

Natural monument Femeiche National heritage tree

(detailed text)

The age of the oak

The **Femeiche of Erle (vehmic oak)**, is a pedunculate oak (*quercus robur*). Its age can be roughly estimated at **around 800 to 1100 years** based on historical data on its circumference, diameter and cavity. This makes it **one of the oldest trees in Germany**. In 2021, the Femeiche was proclaimed a '**national heritage tree**' by the German Dendrological Society due to its significant age, its uniqueness and its special historical significance as a court tree.

In the Middle Ages, the oak was the **site of a court**, called *vryen stoel tum Assenkampe*, in today's German: *Freistuhl zum Assenkamp*, which means 'the court of the freeborn at the place of the Asen gods'. The old name *Ravenseiche (raven's oak)* and the place name *Assenkamp* indicate that in pre-Christian times (before 800 AD), the *Femeiche* could have been **a place of worship and assembly for the pagan Saxons** and was dedicated to the Germanic god Odin. His constant companions were two ravens. The place name *Assenkamp* (field of the Asen) is reminiscent of the Germanic dynasty of gods, the Asen. However, nowadays many tree scientists consider it **unlikely** that the tree is significantly **older than 1000 years**. It is possible, but controversial, that the *Femeiche* had a predecessor tree in the early Middle Ages, connecting this location to the theory of a pagan place of worship.

The vehmic court site

The secret **Vehmic Court** (Vehmic/Feme = judgement, punishment) met in the shade of the oak tree in the Middle Ages. Vehmic courts were particularly common in Westphalia during this era. They ruled in the name of the king on **serious crimes such as murder, robbery, arson and perjury**, which carried the death penalty by hanging if found guilty.

The **Stuhlherr (the lord of vehmic court)**, a clerical or noble lord, appointed a **Freigraf** (a magistrate) as **chairman of the court**. Together with the **Freischöffen (freeborn jurors)** he formed the **Femegericht (Vehmic Court)**. Freeman from the parishes of Erle, Raesfeld, Rhade, Holsterhausen and Alt-Schermbeck could be summoned as jurors by law to the jurisdiction of this vehmic court. It was subordinated to the **Lord of the court**, a Heiden nobleman, who pledged the southern part of his **Freigrafenschaft (court district)** with Erle to the Count of Cleve in 1335. In 1375, the baron of Raesfeld was the owner of this "Freigrafenschaft" (court district). In 1441, the **Freigraf (freeborn chairman of the court) Bernd de Duiker sentenced** the knight **Gert van Diepenbrock** and two of his servants **to death for the murder of two Freischöffen** (freeborn jurors) and **declared them outlaws in absentia**. Those jurors had attempted to deliver a summons to his brother Evert van Diepenbrock in another case at Diepenbrock Castle. On orders of the Diepenbrock brothers they had been captured and hanged. Evert was outlawed at the Vehmic Court at Synbeck in Westerholt. For the period from **1363 to 1572, purchase contracts, declarations of renunciation of inheritance and other legal regulations** before the vehmic court of Erle are documented.

As the influence of the Prince-Bishop of Münster grew stronger in the 16th century, university educated professional judges gradually took over the jurisdiction as sovereign officials. The lay jurors of the vehmic courts were only left with the punishment of minor offences and legal regulations. At the end of the **18th century, the Freistuhl zum Assenkamp ceased to exist**.

Conservation measures

The ravages of time, lightning and storms have taken their toll on the tree over the centuries. Around 1750, the oak was still relatively solid. However, water gradually penetrated the trunk, fungi decomposed the heartwood and **a cavity gradually developed**. Parts of the crown broke off during storms. For around 250 years, the tree has therefore 'pulled back' its crown, i.e. reduced its height, so that the transport routes for water from the roots to the crown and for sugar from the leaves to the roots were shortened. Around 1800, the rotten wood was removed from the trunk, creating a large cavity through which the inside of the tree could be entered.

The extent of the cavity is illustrated by the following historically documented events:

- During a manoeuvre in 1819, **the future King Frederick William IV of Prussia had 36 infantrymen in marching gear take up position in the oak tree**.
- In 1851, the Bishop of Münster and eleven of his clergymen dined at a round table in the hollow of the oak.

Only fragments of the mighty tree remain today. It leans heavily to the south-west due **to leaning growth**. To prevent it from toppling over, it was propped up for the first time in 1883. Today it is held upright by **11 supports**. Later, **two iron rings** were attached to hold the trunk sections together. The last ring was removed in 1965 because it was impeding the flow of sap. Since then, **several steel tubes** have held the mantle fragments together. The roots were examined by an arborist and the fungal infestation was treated. Since then, the roots have been regularly fertilised and aerated. In April 1994, a fence was erected to protect the tree. In 2024, the area around the Femeiche was redesigned.