

Fetters and Cords in Germanic Polytheism

In Germanic polytheism, there is record of ritual worship involving fetters (bindings), often chains, that extends across a wide range of areas, sources, and time periods. The evidence suggests these rituals were directed toward or involved Odin, however this is inconclusive, and alternate deities are certainly possible.

The earliest record of such practices comes to us from the Roman senator Tacitus, in his work *Germania*, in reference to a Germanic tribe known as the Semnones. Tacitus provides an account of a ritual conducted in reverence to their supreme God, referred to in Latin as “regnator omnium deus” (essentially: “God who rules all”). This ritual was carried out in a sacred grove in which no one could enter unless they were bound in chains. The ceremony was considered incredibly holy by the Semnones.

At a set time, deputations from all the tribes of the same stock gather in a grove hallowed by the auguries of their ancestors and by immemorial awe. The **sacrifice of a human victim** in the name of all marks the grisly opening of their savage ritual. Another observance shows their reverence for this grove. **No one may enter it unless he is bound with a cord**, by which he acknowledges his own inferiority and the power of the deity. Should he chance to fall, he may not raise himself or get up again, but must roll out over the ground. The grove is the center of their whole religion. It is regarded as the cradle of the race and the dwelling-place of the supreme god to whom all things are subject and obedient. – Tacitus, *Germania*

Regnator omnium deus is generally thought to represent Odin, however this is contested. The argument is primarily based upon Odin’s role as described in the later Eddic material. He is chief among the Æsir, thus ruler of all the Gods. However, for a more in-depth argument for Odin as Tacitus’ Regnator Omnium Deus, please see a paper titled *Wodan as regnator omnium deus in Tacitus’ Germania 39* by Samuel Zinner.

Further connection to Odin rests on earlier mention by Tacitus that:

Of all the Gods, **Mercury** is he whom they worship most. To him on certain stated days it is lawful to offer even **human victims**. – Tacitus, *Germania*

Human sacrifice to other Gods is not mentioned by Tacitus. Likewise, he indicates worship of “Mercury” is done in the highest frequency than that of other Gods. We can also rather confidently identify Odin as “Mercury” through *interpretatio germania*: the practice of the Germanic people of comparing their Gods to those of the Romans, whence we have the days of the week (Latin “dies Mercurii” → Proto-Germanic “Wōdanas dagaz”).

Taken together, the evidence suggests a practice of extreme piety, likely toward Odin, using fetters to bind practitioners as a sign of reverence and humility. Such a view is contrasted by modern sentiments that tend to eschew piety in favor of misguided yet insulting practices toward the Gods.

Fetters and cords in other sources

We later see reference to the idea of a “Grove of Fetters” mentioned over 1,000 years later in the Poetic Edda. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, Dag, the brother-in-law of the hero Helgi, is given the spear Gungnir by Odin to seek vengeance for the death of his father. Dag then rode to a place called Fjöturlundr (fjöturr – ON “fetter”, lundr – ON “grove”), where he slays Helgi. Thus, we once again have a connection between Odin and the idea of fetters, yet this appears more circumstantial than the account by Tacitus.

In the *Gylfaginning* of Snorri’s *Prose Edda* we find the famous account of the God Týr and the binding of the wolf Fenrir. Without recalling unnecessary details, the Æsir elect to bind the monstrous wolf Fenrir using a magic band. The wolf, sensing deceit, only allows himself to be bound if one of the Gods places their hand in his mouth, and only Týr is brave enough to do so. The wolf is then unable to escape the binding and bites off Týr’s hand.

Beyond this, the account is rather scant on details. It simply refers to the Gods as plural when it states they placed the fetters on the wolf. Likewise, it does not say who originated the idea nor commissioned its construction, so we cannot make any deeper inferences from this piece of evidence.

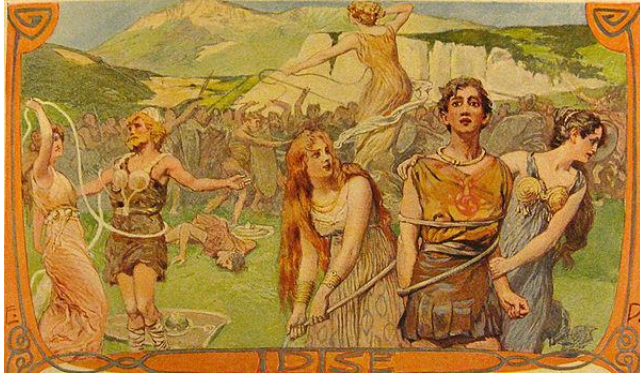
It is interesting to also note the connection between Loki and binding. Beside his son, Fenrir, Loki himself is also bound to a rock by the entrails of another child of his, Nari. In a way, the Jormungandr (another child of Loki) also “binds the world”, so to speak, as it encircles the Earth by biting its own tail.

An interesting connection between fetters and worship can also be elucidated from Adam of Bremen’s work *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, in which he describes an operational pagan temple at Uppsala, Sweden. Therein, he notes:

Scholium 135: A golden **chain** goes round the temple. It hangs over the gable of the building and sends its glitter far off to those who approach, because the shrine stands on level ground with mountains all about it like a theater. – Adam of Bremen (from germanicmythology.com, by William Reaves)

This practice is similar in concept to accounts from later Medieval Scandinavian law codes which denote the practice of placing chains around legal spaces. Many scholars

contend this practice is pagan in origin, and survived in secular, judicial matters following Christianization. A space referred to as a vébǫnd (vé – ON sacred space, bǫnd – ON band (bond, fetter)) is mentioned in *Den ældre Frostathings-Lov* as a space demarked by cords and hazel wood separating those chosen to partake in the legal proceedings from the rest of the attendees. The word “vébǫnd” is also used in the earlier Egil’s Saga in similar context, and the concept of creating boundaries for legal spaces is noted in numerous other sources from the Germanic sphere, similar to what is described in the later *Den ældre Frostathings-Lov*.



It is certainly curious that a temple is encompassed by a chain. This could perhaps be a continuation of earlier practices, such as those mentioned by Tacitus, or perhaps a nod to the myths involving the binding of Fenrir. Or perhaps it is simply part of a larger sacred theme within the religious practices of our pre-Christian ancestors, the power of binding. We see this

reflected, for instance, in the 1st Merseberg Incantation, in which “idisi” (thought to be cognate to Old Norse “dísir”, hallowed female ancestors) free a group of men from their bonds using magic, leading to escape from their enemies. This authentic magic charm is referred to as a “Lösesege”, a “blessing of release”.

Eiris sazun idisi
 sazun hera duoder.
 suma hapt heptidun,
 suma heri lezidun,
 suma clubodun
 umbi cuoniouuidi:

insprinc haptbandun,
 inuar uigandun.

Once the Idisi set forth,
 to this place and that.
 Some fastened fetters,
 Some hindered the horde,
 Some loosed the bonds
 from the brave:

Leap forth from the fetters,
 escape from the foes!

The use of the word “haptbandun” here for “fetters” is interesting, as a nickname listed for Odin in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning* is Haptaguð (God of Captives/God of Fetters), a connection noted by linguists long ago.

Summary

We can see here listed a number of instances (and this is certainly not exhaustive) of a certain mindset of our Germanic ancestors involving the portrayal of fetters or binding in a religious setting. Some of these may be more mundane, such as escaping of fetters in the 1st Merseberg Charm. However, even surviving into the modern world we can also

see instances where this concept becomes deeper, for instance, in the concept of a “binding contract”. Let us ponder a question: what exactly is it you are “bound” to? And what is it that does the binding? These questions may provide hints into the mindset of our ancestors long ago.

Further, we can see multiple references to the use of fetters, across the span of 1,000 years, in groves of clearly ritualistic purposes. Fetters may be used to hang human sacrifices, often thought to be a practice directed toward Odin, or they may be used piously, as described by Tacitus. However, this concept is clearly authentic, and something that can be incorporated into your practice directed toward Odin. Bands of some sort can also be used to cordon off ritual and even legal spaces, providing a physical boundary between sacred and mundane spaces.