

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS FOR SCHOOLS  
"GERMANIC TRIBES. ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES"

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# SYMBOLS AND CODES OF THE EXTREME RIGHT AS APPROPRIATIONS OF THE GERMANIC PAST

Religion — Myth — Ideology

## Exhibition

September 2020 until March 2021 in the Museum of  
Prehistory and Early History, Berlin; May to October 2021,  
LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn.

## Religion—Myth—Ideology

Neither archaeological finds nor written sources can tell us how Germanic tribes practiced religion. Archaeologists emphasize that they do not know where and how cultic rites were performed and who engaged in them. It is likely that these spaces existed both outside in natural settings and in indoor setting. Although many objects have been excavated that could point to religious practices, researchers cannot determine with certainty what they were used for. The fact that Germanic tribes themselves did not produce any written sources contributes to these gaps in our knowledge.

The common public understanding and image of Germanic gods is based on Roman and medieval manuscripts. The first and most significant text is the *Germania*, written by Tacitus.

The second most important text is the so-called *Edda*: a collection of Nordic myths dealing with gods and heroes, oral traditions that were written down during the thirteenth century CE. They give us an idea of how Germanic religion could have been practiced.

With this in mind, we have to interpret both sources critically: Despite all the knowledge that archaeological research presents to us, the gaps that remain, paired with these two problematic texts, make for a highly elusive and malleable image of Germanic tribes. Archaeologist Karl Banghard issues this warning: “I can project a lot into an epoch about which I don’t know much. That opens up almost unlimited possibilities for manipulation and interpretations to political ends.”<sup>1</sup>

Historiography about Germanic tribes has been and is still ideologically misappropriated. In the nineteenth century, the Museum of Prehistory and Early History in Berlin, for example, was known as the “Collection of Nordic Antiquities,” and framed its display of Germanic archaeological artifacts with friezes showing motives of the *Edda*. The exhibition space had been especially designed for this purpose and was named “Hall of Nordic Antiquities.” Today, the same space is called “Fatherland Hall,” and contains frescos that feature images of Thor, Odin, and Loki looking down on the displays. The museum itself has thus brought the image of the Nordic Gods as related to Germanic tribes to the public.

For the Extreme Right, Germanic culture and religion function as a site of projection for their racist, White Supremacist, and antidemocratic ideologies: their rejection of a diverse, multicultural, and post-migrant society; their disdain for modernity; their repudiation of Christianity; and their Antisemitism. They hold humanitarian practices in contempt and regard people who help the weak as weak themselves. In contrast, they present their own Germanic Paganism as superior and, cast in racist terms, as a source of power for the German people today.

1 Karl Banghard, *Nazis im Wolfspelz: Germanen und der rechte Rand*. Wuppertal: Verlag de Noantri, 2016, p. 10

### Tacitus

Tacitus was an important Roman historian and orator. He published a work called *Germania* in 98 CE, in which he described how “the” Germanic tribes lived around the first century CE. His text is regarded as the most important written account of Germanic tribes. However, it should be read carefully, bearing in mind that Tacitus himself had never visited *Germania* or the regions where Germanic tribes lived. We also do not know the sources he used for his work. What we do know is that he did not intend to publish a neutral description of Germanic tribes, but that he had political interests in mind: He juxtaposed the decadent and corrupt Roman society of his time with Germanic tribes, which he cast as noble.



Image 1: Frieze in the "Hall of Nordic Antiquities" of the Museum of Prehistory and Early History in Berlin. Odin is represented with his mythological weapons and companions.



Image 2: Member of the Extreme Right with a tattoo showing two ravens squatting on a fish. The ravens have killed the fish and are eating it. The tattoo refers to the Extreme Right creed: "By Odin We Swear: We Will Remain Heathens!"

Photo: S. Heide



## Activities

- 1 Describe Odin in image 1 and research the names and meanings of his mythological weapons and companions.
- 2 Compare and contrast Odin in image 1 with other depictions of gods that you know of and discuss your findings with your group.
- 3 Describe image 2 and see if you can find motives from image 1.
- 4 Research the meaning of the fish and discuss how Odin and the ravens are juxtaposed with the fish.