 'kindred' or 'kith'. These groups may be egalitarian or be led by a gothi (a male or female priest). However, there is no centrally recognised priesthood within Heathenry. Hearths meet to perform rituals, which may take place out of doors, or in specially created temples, usually within a home, known as hofs.

What do followers of Heathenry Believe?

Followers of Heathenry draw on the mythology of Scandinavia and Germany. This tradition is centred around two groups of deities – the Aesir and the Vanir. The Aesir are sky Gods and include Odin (often seen as the High God), his wife Frigga and son Balder. The Vanir are earth Gods, Gods of agriculture and fertility, and include Frey and Freya. Heathens may choose to work with one deity, one group or all of these deities. In addition, Heathens recognise other spiritual beings ('wights'), such as housewights and landwights. Ancestors (whether literal or mythological) also have a central place within Heathenry.

The mythology of Heathenry provides a complex cosmology. It is believed that human life takes place on Middle Earth, which is just one of the nine worlds that make up Yggdrasil - the Tree of Life. Humans have an eternal soul/spirit which contains a spark of the divine. On death it is reunited with the ancestors in the halls of the Gods. People's destinies are decided in the Web of Wyrd – wyrd is the force that connects everything in the universe throughout space and time. An understanding that one's actions are impacted by one's previous actions, and will simultaneously impact upon one's future actions, encourages Heathens to take responsibility for their actions.

What do followers of Heathenry Practice?

As with other Pagan traditions, followers of Heathenry perform rituals to mark rites of passage, to mark the turning of the seasons and for specific purposes, such as healing, divination and the performance of magic. Heathens use the Runes as a means of divination. The Runes can also be combined to create symbols ('sigils') and as such are the primary method in the performance of magic. However, the practice of magic is not central to Heathenry as it is in other Pagan religions such as Wicca.

The 'Blot' (a sacrifice to the Gods) can be performed by itself or as part of a larger ritual, such as during a seasonal festival. In the past this may have involved animal sacrifice, today it generally involves a libation of mead followed by a feast. The 'Symbel' is a drinking ceremony in which a vessel of mead is blessed and shared amongst all present in a toast to the Gods and wights.

Heathens do not follow the eight festivals of the Year Wheel as Wiccans and some Druids do. The festivals most commonly marked by Heathens are Winter Nights (in October or November), Yule (a 12-day festival starting on the Winter Solstice) and a festival for the Goddess Eostre in the spring. Some Heathens also celebrate Einherjar (Hero's Day) on 11th November to commemorate the dead.

Heathens state that the tradition is a way of life as much as a religious practice. Many try to adhere to what are known as the Nine Noble Virtues: Courage, Truth, Honour, Fidelity, Discipline, Hospitality, Industriousness, Self-reliance and Perseverance. Family values are strongly emphasised, as is loyalty to one's social group (the concept of 'frith').

Controversies

In the past, Heathenry has been male-oriented, with women occupying only a secondary place, due to an emphasis on Odin as the High God. This orientation is changing now as more women are becoming involved. Also, members who emphasise 'family values', may take a negative view toward LGBTQI issues.

Some are attracted to Heathenry in the belief that this is the 'original' religion of their ethnic group. Some groups thus aim to promote the Tradition as the 'national faith' of a people. Scholar Ethan Doyle White (2017) makes a distinction between those who hold "an inclusive, Universalist perspective", such as the networking organisations mentioned above, and those who hold "a racially exclusive, Folkish alternative". Examples of the latter movements include the Odinist Fellowship (<http://www.odinistfellowship.co.uk/>), the Odinic Rite (<https://odinic-rite.org/main/>) and Woden's Folk (<https://wodensfolk.blogspot.com/>). Doyle White explains that whilst these organisations claim an apolitical stance, they simultaneously promote a racial identity centred around the idea of 'the folk'. For instance, one of these groups has in the past claimed that it is the destiny of the Odinist religion to eclipse Christianity as the religion of the state, nation and people. This interpretation of Heathenism has a long history; during the early 20th century, Hitler and The National Socialist Party appropriated some ideas and symbols from Heathenry to support Aryan racism. Some modern neo-Nazis, who would not necessarily identify as Heathen, have continued to misappropriate key concepts, beliefs and practices of the religion. The majority of Heathens unequivocally reject this use of their religion.

Further information on Druidry

UK organisations:

Pagan Federation - <http://www.paganfed.org>

The Druid Network - <http://druidnetwork.org>
The Council of British Druid Orders - <http://cobdo.org.uk/>
The British Druid Order - <http://www.druidry.co.uk/>
The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids - <http://druidry.org/>
The Druid Order - <http://thedruidorder.org/>

Independent websites:

Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance:
www.religioustolerance.org/neo_paga.htm

RE Online: <https://www.reonline.org.uk/subject-knowledge/paganism/>

For a practitioner's perspective:

Carr-Gomm, Philip (2011) *Druid Mysteries: Ancient Wisdom for the 21st Century*, Ebury Digital.

Carr-Gomm, Philip (2014) *Druidcraft: The Magic of Wicca and Druidry*, Thorsons.

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For an academic approach:

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Harvey, Graham (2006) *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism*, London: Hurst.

Hutton, Ronald (2009) *Blood and Mistletoe. The History of the Druids in Britain*, London: Yale University Press.

Owen, Suzanne (2021) *Contemporary Druidry: A Native Tradition?*, Bloomsbury.

Further information on Heathenry

UK organisations:

Pagan Federation - <http://www.paganfed.org>

Asatru UK - <https://www.asatruuk.org/>

Independent websites:

The BBC:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/paganism/subdivisions/heathenry_1.shtml

World Religions and Spirituality Project: <https://wrldrels.org/2020/08/02/asatru-iceland/>

Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance:

<http://www.religioustolerance.org/asatru.htm>

For a practitioner's perspective:

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Doyle White, Ethan (2017) 'Northern Gods for Northern Folk: Racial Identity and Right-wing Ideology among Britain's Folkish Heathens', *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 10(3): 241-273.

Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas (2002) *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity*, New York: New York University Press.

Harvey, Graham (2000) 'Heathenism: A North European Pagan Tradition' in *Pagan Pathways: A Guide to the Ancient Earth Traditions*, edited by Graham Harvey and

Charlotte Hardman. London: Thorsons, pp. 49-64.

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Strmiska, Michael with Baldur A. Sigurvinsson (2005) 'Ásatrú: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America' in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*, edited by Michael Strmiskak. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, pp. 127-69.

HOW INFORM CAN HELP

- o By providing reliable, up-to-date information about minority religions
- o By putting you in touch with a nation-wide network of experts with specialist knowledge concerning minority religions
- o By putting you in touch with people who can give counselling, legal advice - or just lend a sympathetic ear.
- o By putting you in touch with former-members or families who have personal experience with a particular group.

New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information. It can be brought second hand from retailers including amazon.co.uk and abebooks.co.uk

Every care is taken to provide as accurate and balanced an account as possible, but we welcome corrections and comments.

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