

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 24:  
GERMANIC MYTHOLOGY**

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## **EPISODE 24: GERMANIC MYTHOLOGY**

Welcome to the History of English podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 24: Germanic Mythology.

Last time, I looked at the early writings of Roman historian Tacitus, and I used his book ‘Germania’ to explore early Germanic society. In this episode, I’m going to continue exploring Germanic culture. But this time, I want to focus on Germanic mythology and religion, and the impact that Germanic mythology has had on modern English.

But before I begin, I want to note that I am going to discuss the Germanic runic writing system in the next episode. I had originally intended to discuss it this time, but it will actually fit better in the next episode. Next time, I’m going to discuss the Gothic tribes and their language, which was the first Germanic language to be written down and recorded for posterity. So next time, we’ll focus on the early written forms of the Germanic languages.

But now let’s turn to the very broad topic of Germanic mythology. And I want to begin this topic by establishing a general time frame. So far, my focus has been on the early Germanic tribes at a time when there was a more or less common culture and common language. But our knowledge of this early period is somewhat limited. I’ve looked at some of the archaeological evidence and some of the linguistic evidence. And last time, I used Tacitus as a source. But Tacitus only tells us a little bit about Germanic mythology. In addition to Tacitus, there are a few other early written sources which mention a few things about the early Germans and their religious practices. But most of what we know about Germanic mythology comes from much later written sources. Most of these later sources were written several centuries later during the early Middle Ages. So it is difficult to know how much of this mythology was inherited from the original Germanic tribes and how much developed at a later date after the tribes began to fracture.

From these later sources, we know the most about the mythology of the northern Germanic tribes in and around Scandinavia who were the ancestors of the Vikings. With respect to the western Germanic tribes, which included the Angles and the Saxons, there are relatively few written records which actually discuss their religion and mythology. And there are even fewer records concerning the eastern Germanic tribes which included the Goths. We do know that the Gothic missionary Wulfilas converted the Goths to Christianity in the fourth century, but very little is known about their specific beliefs before the conversion.

So why do we know so much more about the mythology of the northern Germanic tribes? Well, it’s a matter of timing. Writing was very limited among the early Germanic tribes. The tribes did develop a runic writing system which they used for inscriptions, but most of what we know about these tribes comes from the Romans and other literate peoples. But from the sixth century onward, writing became more and more prevalent throughout the Germanic regions. The spread of writing and the Roman alphabet was also accompanied by the spread of the Roman region, Christianity. In fact, as we’ll see in later episodes, the spread of writing and Christianity were very closely linked.

But for purposes of Germanic mythology, this creates a problem. By the time most of these tribes had adopted writing and began to write about their own cultures, they had already been converted to Christianity. This is generally the case with the Goths and their language which we'll explore next time. Most of the written evidence of the Gothic language comes in the form of the Gothic translation of the Bible. So we know virtually nothing about their pre-Christian beliefs.

And this is generally true of the western Germanic tribes as well, though we do have some limited writings about mythology in Old English and other Western dialects.

But in the North, the northern Germanic speakers didn't convert to Christianity until much later, well after they had adopted writing. So the early northern Germanic writers gave us a very detailed description of their religious beliefs during this period before Christianity. But again, did the beliefs of the Old Norse speakers in the tenth century reflect the beliefs of the early Germanic tribes of eight or nine centuries earlier. Well, again, that's a little difficult to say.

But there are a few things to keep in mind. First, religious views tend to be very conservative. They don't tend to change very much over time. And as we look at the later writings of the Germanic tribes, most of these written accounts were based on oral traditions which date back centuries to the time of the early Germanic tribes. But beyond these very general statements, we can only compare the Old Norse accounts with the limited written accounts of the western Germanic tribes and the early accounts of the Roman writers. By comparing these sources, modern historians can make some general conclusions about the mythology of the original Germanic tribes.

So let's look at the earliest known written sources.

Interestingly, the first written account of Germanic religion comes from Julius Caesar. After he conquered the Celtic Gauls in the first century BC, Caesar wrote a firsthand account of the Gallic Wars. Though the book focuses on Gaul and its Celtic-speaking inhabitants, Caesar does make a few references to the Germanic-speaking tribes to the northeast of Gaul. And specifically, he distinguishes the Germanic tribes from the Celtic tribes. And one way in which he does this is to distinguish their religious practices.

As I noted in the episode about the ancient Celts, the Celtic religious leaders were the Druids, but Caesar noted that the Germanic tribes didn't have Druid priests. The Druids routinely used sacrifices as part of their religious practices, but Caesar wrote that the Germanic tribes didn't have the same high regard for sacrifices that the Celts had. And later historians have actually confirmed that the Druids were not a feature of the Germanic tribes, but Caesar's comments about sacrifices has been largely discounted. We now know that the Germanic tribes actually did believe in sacrifices and, in fact, they routinely made sacrifices to gain favor with the Gods.

Before we leave Caesar, I should note that he made one other important comment about the religious beliefs of Celtic Gauls. He noted that they worshiped many Gods, but that Mercury was their preeminent God.

The Celts actually called their primary God *Lugus*. But the Romans tended to associate the Gods of foreign people with their own Roman Gods. And of course, Mercury was a Roman God, not a Celtic God. So for some reason, the Romans associated Mercury with the preeminent Celtic God. And Caesar confirms this by noting that the Celtic Gauls worshiped Mercury above all others. And this reference is actually very important when we get to the writings of Tacitus.

So let's jump ahead to Tacitus. Remember that Caesar wrote in the first century BC. And as I discussed last time, the next major source of information about the Germanic tribes was Tacitus in his book *Germania* written at the end of the first century AD – so about 150 years after Caesar. And thanks to Tacitus, we get a bit more detailed description of Germanic religion.

Tacitus begins his discussion of Germanic religion by noting that they worship Mercury above all other Gods. And so we see the same connection that Caesar had made with respect to the Gauls a century and half earlier. Once again, we see that the Romans equated the Germanic Gods with their own Gods. And again, for some reason, they associated the preeminent God of the Germans with Mercury, just as they had done with the Celtic God *Lugus*.

Of course, the early Germans didn't actually worship the Roman Gods. They worshiped their own Gods. And we know that the preeminent God in Germanic mythology was *Woden* – or *Odin*. And just to be clear about that name because you do see it written both ways, the later Norse speakers in Scandinavia called the God *Odin*, but the Anglo-Saxons called him *Woden*. The later Norse speakers tended to drop the 'w' sound when it appeared before a vowel. So *Odin* without the 'W' developed as a later version of the name. But since this is a podcast about English, I'm going to use the Anglo-Saxon version of the name – *Woden*.

So Woden was the primary Germanic God, but did these early Germanic tribes actually call their God *Woden* during this very early common Germanic period. Well, we don't know. Since the Romans didn't use the Germanic names, we can't say for certain what the original Germanic tribes called this God. And we don't have written accounts which refer to the God by his later Germanic name *Woden* until the third century – shortly after Tacitus. But linguists have used reconstructions to determine that the original name of the God would have been something like *Wodenaz*. So it is likely that the early Germans did refer to this God by a very early version of his later name. But again, the Romans just called him *Mercury*.

And we can still see that connection when we look at the days of the week which I discussed back in Episode 18. Remember that the Romans had a day named after Mercury which was basically 'Mercury's Day.' And that name still exists in modern Romance languages like French where the name is *Mecredi*. And the later Germanic tribes were influenced by the Roman association of Mercury with Woden. So they substituted Roman *Mercury* with Germanic *Woden*. And the day became 'Woden's Day,' or as we know it today – *Wednesday*. So the connection between those Gods can still be found in the modern names for that day of the week.

Tacitus also refuted Caesar's earlier statements regarding Germanic sacrifices. He noted that, in fact, the Germanic tribes did make both animal and human sacrifices on specific days. And later archaeological discoveries have confirmed that the Germans did make animal and human sacrifices.

Tacitus also notes that the early Germans didn't believe that their Gods lived in temples. Instead, they preferred to conduct religious ceremonies in forests or groves. And here we see some strong similarities between the Celtic and Germanic religious practices.

Tacitus also tells us that the early Germans discerned the will of the Gods by casting lots. As he described it, the process involved cutting a tree branch into many different pieces and placing specific markings on each piece. The pieces were cast onto a white cloth, and a priest (if it was a public ceremony) or the head of the family (if it was a private ceremony) would select three pieces at random. The markings on those pieces would then be read to determine the will of the Gods or to predict the future, which could be essentially the same thing. These little pieces of wood, or for that matter any such objects which were read in this random manner, were called *khlutom* by the early Germanic tribes. This word was eventually shortened and became *hlot* in Old English. And it eventually became *lot* in Middle English.

Around the twelfth century, the word *cast* was borrowed from Old Norse meaning 'to throw.' And that word produced words like *outcast*, meaning 'someone thrown out.' And it also produced phrases like *cast-away* and *cast-off*.

And that word *cast* was often used in conjunction with the concept of throwing lots. And it produced the phrase "to cast lots" meaning to throw objects in a random manner with some larger purpose in mind. So you might "cast lots," or in games involving dice, you might "cast a die," which is just another form of casting lots. And even today, if we "cast our lot" with someone, we're basically "rolling the dice." We're picking a side and letting fate have it way.

Interestingly, this Germanic word *lot* was later borrowed into early French and Italian, and there it produced new words like *lottery* and *lotto*. This comes from the fact that the early version of those games involved putting objects in a container and shaking them up and the selecting certain pieces. This was a game of chance which involved a form of casting lots. So from there we got the terms *lottery* and *lotto*. Again, all derived from this original Germanic method of predicting the fates.

Now in addition to casting lots, Tacitus described another way in which the Germanic tribes predicted the fates. He said that they observed the sounds and flights of birds, as well as the neighs and snorts of horses. And he said that the early Germans could discern the will of the Gods by paying close attention to those signs.

Now the Germans were not the only ones who thought that the future could be predicted by observing the flight patterns of birds. The Romans did that as well. And in fact the Romans coined their own term to describe the process of trying to predict the fates or the future in any of

these random ways. They called these signs the ‘auspices.’ And this term actually came from the process of watching birds in the sky.

The Latin word for ‘bird’ was *auis* (/ah-wees/), which later became *avis* (/ah-vees/). Remember from the last episode that early Latin didn’t have the ‘v’ sound. It had the ‘w’ sound. So /weenum/ became /veenum/ and later *vino*.

Well the same thing happened with the Latin word for ‘bird.’ Early on, it was ‘*auis*’ (/ah-wees/) and later became ‘*avis*’ (/ah-vees/). And from that later version of the word, we get modern English words like *aviary* for a place where birds are kept, and *aviation* for the process of flying – like a bird.

Well, early on, the Romans combined that original version of the word – *auis* – with the Latin verb ‘to watch’ which was *spectare*. Of course, that word gives us English words like *spectate* and *spectator*. Well, when you combined the words for ‘bird’ and ‘watch,’ you got a ‘bird watcher.’ So *auis* and *spectare* produced the word *auspex*, which again was literally a ‘bird watcher’ or someone who predicted the will of the Gods by observing the flight patterns of birds.

And there are some linguists who think that this word *auspex* actually pre-dated the Romans. The Latin words for ‘bird’ and ‘watch’ both come from Indo-European root words. And there is some evidence that the original Indo-Europeans also combined the same two root words to produce an even earlier version of the word *auspex*. But at any rate, the Romans definitely used this word, and they called the process of watching birds *auspicium*. This word later produced the English word *auspicious* meaning a favorable or good sign.

By the way, just as the Romans kept a close eye on the movement of birds in the sky, they also paid close attention to the movement and the alignment of the stars. Of course, the Greeks did this too. And they thought that the particular alignment of the stars could be a good omen or a bad omen. From an earlier episode, we know that the Greek word for ‘star’ was *aster*. And that ultimately gives us the word *astrology*, which also involved this process of observing the stars in the sky. But it was the Romans who gave us the word for what astrologers watch which is *constellation*. Since a constellation is a group of stars associated with each other, the Romans combined the word *cum* (meaning ‘with’) and *stella* (which was their word for ‘star’), and it produced the word *constellatus*, which later became *constellation*.

But the early Romans had actually developed a separate word to refer to a star or group of stars in the sky. This separate word came from a separate Indo-European root word which originally meant ‘to shine.’ This Latin word was *sidus*. So the Romans combined this word with that same prefix *cum* meaning ‘with’ to describe the process of observing the stars, perhaps because you were ‘with the stars’ as you observed them to determine the fates. This combination of *cum* and *sidus* produced the word *considerare*. And this is the origin of the modern English word *consider* meaning to review or contemplate something.

Well, unfortunately, when you look for signs in the night sky, you sometimes get bad news. And the Romans created a word for that which literally meant the stars were out of alignment. They combined the word *de* (meaning ‘apart or away from’) and *aster* (meaning ‘star’) to produce the word *disaster*.

So *lots*, *casting lots*, *lottery*, *lotto*, *auspicious*, *astrology*, *consider* and *disaster* – all of those modern words come from this early process of trying to discern the will of the Gods by observing random events – either pieces of wood, or birds, or stars, or some other random event.

So one again, we’ve digressed from early Germanic into Latin, but I wanted to make some historical connections between those words for you. So now let’s turn back to the Germans. And at this point, we’ve basically exhausted what Tacitus has to tell us about early Germanic mythology. So from here, we have to look to other sources for information about German religion and mythology.

As I noted earlier, the Germanic languages began to be written down a few centuries after Tacitus. And these early writings reveal a lot more about the specific Germanic Gods and the religious practices of the early Germanic people. And by comparing these later sources from different regions, we can discern some common features that were likely inherited from the earlier Germanic tribes during the common Germanic period.

We know that the early Germans had their own pantheon of Gods. It wasn’t just Woden. There were lots of Gods with their own unique histories and personalities. Much of what we know about these Gods comes from later sources, especially writings from Old Norse sources in Scandinavia. But since these sources were written many centuries later, it’s unclear how much of this Norse mythology can be traced back to the original Germanic tribes.

But there are a few aspects of these various Gods which did have a later impact on the English language. So I’ve picked through the various mythologies and selected a few bits and pieces which relate to later English, and also relate to our modern culture in general.

As I noted earlier, the primary Germanic God was Woden. And he was worshiped by the early Germanic tribes during the common Germanic era. He was considered the head of all royal Germanic families. And even the Anglo-Saxon kings ultimately traced their lineage back to Woden.

Not surprisingly, Woden was a war god. And this is consistent with the Germanic emphasis on war. He was the god of those who died in battle. He sat upon a throne in the sky and looked down upon the world. And when warriors died in battle, they would go to Woden’s heavenly home called Valhalla. It was common for early Germans to use the phrase ‘journey to Woden’ or ‘be a guest of Woden’ to mean ‘to die.’

In later mythology, Woden is described as having one eye and wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a cloak. He controlled the wind and the water, and he could walk on waves and could arrive through the air in a storm. He also rode an eight-legged horse.

I've noted that *Wednesday* was named after Woden. But beyond that, the name of Woden doesn't produce any other words in Modern English, at least none that I've been able to identify. However, Woden's influence on modern culture can be seen in other ways. It is especially evident in certain Christmas traditions which were borrowed from the Germanic pagans.

It appears that the early Germanic tribes were like most ancient peoples of Europe in that they held a specific midwinter festival. These festivals were usually held around the time of the winter solstice which was the shortest day of the year. This date marked the beginning of winter, and in ancient societies, this marked the beginning of a potentially dangerous period. The growing and harvesting season was over, and if the tribe didn't have enough food stored, the following months could bring starvation and death. So, going all the way back to the Stone Age, many of these ancient societies would hold a festival around the time of the year – around the winter solstice. They would make sacrifices to the Gods to ensure divine protection during the winter period. To avoid having to feed cattle throughout the Winter, most of the cattle would be slaughtered. So with fully harvested crops and lots of slaughtered animals, food was abundant. And throughout the year, fruits and grains that had been fermenting. And now late in the year, all of this fruit and grain finally completed the fermentation process, and that meant wine and ale – lots of it. So drinking was a prominent feature at these celebrations as well. So these festivals were all about eating, drinking and making sacrifices. This type of midwinter festival was the last big celebration of the year just before the winter began.

Well, the Germanic tribes had their own midwinter festival, and it was probably part of this same ancient tradition which had been handed down from their ancestors over the centuries. The Germanic version of this midwinter festival evolved into a specific festival which would last 12 days. And we know this celebration today as the 'Yule.'

And the reason we know that name is by looking at the names of the months which were used by the later Germanic tribes before they converted to Christianity and began to adopt the Latin names which we still use today in English.

For example, in the Old English dialect of the Anglo-Saxons, December was known as *Ærra Jeola* which meant 'before the 12 day Yule festival.' And the following month – basically modern January – was called *Æftera Jeola* which meant 'after the Yule festival.' Most of the other Germanic languages also named those months after the Yule period, including the Gothic language which was attested as early as the fourth century. The word *Jeola* eventually evolved into the modern version of the word – *Yule*.

As Christianity expanded into Northern Europe, the church had a choice to make. It could either condemn these pagan festivals or it could co-opt them. If the Church rejected the festivals, it would tend to alienate the native people. But if adopted these celebrations, then it would be easier to convert the native population to Christianity. And ultimately that's what the Church did. It accommodated the beliefs and traditions of the native peoples by adopting the Yule festival into the existing Christmas celebrations. And the terms *Yule* and *Yuletide* (meaning 'Yule time') passed into English with their modern associations with Christmas.



As I mentioned, the Germanic Yule festival lasted for a period of 12 days. And from this 12-day festival, we got the 12-day Christmas celebration which began on December 25. This 12-day celebration of Christmas was actually very common in much of Europe during the Middle Ages, including the British Isles. And some elements of that 12-day celebration still exist there, but very little of the 12-day celebration has made it to modern America. Of course, we still have the song – “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” And some people light a candle at Christmas for each of the 12 days of Christmas. But these are merely remnants of the 12-day celebration which owes its roots to the Germanic Yule festival.

By the way, it was common in the early Germanic period to burn a large tree throughout the 12-day celebration. It was sort of like a big bonfire that burned for 12 days. This log was called the ‘Yule Log.’ And that tradition was also incorporated into the later 12-days of Christmas. As people began to have homes with fireplaces, they would burn a log in the fireplace each day during the 12-days of Christmas. So if you ever wondered exactly what a ‘yule log’ was, well now you know.

So, you may ask, what does all of this have to do with the Germanic God Woden. Well, during the Yule period, it was believed that supernatural and ghostly events would occur. One of these events was the so-called ‘Wild Hunt’ in which Woden would lead a ghostly procession across the sky. And many historians believe that this was the ultimate origin of certain ideas and aspects that would later play a role in the figure of Santa Claus. The Yuletide figure of Woden had a long white beard and he rode a gray horse across the sky.

By the time of the later Norse traditions of the thirteenth century, Woden – or Odin – still had a long white beard, but now he had a blue hood, and his horse had eight legs, and he bore gifts. These aspects of Woden later influenced the figure of Sinterklaas, which developed in and around Belgium, the Netherlands and parts of Northern Germany. Sinterklass developed as part of the December celebration of Saint Nicholas who was a real life person who lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries and was patron saint of children. So Sinterklass was based around this particular celebration in and around the Netherlands. And the name Sinterklass was actually derived from the name Saint Nicholas. Sinterklass eventually got mixed in with the English figure of Father Christmas, thereby completing the evolution from the northern European Sinterklass to the Anglicized Santa Claus. He still has his long white beard and he still bears gifts. And he still lives in the cold and icy north – now the North Pole. In some depictions, he still has a hood, only now it’s red instead of blue. And he still rides through the sky at night during Christmastime, only instead of an eight-legged horse, he now has eight reindeer. So you can see how some of these ancient Germanic figures and religious traditions have filtered down to us in Modern Christianity and Modern English.

So I’ve talked a lot about Woden. And modern historians believe that Woden was actively worshiped in some early form by the original Germanic tribes. But what about the other gods which appear in later Anglo-Saxon and Norse mythologies? Were they also worshiped by the original Germanic tribes? Well, that a tougher question.

I've noted in earlier episodes that just as *Wednesday* was named after Woden, *Tuesday* was named after the god Tiu – or Tir as he was known in Old Norse. And you might also remember from a very early episode of the podcast that *Tiu* is cognate with the Greek god *Zeus* and the Roman god *Jupiter*. The names of all of those gods originated with an original Indo-European word which meant 'sky father.' So since Tiu has roots within the original Indo-European language that continued throughout the Germanic period, that suggests that the even the earliest Germans had some concept of this god Tiu.

But in later Norse mythology, Tiu – or Tir – doesn't play that same prominent role that Zeus plays in Greek mythology or Jupiter plays in Roman mythology. So what happened to Tiu. Well, we can't say for certain, but he was still a sky god in the later Norse mythology. For example, he could arrive from the sky as a storm. So the fact that he was a sky god seems to have been retained from the original Indo-European version of the god. But he is clearly subordinate to Woden in the Germanic pantheon of gods. In fact, he is sometimes depicted as the son of Woden. So was he downgraded at some point? Maybe.

Tacitus may actually give us a clue to this. You might remember from the last episode that Tacitus began his book *Germania* by dividing the Germanic tribes into three separate groups. And he stated that each of those tribal groups were descended from the three sons of an ancient god. The god was named Mannus. But Tacitus also states that the father of Mannus was a god named Tuisto. And that's all he says about that Tuisto. But some modern scholars think that *Tuisto* was the earlier version of *Tiu* or *Tir*. And if so, that would make sense given what we know about Zeus and Jupiter. That would make Tuisto as the ultimate 'father' – or more precisely the 'grandfather' – of the Germanic tribes. But again, Tacitus doesn't tell us anything else about Tuisto. And we know from Tacitus himself that Tuisto was not the primary God worshiped by the Germans. So perhaps, around the time of Tacitus in the first century AD, Tiu held a lofty status in the pantheon of Germanic gods, but he wasn't actively worshiped in the way that Woden was.

At any rate, by the time we get to the later Anglo-Saxon and Norse versions of Tiu, we can see lots of parallels with Woden. They were both sky gods, and they were both gods of war. And scholars believe Tiu was a god of war because the later Romans equated him with the Roman god Mars, which is also how French *Mardi* (named after Mars) became English *Tuesday* – named after Tiu.

Now let's move on to another Germanic God. In fact, let's discuss probably the most famous Germanic god in modern western culture, because even Hollywood knows about this God. Of course, I'm talking about Thor. Again, we know from earlier episodes of the podcast that *Thursday* was originally 'Thor's Day.' He was a popular deity and was also known as the 'Thunder God.' In fact, his name literally meant 'thunder' in Old Norse, and it comes from the same Germanic root as the English word *thunder*. So *Thor* and *thunder* are cognate. Thor was a great warrior with incredible strength. And, of course, his famous weapon was a hammer which can be thrown and which would automatically return to his hand. He was named after Thunder because he announced himself through thunder and lightning.

So was Thor around during the time of Tacitus, or was he a later creation? Well, we don't have any specific references to Thor during the time of Tacitus, so we can't say for certain that he was being worshiped at that time. But some modern scholars speculate that Thor may indeed have been around at this very early stage.

In fact, they speculate that Thor was actually a very old God, and may have even pre-dated Woden. And he may have held a higher position than Woden at some point in the Germanic pantheon of gods. Again, this is only speculation, but the reason why some scholars have proposed this view is the fact that Thor is so closely associated with thunder. I noted that words *thunder* and *Thor* were cognate. Well, the word *thunder* has very strong Indo-European roots. The word appears in very similar forms in both Latin and Persian, as well as the Germanic languages. And they all share the same root with the Sanskrit word for *thunder* as well. So if Thor was closely associated with thunder, then there may have been deeper roots among the Indo-Europeans. Many ancient agricultural societies had specific thunder gods. And those gods were extremely important because they controlled thunderstorms and rain. And that meant they were responsible for the fertility of the land. And in fact, Zeus was a thunder god and was one of the oldest gods in Greek mythology. So if the original Indo-Europeans had a distinct thunder god, that god may have passed on the early Germans as a very early version of Thor. Again this is all speculation, but it is an interesting argument.

Outside of *Thursday* which comes from Thor's name, and *thunder* which comes from the same root as Thor, the only other word connected to Thor is *thorium* – the chemical element which was named after Thor by a Swedish chemist in the 1800s.

So we've covered the Gods which gave us the names of *Tuesday*, *Wednesday* and *Thursday*. Now let's turn to *Friday*. Friday was named after a Germanic goddess, but the precise one is a matter of some debate. Most scholars attribute the source of the name *Friday* to the goddess Frigga. Frigga was the wife of Woden. But Germanic mythology also had another goddess named Freya. And because of the similarity of the names, the two are often confused. And there is actually some evidence that the two goddesses originated as a single goddess in very early Germanic mythology, and later, the original goddess evolved into two separate goddesses. In fact, Freya was only known in northern Germany. And the southern Germanic regions only recognized a goddess whose name was almost identical to Frigga. So as the early tribes began to migrate and separate from each other, the original Goddess may have taken on distinct identities within the northern and southern tribes. But keep in mind that our sources of knowledge about these goddesses come from much later Nordic accounts. So by the time of these later sources, these separate versions of the original goddess may have just been considered completely separate goddesses altogether.

As I noted in an earlier episode, *Friday* is generally attributed to Frigga, the wife of Woden. But it appears that some of the Germanic tribes named the day after Freya instead. For example, many scholars think the name of the day in Icelandic is named after Freya. And remember that Freya was only known in the northern regions, so that connection makes sense.

Now in addition to Freya and Frigga, there is another Germanic goddess which I need to mention because she is also important to modern English and modern Christianity. The goddess was called Eâstre. She represented ‘increasing sunlight’ – and therefore she came to represent Spring and fertility as well. The name of the goddess actually has its origins in the original Indo-European language. The Indo-European word *\*aus* meant ‘to shine (specifically shining at dawn)’. And so this word came to be associated with the sun rising in the morning. And this Indo-European word *\*aus* ultimately produced the word *east*, as in the place or direction where the sun rises in the morning. This Indo-European root word also produced a Roman goddess – Aurora, the goddess of the dawn. And of course, the name *Aurora* has passed into Modern English as another word referring to dawn.

But amongst the Germanic tribes, who descended from the same Indo-Europeans, that same Indo-European root word produced the name of this Germanic goddess *Eâstre*. And it also produced another Germanic word *\*Austron*, which originally referred to the sunrise feast which was celebrated at the spring equinox. And in fact, the name of the goddess *Eâstre* was probably derived from this Germanic word for the sunrise feast. Since the spring equinox marked the beginning of Spring, which was the start of the planting and growing season, it was considered a time of fertility. And the goddess Eâstre came to represent the Springtime, and she therefore became a goddess of fertility.

Of course, the importance of Eâstre to modern English and Christianity is the fact that her name is the source of the word *Easter*. Shortly after the Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity, they incorporated certain aspects of the Spring *\*Austron* celebration into the early Christian celebrations commemorating the resurrection of Christ. The timing of the Christian celebrations coincided with the Germanic Spring celebration.

The Christian celebration also represented a re-birth of sorts, so its connection with the fertility Goddess Eâstre made sense. So the Anglo-Saxons made this connection and borrowed the goddess’s name as the name of the Christian celebrations.

By the way, have you even wondered what the Easter Bunny and Easter eggs have to do with the resurrection of Christ in the Bible? Well, here’s the connection. Bunnies and eggs represent fertility. Obviously, rabbits reproduce very quickly. And eggs are new chickens or birds just waiting to hatch. So these fertility symbols were closely associated with Spring fertility. And so these pagan Springtime fertility symbols, including the name of the Spring fertility goddess, became associated with the Springtime Christian holiday celebrating a different type of re-birth.

But I should note that this association of the name of the Christian holiday with the Spring fertility goddess was somewhat unique to the Anglo-Saxons. Almost all neighboring languages use a variant of Latin ‘Pasche’ to name this holiday. But again, just like with the combination of the Yule celebrations with Christmas, we can see the mixing of Germanic pagan traditions and Christian traditions as Christianity spread into northern Europe.

Now beyond the gods and goddesses which I've mentioned, there were many other Germanic deities as well. Most of those didn't have much of an impact on Modern English, so I am not going to address all of them here. But I did want to mention one other god before I conclude this episode. And that's the Germanic God Loki.

Loki was a trickster god, and he has found his way into modern popular culture thanks to movies like *The Avengers*. But he is important to our story because he was the father of a daughter goddess named Hel (spelled 'H-E-L'). According to later Norse mythology, Hel was banished to a cold, dark, misty world where she became the goddess of the dead and came to represent the realm of the evil dead. And as Christianity spread into northern Europe, it borrowed the name of this Goddess just like it had borrowed the name of Eâstre for Easter. The goddess Hel, who oversaw the realm of the evil dead, became the word for the Christian concept of the place where bad people go when they die. So the modern term *hell* (spelled 'H-E-L-L') was taken directly from the name of this Germanic goddess. The use of the term was secured within English when it was used in the King James Bible to translate the Greek word *Hades* – referring to the same place.

Now speaking of the place where dead people go when they die, the early Germans were like many ancient people in that they believed a dead person could continue to live after death in his or her grave. Therefore a corpse was buried with everything the person might need in the afterlife. And this is largely determined by examining the grave evidence from this period.

And it appears that the Germanic people believed that there was a realm of the dead within the ocean and other bodies of water. When prominent tribe members or leaders died, a special ship was prepared for the deceased's final voyage. The deceased person was then buried with the ship. This process is actually documented throughout later Germanic literature after writing was adopted by the Germanic tribes.

For example, *Beowulf* begins with a description of this ceremony. In one modern English translation, the passage reads in part: "The king's dear comrades carried his body to the sea's current, as he himself had ordered when he still gave commands; the nation's dear leader had ruled a long time. There at the harbor stood the ring-carved prow, the noble's vessel, icy, sea-ready. They laid down the king that they had dearly loved, their tall ring-giver, in the center of the ship, the mighty by the mast. Great treasure was there, bright gold and silver, gems from far lands . . ."

And as you may know, in 1938, archaeologists unearthed an Anglo-Saxon ship loaded with artifacts at Sutton Hoo in eastern England. The ship was part of a large Anglo-Saxon burial ceremony which probably dates back to the early seventh century. And this find is extremely important to Anglo-Saxon scholars. But we'll deal with all of that when we get to the Old English period.

The main point here is to show the connection between the dead and the sea, which was a prominent feature of Germanic mythology. The Northern Germanic tribes had access to the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. So they believed that the kingdom of the dead existed at the

bottom of the sea. But the southern and eastern Germanic tribes were landlocked. So they tended to believe that the kingdom of the dead existed in certain lakes. The ritual of ship burial was linked to this belief because a dead king might need his ship to travel to this underwater kingdom of the dead.

And we can also see this belief in certain words in Modern English. For example, the words *soul* ('S-O-U-L') and *sea* ('S-E-A') both derive from the same common Germanic root word. That original Germanic word was *\*saiwaz*, and it meant lake or inland sea. And that word eventually became *sea* in modern English. But that root word also produced the later Germanic word *\*saiwa-lō* which meant 'something belonging to a lake or deriving from a lake.' And that term later evolved into the Modern English word *soul*. The word *soul* can be specifically traced back to Germanic dialects spoken in southern and eastern Germany where lakes were considered the place where souls returned at death. But interestingly, that early word for 'soul' isn't found in the early northern Germanic dialects. So it appears that the word *soul* was originally connected to lakes, but not the sea.

By the way, many scholars also think this is the connection to the old belief that the stork delivered newborn babies. This belief apparently originated within the Germanic regions of northern Europe and it reflects the idea that there is a place beneath the lake where souls live – in this case souls that haven't yet been born as humans.

Also, remember that the original Germanic concept of Hel was not a place of fire and brimstone – that's the Christian version. The original Germanic version was an underwater kingdom of dead souls. And in fact, there is some interesting etymology here as well. The name of the goddess Hel ('H-E-L'), and her underwater kingdom called Hel, actually can be traced back to the original Indo-European language. The Indo-European root word was *\*kel* which meant 'to cover or conceal.' But remember Grimm's Law. The original 'k' sound became an 'h' sound in the original Germanic language. So *kel* became *hel*. But again, it came from a root word meaning 'to cover or conceal.' So we can see that connection to an underwater kingdom which is concealed or covered by a lake.

But that same original Indo-European root word *kel* passed into Latin as *cella* (/kella/) spelled 'C-E-L-L-A.' And if you remember back to the history of the letter C, the Latin 'k' sound shifted to an 's' sound before an E or an I in early French. So Latin *cella* (/kella/) became French *cell*. And from French, the word passed into Modern English in basically the same form. And today we have the word *cell*, as in jail cell, to mean a place where a person is concealed or contained. So *cell* and *hell* both come from the same Indo-European root word. *Hell* is the Germanic version, and *cell* is the Latin and French version.

Now I've spent a lot of time talking about Germanic Gods and goddesses, but I should also note that Germanic mythology involved lots of other mythological beings and other creatures. For example, it features beings like giants, dwarves, nixies and elves. Of course, JRR Tolkien used many of these creatures in his books like The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. And the Brothers Grimm also collected many folk tales which involve these same creatures. And these beings and creatures then passed to many other works of literature and fantasy. So we see these

creatures throughout western literature today, but most of their characteristics can be traced back to Germanic mythology.

So I am going to conclude this episode about Germanic religion and mythology on that note. In this episode, we've seen how the religion of the early Germans had a significant influence on Modern English, as well as modern Christianity and our modern western culture.

Next time, I'm going to move the story of the Germanic people forward a bit. I am going to look beyond the early common Germanic period to the later period around the third and fourth centuries. During this time frame, new distinct tribes began to emerge. And one of these tribes was the Goths. And also during this period, some of the early Germans began to adopt writing. We'll look at the development of Germanic runic writing. And we'll look at the Gothic translation of the Bible and related religious texts. And this is all very important because it marks the first time we have the German people writing down their own language for later generations to read. So we can read their own words in their own languages. So next time, we'll look at the Goths and written language of the early Germans.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.