

WILLIAM SAYERS

Cornell University, Ithaca

ws36@cornell.edu

ORCID: 0000-0001-9406-6649

THE MYTHOLOGICAL NORSE RAVENS HUGINN AND MUNINN: INTERROGATORS OF THE NEWLY SLAIN

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Abstract

In preference to the common assumption that Óðinn's ravens daily gather general information from around the world and report back to their master, this study identifies their principal informants as the newly dead (recently slain warriors and hanged men), and the information gathered not simply wisdom but tactical intelligence needed for the eventual cataclysmic battle of Ragnarøk, in which Óðinn's troop of fallen warriors, the *Einherjar* of Valhöll (named in *Gylfaginning* in the same context as the ravens), will also participate. The study addresses the central questions of chthonic wisdom, of how the dead (are presumed to) know what is hidden from the living, and why Snorri, in contrast to the skalds, paints an innocuous picture of the ravens.

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Flugu hrafnar tveir af Hnikars ǫxlum;
Huginn til hanga, en á hræ Muninn.

[Two ravens flew from Hnikarr's [Óðinn's] shoulders; Huginn to the hanged one, and Muninn to the corpse.] (Clunies Ross 2017: 304)

This half-stanza is quoted from the thirteenth-century Icelandic poet and grammarian Óláfr *hvítaskáld* Þórðarson by Snorri Sturluson in his *Skáldskaparmál* as an example of the figure *prolepsis* and is thus, for us, without a greater context.¹

¹ Wills (2017: 304, stanza 4). *Hnikarr* is elsewhere listed as a byname of Óðinn and may be related to *hníga* 'to fall, decline' and thus have an association with hanging; see further below.

Although the verses may have been crafted purposely to exemplify the rhetorical figure and need not, in their symmetry and succinctness, reflect deep traditional belief, they must have seemed a convention of the cultural lore and thus authorize broader questions of the activity and function of Óðinn's ravens. With its direct, even striking, association between the birds and unburied dead bodies, the verses introduce a reassessment of 1) the function of these corvids, often called carrion crows in English, 2) the source and nature of the knowledge that they are dispatched by their master to gather, 3) purposes to which this information is to be put, 4) aspects of the place of the dead and death in pre-Christian Norse religious belief and practice, and, lastly, 5) the interface between pagan and Christian religions in the early North as evidenced by Snorri Sturluson, with his euhemerism and detoxification of the pagan on the one hand, and antiquarian poetic project on the other.

The fullest information on Óðinn's pair of ravens is given in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, where the curious Gangleri is told:

Hrafnar tveir sitja á ǫxlum honum ok segja í eyru honum ǫll tíðindi þau er þeir sjá eða heyra. Þeir heita svá: Huginn ok Muninn. Þá sendir hann í dagan at fljúgja um allan heim ok koma þeir aprt at ǫgurdarmáli. Þar af verðr hann margra tíðinda viss. Því kalla menn hann hrafna guð. (Faulkes 2005: 32)

[Two ravens sit on his shoulders and speak into his ear all the news they see or hear. Their names are Hugin and Munin. He sends them out at dawn to fly over all the world and they return at dinner-time. As a result he gets to find out about many events. From this he gets the name raven god.] (Faulkes 1987: 33)

Óðinn expresses his concern for the birds' safe return from these daily news-gathering forays in verse that Snorri cites:

Huginn ok Muninn
fljúgja hverjan dag
jǫrmungrund yfir.
Óumk ek Hugin
at hann aprt ne komi,
þó sjámek meir at Munin.²

[Hugin and Munin fly each day over the mighty earth. I fear for Hugin lest he not come back, yet I am afraid more about Munin.] (Faulkes 1987: 33)

The consensus view of these companion birds, reputed to be both inquisitive and acquisitive, is found in such reference works as John Lindow's *Norse mythology* and Rudolf

A derivation from *hnika* 'to push, upset the balance', attested only in poetry, is discussed in Gurevich (2017: 735). The stanza is quoted here only as a signpost for the following study; further comment on authorial intention and Snorri's objectives is reserved for the conclusion of this essay.

² Faulkes (2005: 32–33). Snorri appears to be quoting *Grímnismál*, stanza 20 (Kuhn 1987: 61). In *Landnámabók* Flóki Vilgerðarson exploits the ravens' presumed sense of spatial relationships to send out avian scouts to determine his proximity to the coast of Iceland (Benediktsson 1986: 36).

Simek's *Dictionary of northern mythology*, that is, a simple acceptance of the *prima facie* evidence (Lindow: "they fly all around and report back to him") with no speculation on the nature of the "tidings" gathered nor of the purpose to which this information might be put.³ Are the reports simply of the garrulousness of gods, the meditations of men, the grumbings of giants, the gossip of elves, and the small-talk of dwarves? We might imagine a northern King Arthur in his high seat waiting for marvels and adventures to be brought for his entertainment. The single focus of current scholarship on the ravens is their possible affinity with north-Eurasian shamanism, in which the medicine man's astral travelling may be undertaken in the form of a bird.⁴ At a minimum, however, it should be noted that the shaman travels in order to confront inimical spirits and thereby restore the spiritual and physical health of an individual or community. No comparable purpose is ascribed to Huginn and Muninn.

The eddic poem *Hrafnsmál*, attributed to Þorbjörn *hornklofi*, stages a dialogue between a raven, one of a pair not expressly identified as Huginn or Muginn, and a valkyrie. The life and martial deeds of the Norwegian king Harald *hárfagri* ('fair-hair') are described but the bird is credited with no more than careful, respectful observation and speech. An excerpt will give the flavour of raven references in skaldic verse and, as importantly, establish that it is a pair of birds, albeit unnamed, that are being interrogated for their information.

‘Hvat es yðr, hrafnar?
Hvaðan eruð ér komnir
með dreyrgu nefi
at degi qndverðum?
Hold loðir yðr í klóum;
hræs þefr gengr ór munni;
nær hygg ek yðr í nótt bjoggu,
því es vissuð náí liggja.’

Hreyfðisk inn hqsfjaðri,
ok of hyrnu þerrði,
arnar eiðbróðir,
ok at andsvorum hugði:
‘Haraldi vér fylgðum
syni Halfdanar
ungum ynglingi
síðan ór eggí kvómum.

[“What is the matter with you, ravens? From where have you come with gory beaks at break of day? Flesh hangs from your claws; the stench of carrion comes from your mouths; I think you lodged last night near where you knew corpses were lying.”

The grey-feathered sworn-brother of the eagle [RAVEN] gloated and wiped its bill, and gave thought to an answer: “We have followed Haraldr son of Hálfðan, the young king, since we emerged from the egg.”⁵

³ Lindow (2001: 186–188); cf. Davidson (1964: 65, 146–147), Simek (1993: 164, 222), Orchard (2002: 211–212), Heslop (2018: 74, 79).

⁴ See, i.a. Tolley (2009) and studies cited there.

The *heiti* used of ravens in skaldic verse are, according to Snorri, *krákr*, *Huginn*, *Muginn*, *borginmóði*, *árflognir*, *ártali*, *holdboði*, which Faulkes translates as “crow, Hugin, Munin, secure-mood, early-flier, year-counter, flesh-marker” (Faulkes 1987: 138; Faulkes 1998: 91). Just as there are several epithets for the raven, so the association with ravens is among the many means to designate the god Óðinn, e.g. *hrafnaguð*. Other references to the ravens in the literary corpus are of an incidental kind, in furtherance of poetic ends. In exclusive fashion, the raven, along with other beasts of battle, the wolf and eagle, is associated with the carnage of man-to-man combat and in particular with its gory remains. One unusually dense example is found in Snorri’s *Háttalykill*:

Réð gunnstara gildi
 Gauts mútari drekka,
 þvít morðhauka milsku
 Muninn kunni sér nýta.
 Ql vas ógnar gagla
 ótrautt gefit hrafni;
 réð ylgjar mjøð erni
 ógndjarfr konungr veita.

[The hawk of Gautr < = Óðinn [RAVEN/EAGLE] drank the banquet of the battle-starling [RAVEN > BLOOD], because Muninn <raven> knew how to avail itself of the brew of battle-hawks [RAVENS/EAGLES > BLOOD]. Ale of goslings of battle [RAVENS/EAGLES > BLOOD] was unstintingly given to the raven; the battle-brave king gave mead of the she-wolf [BLOOD] to the eagle.] (Gade 2017: 1059, st. 52)

It is not the moment of battle that is being celebrated but its outcome, in particular – and we return to this below – the liminal moment between the life and death of a fallen warrior, when blood still pulses. It should be recalled that spilled blood oxidizes quickly and takes on the same dark hue as the raven.

Yet, despite the ubiquity of the raven motif in verse, Huginn and Muninn as Óðinn’s news-gatherers – collectors of preferential knowledge – figure in no extended mythological narrative. In contrast, they do appear widely in northern iconography: on the armrests of the miniature throne in which Óðinn is judged to be seated, as recovered at Lejre; the bird-shaped ornaments found in the warrior’s grave at Bejsebakken; on harness mounts from Gotland; and on the Sutton Hoo shield.⁶ Yet none of these instances suggests a rationale for the birds’ global information-gathering. Even though the focus in poetry is on the ravens as carrion-eaters, the poets were well aware of a greater function ascribed to Óðinn’s ravens and in Úlfr Uggason’s *Húsdrápa* the god is called the “raven-tester”, *hrafnfreistaðar* (Marold 2017: 418, st. 8).

⁵ Fulk (2017: 91–97, st. 3–4). A rare instance of a raven actually urging war is found in *Rígsþula* (Kuhn 1987: st. 44–45); see Schjødt (2021: 40–41) too.

⁶ See the description of the figurine in Christensen (2010: 4–6); discussion of this and other raven representations in Vang Pedersen (1990), Hoefig (2007), Osborn (2015), Mitchell (2019, 2022), and, for raven banners, Wild (2008).

The ravens seem very consciously named. It has been suggested that *Huginn* and *Muninn* as “Thought” and “Memory” are names added relatively late to the tradition.⁷ Yet, if the ravens fly the spatial coordinates of the world, it is consonant that, like the *vǫlva* consulted by Óðinn (see below), they could also be imagined as exploring both the past through memory and the future through speculative thought. If the ravens earlier had conventional names, these might have been closer to their immediate attributes and functions, e.g. *Huginn* replacing a reflex of *hogg* ‘stroke, blow’ (cf. the verb *hoggva*, past. part. *hogginn*) and conceivably figuring the raven hacking with its beak, and *Muginn* replacing a form based on *munnr* ‘mouth, maw’.⁸

Óðinn’s curiosity is well documented in the literary corpus of the medieval North. He travels the world himself, often disguised, and both gathers information and imparts lore in wisdom tests and other encounters with giants and humans. He also undertakes specific quests for knowledge and these may now be reviewed under the aegis of death and the dead. To itemize: his consultations with the severed head of Mímir; his inquiries of seeresses (one deceased); and his boast of the ability through a rune charm to engage in conversation with a hanged man. These may now be explored in more detail as possibly related to the reconnoitering of Huginn and Muninn. Mímir is a trusted counsellor of Óðinn and his counsel may be of particular value when Ragnarøk dawn.

Óðinn hafði með sér hofuð Mímis, ok sagði honum mǫrg tíðendi or ǫðrum heimum.
(Aðalbjarnarson 1979, *Ynglinga saga*, I, Ch. 7: 18)

[Óðinn had with him Mímir’s head, which told him many tidings from other worlds.]
(Hollander 1980: 11)

Among these worlds should doubtless be counted Jötunheim, home of the giants (see further below). Óðinn has an exclusive relationship with Mímir, as he does with Huginn and Muginn. On another occasion, distraught over Baldr’s ominous dream, Óðinn undertakes a voyage to Hel and confers with a dead *vǫlva*. Her value may have been determined by some combination of her nature as a woman, her social function as seeress, and her deceased state (Kuhn 1987, *Baldrs draumr*). Comparable to this inquiry is Óðinn’s consultation of the seeress of *Vǫluspá*. Like the ravens’ coverage of the world in spatial terms, the *vǫlva*’s account is comprehensive in temporal terms – from the beginnings of the material world and life to the apocalyptic *dénouement*, when Fenrir is loosed and the giants and other beings inimical to men and the gods attack Ásgarðr, an attack whose outcome is Ragnarøk. In mythical time Óðinn is always learning yet already knowing, but in the “time” that follows this prophecy he bears the burden of knowledge of the individual fates of the gods and, indeed, of himself. The urgent need to grasp the importance of the *vǫlva*’s prophecy

⁷ Simek (1993: 164) suggests before the tenth century. See Sturtevant (1954) and his summary of earlier scholarship.

⁸ Cleasby et al. (1957). *An Icelandic-English dictionary*, s.vv. This is admittedly only speculative and would require further detailed study.

is brought home by the hammer-like refrain “vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?” which we might translate into current idiom as “Haven’t you realized yet, or what?” (see Larrington and Quinn 2021). There appears an unresolved tension between Óðinn’s thirst for knowledge and his patronage of emotional arousal and inspiration, as reflected in his name associated with the adjective *óðr* ‘furious’. Skaldic poetry also incorporates rigorous knowledge of poetics while being supernaturally inspired.

Óðinn employs a charm called *valgaldr* to waken the dead *vǫlva*, the first element of which refers to the fallen (cf. *valkyrie* ‘chooser of the slain’). A charm for the future elect fallen does then not seem strictly appropriate in the case of the seeress. Could *valr* ‘the slain’ be a generic term used in necromancy and discourse with the dead? The *vǫlva* is said to reply in/with *nás orð* ‘corpse words’. Are these words simply those of a dead person or also a distinct kind of discourse in which the deceased can be engaged? Worth mentioning here is the association between ravens and prophecy.

In *Ynglinga saga* the mention of Mímir continues as follows: “en stundum vakði hann [Óðinn] upp dauða menn or jörðu eða settisk undir hanga. Fyrir því var hann kallaðr draugadróttinn eða hangadróttinn” [“and at times he would call to life dead men out of the ground, or he would sit down under men that were hanged. On this account he was called Lord of Ghouls or of the Hanged”] (Adallbjarnarson 1979, *Ynglinga saga*, Ch. 7: 18; Hollander 1980: 11). This is made more explicit in *Hávamál*, whose speaker is most surely Óðinn. The immediate topic is various charms that he has mastered, useful for a neophyte:

Þat kann ec iþ tólpta, ef ec sé á tré uppi váfa virgilmá:
svá ec rist oc í rúnom fác, at sá gengr gumi
oc mælr við mic. (Kuhn 1987, *Hávamál*, 43, st. 157.)

[I know a twelfth one if I see, up in a tree, a dangling corpse in a noose,
I can so carve and colour the runes that the man walks
and talks with me.] (trans. Mitchell 2017: 289)

Reversing the situation, Óðinn recounts that he voluntarily experienced hanging in return for knowledge and similarly sacrificed an eye. This may be seen as a typical Norse instance of the loss of a physical function in return for enhanced competency in its more psychic counterpart, here wisdom in exchange for the head impairment and injury.⁹ But, in the present context, the physiological dimension of hanging is also worth considering. Asphyxia reduces the flow of blood to the brain, resulting i.a. in hallucination and dermal discoloration, a feature of revenants returning from death. Óðinn’s hanging is a simulacrum or rehearsal of dying. The expected reward is enhanced knowledge and wisdom, although perhaps of a dark kind. This corresponds neatly with his trip to the dead *vǫlva* and discourse with hanged men. In addition to these “approximations” of death, we may compare the extreme ascetic practices employed by other cultures to achieve arcane knowledge or higher states of awareness.

⁹ On the sacrifice of body faculties in return for enhanced abilities, see E.E. Sayers (2004).

The knowledge sought from the deceased is not always the same, just as the parties questioned differ. In passing we note the multiple options in the “management” of the deceased: as objects of ancestor worship, residents of Valhøll or Hel, cheery mound-dwellers open to consultation, revenants coursing the countryside, interred or cremated corpses.¹⁰ However, the *völva*’s counterparts in other poems provide only practical advice relevant to the life of a kinsman (*Hyndluljóð*, *Grógaldr*, and the *haugbúi* ‘mound-dweller’ Brynjarr in *Borsteins þáttur uxafóts*). Those killed violently – in battle, through the judicial system, or (conceivably) in religious ritual – form a group apart. Although only a speculation, information from them might be thought particularly relevant to future violence.

Why does Óðinn think it profitable to consult the dead? We are unlikely to find the answer from the vantage point of the ravens alone. Óðinn seeks an explanation for Baldr’s dire dreams from the dead seeress. It may be argued that it is the woman’s earlier status as an oracle that attracts him, not her deceased state. But the hanging motif and Óláfr’s half-stanza at the beginning of this study about the hanged man and slain warrior are not so easily dismissed and, indeed, the prior social status of the former, who may have been guilty of some infraction, does not preclude his apparent value to Óðinn. As to the question of how the dead come to possess such valuable information, it may be speculated, in the absence of firmer evidence, that the dead in Old Norse belief had an advantageous and wider perspective, untroubled as they were by emotional or other involvement in the world of the living. Free of the distortions of passion and self-interest, they are far-seeing and objective. As in the system of loss and reparation that we see in Óðinn’s sacrifice of an eye, Týr’s of a hand, in return for enhanced ability in related cognitive or somatic fields, the dead may be able to see life clearly because they have lost it entirely. They command all history because they are excised from it in the ultimate but unwilling sacrifice and recompense: to lose individual life and then know all its significance, past and future. Yet this is highly speculative and our knowledge of early Norse attitudes toward the dead is still being expanded.¹¹ The freshly dead, on the other hand, may speak of the immediate past and future. Perhaps the dead were most knowledgeable just after leaving life, especially when such a transition was precipitous, on the gallows or battlefield. The recovery of corpses from the battlefield or other sites of death, and from the beasts of battle (ravens included) was the first step in the thanatological ritual, followed by laying out the body, the preparation of the grave site, emplacement of funeral accoutrements, burial or incineration, memorialization, etc.¹²

¹⁰ Price (2020: 225–226 et passim). Broken weapons in graves have been recognized as a form of conspicuous consumption but also of appeasement of the deceased, guaranteeing future comforts but eliminating reasons for a return to life.

¹¹ The most relevant studies for present concerns are Davidson (1943), Nedkvitne (2003), Ólason (2003), Nordberg (2004), McKinnell (2007), Schjødt (2008), Sundqvist (2009; 2010), Jakobsson (2011), Gunnell (2012), Egeler (2013), Kanerva (2011; 2013; 2017), Price (2014; 2020).

¹² Mitchell (2017: 291) observes that “[t]he significance of the dead in Nordic mythological texts has been the focus of substantial debate over the years”, and goes on to review several recent studies.

A curious narratological feature is met in Snorri's sequencing of the accounts of the *Einherjar* 'unique, exceptional warriors' and the ravens in *Gylfaginning*. Gylfi asks how many of these select fallen warriors Óðinn commands. He is told that this is a very good question and that even though the gods have been recruiting them for ages, there can never be too many. In a first section of the text, they are described as fighting all day by way of training and, defying further death, are physically reconstituted by evening in order to feast in the hall. The purpose of this shadowy host is to assist the gods in the ultimate battle against the forces of chaos. A question about their food supply leads to one about Óðinn's diet but Gylfi learns that his serving of meat is fed to his wolves. Gylfi asks of the *Einherjar*'s drink, which leads to a second section on their supply of supernatural mead. Since Snorri introduces the ravens Huginn and Muninn in between parts of the account that details the habits and fare of the *Einherjar*, it is reasonable to speculate that their function is allied or consonant with that of the dead warriors, although the placement of this bit of lore may also have been prompted by the mention of other companion animals, the pair of wolves. Could interrogation by Huginn and Muninn be a first step in the recruitment of *Einherjar*? The ravens do not stimulate Gylfi's curiosity and there is no explicit mention here of the birds' interaction with the fallen who are, as other texts graphically illustrate, part of their diet. Knowledge lies in flesh and blood, like poetic imagination originating in spittle and blood (the *Kvasir*/mead of poetry myth). To summarize considerations thus far, we have a complex that encompasses Óðinn, his ravens, his troop of elite warriors, other dead persons, information, and – by virtue of the function of the *Einherjar* and the content of the prophecies – Ragnarök.¹³

From a revisionist perspective, all the foregoing points to the conclusion that the ravens Huginn and Muninn do not gather general tidings on doings in the greater world but rather information on impending and recently concluded strife, its sites, its opposing parties, its body count. These settings must put them at some risk and would account for Óðinn's concern. Those who supply information to these scouts are the freshly slain, from among whom the valkyries will select new entrants to Valhøll. We may assume that the resident *Einherjar* have already contributed their knowledge before admission to the hall. We should recall that it is more than a single raven that appears to be addressed by the valkyrie in *Hrafnsmál* and it seems more than admissible that it is the pair Huginn and Muninn. In light of the importance attached to liquids in medieval Norse lore in the transmission of, and access to, knowledge – Mímir's well, spittle, vomit, and *Kvasir*, mead, the sea, and poetic art – it may well be that the ravens absorb their battlefield knowledge with the ingestion, transfusion as it were, of the freshly spilled blood (Quinn 2010; Heslop 2018; W. Sayers 2020). The flowing medium would then be closely associated with its content, newly tapped and transformed through speech. There is some tension between the ravens as eaters of carrion and as vocal interrogators of the slain, both activities realized through the beak. One could imagine a corpse as unwilling to enter into

¹³ Recent critical attention, e.g. Mitchell (2017), has focused more on Óðinn as necromancer than on the nature of the knowledge he seeks and the purpose to which he might put it.

dialogue. Others among the knowing dead, the seeress and mound-dwellers, are reluctant to be summoned to wakefulness and speech (Mitchell 2017: 299). Since the ravens have the gift of speech, do they employ some oral charm to address the fallen or is their pecking and rending sufficient to waken them to consciousness and speech? In sum, the ravens' military intelligence may well aid Óðinn in maintaining his troop of spectral warriors and in preparing logistically for Ragnarøk, whose outcome is known but not whose timing.

If we have now accounted for Óðinn's objectives in relying on the ravens and the grisly information they bring in – an abstraction of the gore clinging to their beaks and claws – how are we to explain Snorri passing over this central matter in relatively disingenuous fashion, greatly reducing the impact and image of the ravens as seen elsewhere in the poetic corpus, where the graphic details of bloody beak and carrion-clogged claws are always to the fore? I suggest that this may be understood by a consideration of the likely antecedents of the ship of the dead in Norse tradition. In *Gylfaginning* its name is *Naglfari* 'nail ferry', suggestive of a ship's clinker-built hull studded with rivet heads or of the rivets joining a sword hilt to the tang. Snorri, however, states that it is built of the uncut finger- and toe-nails of the dead, that is, that its construction is furthered by breaches in conventional funeral practice. These advance the cause of forces bent on the dissolution of human and divine culture, since *Naglfari* will be launched at Ragnarøk. It has been argued that *Naglfari* originates in a term, if not exactly a name, such as **náfari*, i.e. 'corpse ship' (< *nár*, seen above in reference to the *vǫlva*'s words).¹⁴ Comparable formations are *náffjörð* for the coast of Hel, *náströndir* for its shores, *nágrindr* for its gates.¹⁵ Since the various worlds of the dead are overseas, ship burials, whether with real vessels or standing stones outlining hulls, were intended to honour the deceased while flattering the status of the living, but also symbolically to distance the dead from the community and transport them to Hel or a more favoured location. This was in the nature of a precaution, since the unhappy and resentful deceased could return as destructive revenants. Another possibly pre-emptive measure was to remove the bodies of those malevolent in life from a dwelling place through a breach in a back wall.¹⁶

An archaic, fully consistent conception of the raven scouts and Óðinn's interest in battlefield intelligence can be glimpsed behind the innocuous statement in *Gylfaginning* on the birds' daily activity, principally through the clue offered by its insertion into the description of the *Einherjar*. Just as the archaic ship of the dead, *Náfari*, which takes corpses from the human community to Hel, was overwritten by *Naglfari*, which will sail in the opposite direction, from Jötunheim to Ásgarðr,

¹⁴ See Sayers W. [forthcoming] and de Vries (1959), s.vv. The Norse ship of the dead, lexical substitution, and the pragmatics of ship burials; and the discussion in Gurevich (2017: 862–863).

¹⁵ See Cleasby et al. (1957), s.vv., and, for *náffjörð*, Faulkes (1998), Snorri, *Edda*, 83, v. 300a. We do not meet the form **náfugl* for 'raven' but *nágogll* 'corpse-gosling', *nástari* 'corpse starling', *násvanr* 'corpse-swan' all occur in skaldic verse (some terms may also be used of the eagle and it seems fully legitimate to see the bird as so understood in cultural terms). Despite these telling compounds, we meet nothing like **náfræði* to designate the knowledge won from the dead.

¹⁶ One of best known instances is in *Eyrbyggja saga*; see Kanerva (2011).

the ravens have been bowdlerized, seemingly as part of Snorri's larger euhemerization project. *Gylfaginning* is, after all, the tale of a theological deception, one to which Gylfi's successors in Sweden were fully victim. Gylfi and the reader are being hoodwinked, although Snorri's readers may have judged that at the conclusion, when the stage-set for the three high ones' exposition has been folded up and removed, they are left with only questionable stories. While it is still more of a hunch than an established fact, it is proposed that this concern to detoxify the pagan past – leave it declawed and toothless – is most apparent in areas that pertain to pagan religious practice, that is, rite not belief, in particular mortuary practice.¹⁷ If it were true that Huginn and Muginn's interrogations of the slain were most rewarding at the very moment of death, this would coincide with the moment when, according to Christian doctrine, the soul leaves the body for one of two principal destinations. This may have been reason enough for suppressing reference to both the objects and timing of the ravens' questioning.¹⁸ The later names Huginn and Muginn with their positive valence may be part of this process. Strikingly, there is little allusion to human sacrifice, save as simulacrum, in Norse texts, and thus it is never hinted that the ravens may interrogate such dead, as well as hanged malefactors and slain warriors. In Old Norse prose, the ravens retreat to figure only among the Beasts of Battle, on war banners, etc. Skaldic verse is a corpus apart in this respect, a conservative genre that was allowed to maintain its traditional conventions long after the conversion to Christianity. Yet in Snorri's age its allusions seem to be to cut-out figures in spectacles remote from everyday life, the pagan lore preserved by the life-support system of verbal art. Despite Snorri's efforts, its days were already numbered by the mid-thirteenth century. Even earlier, the poetry was never exploited to promote religious faith but rather the dark glamour of war, admiration of the bold and generous ruler, the tie of patron and poet, the art of poetry itself, and to a more limited degree the poet's own fortunes in life and love.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that Snorri's relatively anodyne treatment of the ravens conditions the addressing of a number of important questions and moves the discourse into an unsatisfying sphere of speculation. That said, the lines of Óláfr Hvítaskáld Þórðarson that opened this study may be recalled:

Flugu hrafnar tveir af Hnikars oxlum;
Huginn till hanga, en á hræ Muninn.

[Two ravens flew from Hnikarr's (Óðinn's)] shoulders; Huginn to the hanged one,
and Muninn to the corpse.]

¹⁷ Heslop (2018: 75) writes of “dampen[ing] the cultic resonance of the text”. This is particularly apparent in Chapter 7 of *Ynglinga saga*, in which Óðinn's magic is described with only a brief mention of sacrifices and no hint at all of human sacrifice, from whose victims knowledge might otherwise conceivably be won. Early Irish literature offers an illuminating parallel: a plethora of supernatural beings and tales about them that meet all the criteria of mythology but no instances in the texts of expressions of faith or rituals. *Echtra Nerai (The adventures of Nera)* has the hero spend the night with a hanged man. The Great Goddess, Mórrígain, may take the form of a carrion crow and then be called *Badb*. See, generally, Egeler (2013).

¹⁸ In somewhat more innocuous cases, Christian writers might choose to see pagan practices analogically as prefiguring Christian equivalents, much as the New Testament realizes the promise of the Old; discussed in Mitchell (2017: 308).

Óláfr is more explicit than Snorri as to the object of the ravens' chief interest. We should recall that Snorri cites this verse as exemplary of a poetic device, not as immediately relevant to mythological lore. Óláfr is thought to have written a *Thomásdrápa* on the subject of Thomas à Becket and was obviously writing in a Christian age (Clunies Ross 2017: 301). It may then be that his laconic and precise, yet for us informative, statement about the ravens is intended to be offset in his subsequent stanzas, the grim heathen information overwritten by the “good tidings” of the New Testament gospels. Behind Snorri's whitewash of the medial Huginn and Muninn are the dark ravens of *Hrafnsmál* and skaldic poetry generally; in the future, the *Twa Corbies* of Scottish balladry, even the corvid cartoon figures Heckle and Jeckle, the garrulous Californian yellow-billed magpies, who foment violence and cackle over its victims. In the agonistic, zero-sum worldview of early Scandinavia and Iceland, Naglfari and Ragnarøk are always in the offing. It is never too soon to initiate counter-measures. All sources of information are of value, not least the insights of the newly slain as garnered by Óðinn's ravens.

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