

The "Femeiche" - A Historical Oak of Germany

Eike Jablonski

Ettelbruck Arboretum
Hoersdorf, Luxemburg

Like many European countries, Germany has a long affinity to oaks. Tales and legends about old oaks, together with mysterious stories about pre-Christian tribes, are still alive. The ancient Germans, history informs us, had oak castles as well.

Loudon, in his *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum* (1844) wrote about these old oaks of Germany: "...lately standing in Westphalia, one was 130 ft. high, and reported to be 30 ft. in diameter; another yielded 100 loads of timber; and a third served both for a castle and a fort" He also cited Googe's *Four Bookes of Husbandrie* (published in 1586): "We have at this day an oke in Westphalia, not far from the castle of Alsenan, which is from the foote to the neerest bowe, one hundred and thirtie foote, and three elles in thickness; and another, in another place, that, being cutte out, made a hundred waine load. Not farre from this place there grew an other oke of tenne yardes in thicknesse, but not very hie".

It is fascinating, that some of these witnesses of ancient times survived until today. The old oak at Erle, a tiny northwestern village near Raesfeld in Westphalia, is such a tree. Perhaps Loudon told about it already in 1844.

Close to the old church of the village, this oak grows there for some 1500 years. As different reports tell us, this should be the eldest tree in Germany still alive. Despite its real age, which may be only a several hundred years up to a millenium, the tree stands for living history. It is a *Quercus robur*, the native oak of this region. The old name for it was "Raven Oak", which refers to the Raven, the holy bird of the Nordic god "Odin". This old designation and the name of the parish where the oak is growing show that this locality must have been a sacrificial place for the Germanic. As names often last for centuries, it is believed that therefore the oak was already growing here as a remarkable tree in heathen times. Christianity was brought to this remote region in the middle of the 8th century. Also at this time the first wooden church was build just next to the oak. The "heathen" tree was now growing on parish grounds, which may have saved the tree. Other holy oaks of the old Germanic were cut down by early missionaries, if they were growing on common land. Later, a stone church replaced the wooden one, and the oak is still alive.

Today, the oak is known under the name "Femeiche" or "Vehme-Oak". The "Feme" (or "vehme") was a jurisdiction; where a judge presided over a vehmic court. This secret lynchlaw was typical for certain regions in Westphalia in the late Middle Ages. The place underneath the oak served as the court. An old document from 1441 tells of the vehmic judge Bernt de Dücker, who passed a sentence of death upon Gert van Diepenbrock and his bondmen; the judgment was spoken under this oak.

In 1750, the parish priest ordered the removal of the rotten wood inside the massive trunk. Now the tree was hollow, and perhaps this saved the tree a second time. A doorlike passing with a height of two meters, and a width of 80 cm must have been there in 1819, when the hollow trunk had a diameter of some 2,75 m. That year, on September 26, the Prince Royal Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia (later



The ancient "Femeiche" (*Quercus robur*) in the village of Erle, Germany, is said to be 1500 years old.

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King Friedrich Wilhelm IV) visited the oak. 36 infantry soldiers had to stand in the trunk with complete armament in marching order. The Prince Royal liked the tree so much that he had his breakfast with two of his generals inside the oak the other morning.

In 1851, the Bishop of Munster, Johann Georg, came to see the parish and the oak. It is reported that (after a night visit) he had a glass of wine in the oak, where a table for 12 persons including chairs were situated for him and his fellows.

The last of this kind of report dates from 1897, when a group of 40 members of the regional Forestry Commission arranged themselves inside the tree, singing a huntsman song. Nothing is written about it, but it seems that this event did not harm the tree too much.

The local population from villages nearby celebrated most of their important holidays like weddings and births under the tree, and did so for several centuries.

Today, law protects this oak, still growing vigorously on fresh, sandy diluvial soil. A fence keeps the Forestry Commission, Royal Princes, and Bishops away. Despite a height of perhaps 14 meters, the oak is nevertheless a giant. In 1953, a circumference of 14 meters at soil level, and of 12 meters at two-meter level was measured (Buerbaum, 1954). The first branches are sprouting three meters above the soil, forming a secondary crown. It is still clearly visible that the whole former crown was completely destroyed by storms and lightning during the last centuries. Only in single years, acorns are produced. In 2004, after the hot 2003 summer, the tree bore an excellent crop with masses of viable acorns. The trunk is not only hollow; several parts of the old trunk are not connected together any more. Wooden and iron posts support the remaining branches. In 1965, the first treatment of this kind was done. A second treatment was done in 1987.

Let's hope that this impressive living monument of history will survive for several more decades. Visiting this tree, one still can feel the history connected with it.

References:

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Author standing near "Femeiche."

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