

rites of the heathen household

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Note: This booklet is an extraction from the forthcoming full-length book “As Do The Heathen”.

Introduction

It is a cornerstone of Þéodish Belief that the tribe is central. The Gods deal with mortals on the level of the folk collectively rather than individually (in most cases), and the sacral chief serves as the intermediary between the Gods and the folk. The expression of that relationship, the rite of blót, or blood sacrifice, is the means by which the assembled folk collectively give offerings to the Gods in return for Their favor, or “luck”, which flows into the group through the sacral chief. In this way, the blót cements the bonds between the Gods and the folk as a whole.

Within the folk, the bonds of community are forged through the web of oaths and the bonds of clan and family. The oath-bonds connect the sacral lord to his nobles, who in turn extend that connection to the rest of the people. Also, bonds of marriage and blood-brotherhood serve to forge similar bonds, as the web of luck becomes ever-stronger among the collective members of the tribe (or, as they were known in ancient times, nation). Those relationships are expressed through the ritual of the sumbel, or ritual drinking. As bonds of loyalty are sworn through sacred oaths, and ties of kinship and friendship are forged through marriage and the institution of fosterage, the bonds between the folk are made stronger.

These two functions, however, don't touch on the religion of the common man. They, by their nature, deal with large gatherings and the higher rungs of the society of the folk, and take place only a few times a year. Blót is only done a few times a year, and the swearing of an oath to a high Þéodish lord or a marriage between two families are events that take place only a few times in a given lifetime. The “common religion” exists in and around these weighty events and mighty personages. It is, in a very real sense, the deep foundation upon which the lofty towers of blot and sumbel are built, and without which it is difficult for them to endure in the long run.

It is the norm in Þéodish Belief that the ordinary folk do not directly deal with the Gods except in the most perfunctory way. In the Þéodish context, where the Gods are dealt with at the level of the Folk, and where there are specially trained and lore-wise priests and

wizards to do so, makes such direct entreaties both unnecessary and unwise. However, this does not mean that the religious obligations of the family or the individual are limited to attendance at a high festival a few times a year. There are wights besides the Gods that must and should be dealt with, and dealt with at the level of the family or the individual. These form the rites of the Heathen household with which this booklet deals specifically.

It should be remembered that Péodish Belief should not only be seen as a phenomenon which operates from the top down, no matter how much emphasis is placed on that particular relationship by the Greater Fainings with their pomp and revelry. It is true that the luck of the Gods flows down into the folk through the sacral lord. It is no less true, however, that the folk build their own luck by their relationships with the wights of the land and the spirits of the home.

The family is a microcosm of the tribe, and just as the sacral leader speaks and acts on behalf of the folk as a whole in a religious context, so does the head of the household speak and act on behalf of the family when performing these rites. This is a concept that is attested to as far back as Tacitus, who mentions the fact in his book *Germania*. The family is a microcosm of the tribe, and just as the tribe makes offerings to the Gods in return for definite material gains (the outward manifestation of the luck the Gods bring) so too does the family make offerings to the various spirits for exactly the same sort of benefit. They bring luck, but the outward proof of that luck is *ar ok friðR* (“peace and good seasons”).

By conducting these household rites, the rooftrees, families, and individual members of the folk not only increase their own luck and might, but they contribute to the overall luck and might of the folks as a whole. They contribute in a spiritual sense to the overall wellbeing of the tribe in just as real a sense as if they had contributed money to the treasury or labor in the building of a mead-hall. Such rites should be the focus of the family and the individual members of the tribe, not only for their own sake (although the benefits of doing so are great indeed), but also for the prosperity of the tribe to which they belong and to which their loyalty lies.

The Land-Wights

The land-wights (ON *landvættir*) are the guardian spirits of the land itself, well attested-to in the sagas and other written lore. They can be very local, dwelling in a single spring or being associated with a particular mountain or field. They can also be more general, protecting entire lands and caring for stretches of countryside with varied terrain. We are told of land-wights who protected Iceland from an invading magician in the form of a great dragon, an enormous bird, a huge bull, and a hill giant, plus many hundreds or thousands of lesser land-spirits in similar, if smaller, shapes.

The well-being of the land (and the people who live on it) is directly tied to the presence and goodwill of the land-wights, and care must be taken not to offend or frighten them. In Iceland there was a law that incoming ships must remove their fearsome dragon-heads before approaching the island, lest the land-wights become frightened and leave the island. The famous curse that Egil Skallagrimson placed on king Eirik of Norway with the *niðing*-pole was designed to drive the land-spirits away so that the luck they brought to the land would leave with them.

In modern practice, this translates to not doing anything to deliberately annoy, insult, or frighten the land-wights. One must always be mindful that they are there, and watching, and can be quick to offense.

Tales abound from Scandinavia, England, and the Continent concerning the activities of the land-wights and their interactions with human folk up to modern times. These tales are found in the form of the folklore concerning those beings called variously *elves*, *huldufolk*, hidden-folk, *bergfolk*, *trolls*, etc. Naturally some of these stories need to be stripped of the Christian veneer which has been placed upon them (such as the story which tells us that the hidden-folk are the descendents of the Biblical Cain), but they provide an invaluable guide to the proper way to deal with these beings, and are enormously entertaining into the bargain.

It is possible that the land-wights will come to you, either in person or in a dream, and offer their friendship or partnership. If this happens, by all means accept. We are told of one Icelander who accepted just such a partnership, and who found his flocks of goats increase enormously thereafter. Those who had the second sight said that he was followed by the land-wights wherever he went, and his brothers as well were similarly prosperous.

While the land-wights are fickle, they are not inherently hostile, and will respond positively to offerings and attention. If you own land of your own, you should seek out any elf-stones that it may contain. These are large rocks or boulders with bowl- or cup-like indentations. These “cups” (whether natural or worked into the stone) are used to hold the libations given to the land-spirits. If no such rocks are to be found, offerings may still be made anywhere on the land; you may wish to wander the land until you find a place that “feels right”. Such will usually be a location with some obtrusive natural feature such as an old tree, a spring, large rock, etc. Alternatively, you may wish to consult a Péodish wizard with training in such matters. This feature will serve as the altar (ON *hörgr*) for the faining of offering.

If you live in an urban area (or if you own your own land and no likely spots for land-wight worship present themselves), there are several alternatives available. The land-spirits need not dwell on land that you own for you to honor them. If you live in an apartment, and there is some sort of common land attached, you may well find a suitable location there. You may also try going to any natural setting such as a park, arboretum, etc. A place with some level of solitude is preferable, but land-wights have been known to dwell in boulders in the middle of busy highways (in Iceland, it’s not uncommon for roads to be diverted to avoid having to move the stones in which the land-wights dwell).

The faining for the land-wights can be done as often as is felt necessary; once per month is probably acceptable (if that is the schedule used, then it should be conducted while the moon is waxing, rather than when it is growing smaller).

Faining for the Land-Wights

Setting: The faining is centered on an altar consisting of a large natural stone, well/spring/stream, or large tree, as discussed above. Specifically do not undertake to separate the space by carrying fire or roping off, as might be done in a faining to the Gods. A plate of cakes and a horn of ale/milk/mead is set ready. A lit candle or enclosed lantern is ready. Iron or steel should not be worn or brandished in the setting, as the land-wights find such uncomfortable (this is not limited to blades).

The celebrant (usually the head of the household, but this ritual could be adapted for use by larger groups of the folks as well) stands facing the altar, with other participants behind him, similarly facing. If geography makes it possible and appropriate, all should be facing north, or (alternatively) should face an “interesting” feature of the altar such as a large crack in a stone or natural knot in a tree that could be a door for the land-wights.

The celebrant begins, and the assembled folk take up a chant (in white-voice style¹ if possible, but this is not necessary) to summon the land-wights; accompaniment on drum or harp is optional. This proceeds for a time until the celebrant deems the wights have heeded the summons. In some cases this will be immediate, in other cases it might take some time. Their appearance may or may not be demonstrated by signs; the celebrant should be on the lookout for such. Once the signs have been observed, the celebrant begins.

Silence I ask
Oh sacred kin,
Greater and lesser,
Ye sons of Heimdall.

Come we here,
kith and kin of name's house,

¹ A style of vocal chant or song based on traditional Scandinavian shepherd calls.

To the spirits of the land
Offering is made.

The celebrant then takes the cakes and passes them over the flame three times deosil (clockwise), saying with each complete pass:

Aesir and Alfs²
make this food holy.

The celebrant then places the cakes on or before the hörg (whichever is appropriate) and says:

Spirits of the land, accept
our gift of friendship,
freely offered
with none but friendship sought.

The assembled folk reply:

May our friendship
never end.

The celebrant then takes the ale (or milk, or mead) and passes it over the flame three times deosil (clockwise), saying with each complete pass:

Aesir and Alfs
make this drink holy.

The celebrant then pours the liquid over or before the hörg (whichever is appropriate) and says:

Spirits of the land, accept
our gift of friendship,

² The Alfar are often called Elves in modern English, although this can cause some confusion as the term “elves” bears with it certain connotations which are not necessarily appropriate in a Théodish context. Here the stricter Anglicization “alfs” is used intentionally to avoid such confusion.

drink freely offered
with none but friendship sought.

The assembled folk reply:

May our friendship
never end.

The celebrant then continues:

To a false friend
the footpath winds
though his house be close.
To a sure friend
the journey is short,
though he live far away.

The assembled folk reply:

Let us be sure friends!

The rite is ended. The flame is extinguished, and the assembled depart the place silently.

It should be noted that the above, like all the fainings and prayers in this booklet, is intended only as an example. It is expected that each family and household will, over the course of years and with repeated practice and experimentation, develop its own set of rituals and rites to honor these spirits, without need to get approval from any authority. In these matters, the head of the household is sovereign.

The House-Gods

The house-gods are associated not with nature and natural places, but most specifically with the house and the household itself. They are known by various names in various places; the *tomte* in Sweden, the *nisse* or *tusse* in Norway and Denmark, the *brownie* in England and Scotland, etc.

The house-god is a definite boon to the household. It can be trusted to help with the household work, as well as bringing wealth and prosperity to the home (often at the expense of one's neighbors!). We are told, for example, of how one house-god would go to a neighbor's farm and steal hay for the barn or fresh-baked bread for the household to eat.

The house-god can be quite particular in how it is approached, and it is very easy to offend it. Such offense often brings dire consequences, such as the house-god whose work on behalf of the household were mocked as being of but little effort. He turned around and brought the single sheaf of grain he had been carrying to a neighboring farm instead. It turned out that what had appeared as a single sheaf was in fact an entire cartload of grain. The farm was thrust into poverty soon thereafter, and the farm owner died violently for his abuse.

The lesson here is clear; always treat the house-gods with great respect and friendship. Even an ill-received joke could cause the house-god to leave, taking his good luck with him. Overt references to Christianity, even as seemingly innocuous as an oath or swear-word, can also be enough to drive away such a house-god for good, especially one new to the home.

Unlike the land-wight which is found on its own accord in the lands and natural features around us, as discussed above, or the family spirit, which attaches itself unbidden to a particular family line or extended clan, as discussed below, the house-god may need to be summoned to its station. Some homes, particularly those of sufficient age and continual occupation (in the United States, especially those which were originally built by settlers from Scandinavia) will be blessed to already have one, sometimes thought to be the spirit of the original

builder of the home or farm. Most householders, however, will need to actively undertake to summon a house-god.

Fortunately this is something which is well attested-to in the folklore of northern Europe. The house-god will be attracted to a clean, neat, and orderly home. We are told that something as simple as a prayer spoken aloud, asking for the blessings of having a house-god (by whatever local name you wish to call it; *tomte*, *brownie*, etc.) can be sufficient. One suggestion might be the following prayer.

Prayer of Invitation to the House-Gods

Fine indeed I think t'would be
A friendly *tomte* here to see
Luck and frith we all to share
Bonds of friendship all to bear.

An immediate sign, some sort of sudden noise (the sound of the house-god moving in) will accompany the prayer if it has been successful. If you are unsure about the nature of a sign, consult a Péodish wizard for an informed interpretation.

If such a simple prayer proves ineffective, a more elaborate ritual may be required.

Ritual of Invitation to the House-Gods

A formal invitation to the spirits to come and inhabit one's home is a time-honored tradition. It is done at night (during the waxing phase of the moon, but not within three days either of the full or new moon), by the head of the household alone, at a crossroads (specifically a four-way intersection with the roads heading at right-angles to one another). It is best to find a crossroads that is not likely to see any traffic during the ritual; not only could such unexpected witnesses prove an embarrassment, but will most certainly frighten off the house-gods you are trying to attract.

The celebrant should have a flame (a candle works fine), coarse-grain bread and either whole milk, mead, or dark beer (with two cups plus the vessel it is poured from). The ritual itself should be conducted immediately off the road itself, in whatever corner is closest to the north.

The celebrant should meditate silently for a period, long enough to establish an inner calm and focus his or her mind on the purpose of the ritual.

The celebrant takes the bread and passes it over the flame three times deosil (clockwise), saying with each complete pass:

Aesir and Alfs
make this food holy.

The bread is placed on the ground in front of the celebrant.

The celebrant then takes the ale (or milk, or mead) and passes it over the flame three times deosil (clockwise), saying with each complete pass:

Aesir and Alfs
make this drink holy.

The drink is then also placed in front of the celebrant. He or she then breaks the bread in two and pours two cups of drink from the container.

Oh good house-god,
come sup with me tonight.
Food and drink aplenty,
a warm bed and a merry fire;
all these things
a friend of the Aesir and Alfar
promises you.

The celebrant then eats of his share of the bread and drinks from his cup.

My house is dry,
my hearth is warm,
my family pleasant and welcoming.
Faith we have in you,
faith we have in the Gods.
Come, good house-god,
a home awaits your pleasure.

At this point the celebrant should await a sign. It may well manifest itself directly with the house-god's portion of the food or drink, or it may simply occur in the vicinity of the ritual.

Note that it is entirely possible that the ritual will not work and no sign will be forthcoming. If that happens, the celebrant should wait at least one month and then try once more. Folklore tells us that one man tried four times before getting a response, and then it was a negative one!

It should also be stressed that the house-gods do not dwell in a household for payment, and the offerings given to them should never be referred to as such; to do so demeans the house-god and places him at the level of a servant. Rather, the household should cultivate a fast friendship with their house-gods, and the offerings given to them should be thought of as the same tokens of affection and appreciation that one good friend regularly gives to another.

The traditional day for honoring the house-gods is Thursday. This is not surprising, given the fact that it is the day of Thor, the most well-known and well-loved of the Heathen Gods among the common folk of northern Europe. Bear in mind that in the Heathen mind-set the day begins and ends at sunset. Thus, Thursday actually begins on what the modern calendar would call Wednesday night. Depending on when you choose to honor your house-gods, this could be significant.

Faining for the House-Gods

This ritual may be done either every Thursday evening (see above for considerations concerning the timing) or it can be done only on Yule-eve. If your household chooses to do it as a weekly rite, it is not necessary for the head of the household to conduct this ritual. It may be desirable for it to be done by a child as a regular task, in order to instill a sense of responsibility. However, if you start weekly offerings, they should be maintained. Stopping them will likely be seen as an insult by the house-god.

A special bowl of porridge should be prepared for the offering to the house-god. Alternatively, a portion of the meal the family is having that evening can be given. It is important that a large pat of butter be visible on top of the bowl of porridge, or a full portion of food; the house-gods will be offended if they think the household is being stingy. There should also be a flame present (a candle will do, although a hearth-fire is best).

The celebrant takes the porridge and passes it over the flame three times deosil (clockwise), saying with each complete pass:

Aesir and Alfs
make this food holy.

The celebrant then places the cakes on or before the hörg (whichever is appropriate) and says:

Good god of our house, accept
our gift of friendship,
freely offered
with none but friendship sought.

The bowl of porridge is then set in the customary place (either on the hearth, kitchen, or in an out-of-the-way corner of the house; if you have a barn that is ideal). The rite is then ended.

The food should be left overnight. If it is still there in the morning, it may be taken outside and left for the local animals.

Conclusion

This, of course, represents only the barest fraction of the spiritual practices attendant the family and individuals. It is the intention of this booklet to stand only as an introduction and skeleton upon which each individual family will gradually develop a body of its own practices. Much has been omitted due to the constraints of space; the taking of auguries and the casting of lots, the heeding of omens, worshiping those land-spirits that specifically dwell in wells and springs, prayers and charms for healing, processions and ploughing the ground to ensure prosperity, and a hundred other things that would be dismissed as “folk magic” or superstition by today's modern post-industrial society. Many of those topics will be discussed in the forthcoming book “As Do The Heathen”.

Yet these things, these “superstitions”, bring us closer not only to those rhythms of the land which our Heathen forebears knew so intimately, but also those spirits of air and water, tree and stone with whom they were similarly acquainted. If Þéodish Belief is to truly achieve its fullest potential, the meat of lofty fainings to the Gods undertaken by high lords and trained priests must be paired with the bread of everyday “heathen living”.