

Natural Monument *Femeiche*

The 'Vehmic Court Oak', a common species of oak, is about **1,300 years** old and **one of the oldest trees in Germany**. Due to its diameter (in 1892: approx. 4 – 5 metres at breast height) some people estimate that the oak is even 1,500 years old.

The *Femeiche* was already used as a **place of worship** in Germanic times. Many people called it *Ravenseiche* (raven's oak), which suggests that this tree was attributed to the **supreme Germanic god Wotan** or *Odin*. Ravens were a symbol of this god. Moreover, the name *Assenkamp* for the surroundings of this tree supports this interpretation since *Asen* were Germanic gods. From this we can deduce that the *Femeiche* must have already been large before Christianisation at the time of Charlemagne (742 – 814 AD). Missionaries spared the pagan tree and built a church nearby. Today the Saint Silvester Parish Church is found at the location.

In the Middle Ages the secret *Femegericht* (vehmic court) met in the shadow of the *Femeiche*. At the time, the court was called '*den vryen stoel tum Aßenkamp*', which means "**the court of the freeborn at the place of the Asen gods**". This kind of criminal court was especially common in Westphalia. In the name of the king they ruled on serious crimes such as murder, robbery, rape, arson and perjury for which the penalty was hanging. The *Stuhlherr*, a high-ranking cleric or aristocrat, appointed a *Freigraf*, a magistrate, as **chairman of the court**. This official set up the *Femegericht* (vehmic court) by appointing jurors. At the court of Erle all freeborn-people of the parishes Erle, Raesfeld, Rhade, Holsterhausen und Alt-Schermbbeck could be summoned as jurors by law. The court of Erle was subordinated to the Lord of the Court, a Heiden nobleman, who mortgaged his *Freigrafenschaft* (court district) to the Earl of Cleve in 1335. In 1375 the *Freigrafenschaft* was owned by the baron of Raesfeld. In 1441 the *Freigraf* (chairman of the court) Bernt de Duiker sentenced the knight Gert van Diepenbrock and two of his servants to death and declared them outlaws in absence.

In the 16th century, as the sovereignty of the prince-bishop of Munster became stronger, the *Femegericht* of Erle as a criminal court lost a lot of its responsibilities and was dissolved at the end of the 18th century.

Around 1800, rotten wood was removed from the stem of the *Femeiche*, creating a hollow through which the interior of the large tree could be entered. The extent of the tree is illustrated by the following historical events:

- During a manoeuvre in 1819 the future King Frederick William IV of Prussia had 36 infantrymen stationed in the oak's cavity - in full marching equipment.
- In 1851 the bishop of Munster and eleven of his chaplains dined at a round table within the hollow.

Today, **only fragments** are left from that mighty tree of old, with its present shape **resulting from storm damage and slanted growth**. Presumably, its middle broke out so that water penetrated the trunk, fungi decomposed the heartwood thus forming its **cavity**.

For a long time, people have tried to preserve the hollow tree. In 1892 it was provided with **structural support**, and later **two iron rings** were added to hold the fragments of the stem together. When in 1965 the last iron ring was removed because it hampered the flow of the tree's sap, its root system was examined by an arborist who further removed the fungal-infestation. Ever since, regular fertilization and aeration of the roots have taken place. In April 1994 a fence was built for the tree's protection.