HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

The Language of Birds in Old Norse Tradition

Ritgerð til M.A.-prófs

Timothy Bourns

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Timothy Bourns

Kt.: 300687-4589

Leiðbeinendur: Ármann Jakobsson og Torfi H. Tulinius

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Abstract

Select characters in medieval Icelandic literature are able to comprehend the language of birds. Ranging from Sigurðr's tasting the blood of the dragon Fáfnir to Óðinn's daily dialogue with the ravens Huginn and Muninn, numerous sources will be examined from a comparative perspective. Birds consistently offer important information to individuals associated with kingship and wisdom. The wide chronological and geographical range of this motif will be explored as well as the fascinating theoretical questions regarding *why* birds are nature's purveyors of wisdom. With their capacity to fly and sing, birds universally hold a special place in human experience as symbols of transcendence and numinous knowledge; Old Norse tradition reflects this reality.

Útdráttur

Valdar persónur úr íslenskum miðaldabókmenntum eru gæddar þeim eiginleika að skilja mál fugla. Allt frá Sigurði sem bragðar blóð drekans Fáfnis til Óðins sem á í daglegum samræðum við hrafnana Hugin og Munin, verða fjölmargar heimildir rannsakaðar í sambærilegu samhengi. Hvað eftir annað bjóða fuglar einstaklingum sem tengdir eru konungstign og visku, mikilvægar upplýsingar. Hið víðtæka sem og landfræðilega svið þessa minnis verður kannað og um leið reynt að svara því hvers vegna fuglar eru verðir viskunnar í náttúrunni. Fuglar eru gæddir þeim hæfileikum að fljúga og syngja og hafa því orðið tákn stórfenglegrar og lotningarfullrar þekkingar meðal fólks um allan heim; forníslensk hefð endurspeglar þennan veruleika.

fyrir fuglana

Table of Contents

I. Introduction 1

II. The Völsungs 3

1. Sigurðr Fáfnisbani tastes the blood of a dragon 3

2. Áslaug discovers her husband's deceit 9

III. Kingship and Wisdom 14

1. *Rígsþula*, Konr, and the sacred powers of kings 16

2. *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* and the most beautiful women in the world 19

3. *Ynglinga saga* and the death of the wise king's dear sparrow 21

4. *Morkinskinna*'s wise farmer and foolish king 24

IV. A Bird God 28

1. *Hrafnsmál*: a conversation between a valkyrja and a raven 28

2. Óðinn, kingship, and wisdom 30

3. Huginn and Muninn 32

4. Óðinn's transformation into a bird 35

V. Beyond Medieval Iceland 39

VI. Why Birds? 54

VII. Afterword: Conclusions for the Modern World 70

VIII. References 77

“Séra Jón: Það er gaman að hlusta á fuglana kvaka.
En það væri annað en gaman ef fuglarnir væru einlægt að kvaka satt.”
(Halldór Laxness, *Kristnihald undir Jökli*)

I. Introduction

During the early travels of Oddr and Ásmundr in *Örvar-Odds saga*, these sworn-brothers come to a large and well-lit hall in Bjarmaland. They see many people enjoying themselves inside. Oddr asks, “*Skilr þú hér nokkut mál manna?*” In response, *“Eigi heldr en fuglaklið,” sagði Ásmundr. “Eða þykkist þú nokkut af skilja?”* Oddr answers, *“Eigi er þat síðr”*.[1] For Oddr and Ásmundr, the language of birds is deemed incomprehensible; but for other characters in Old Norse tradition, bird-speech is not so foreign.

Special individuals capable of understanding the language of birds are spread throughout the medieval Icelandic literary corpus. This phenomenon has received surprisingly little academic attention and is deserving of detailed, extensive, and interdisciplinary study. Capable of flight and song, birds universally hold a special place in human experience. Their effective communication to people in Old Norse lore offers another example of their unique role in humanity’s socio-cosmic reality.

Attention will first be given to the Völsung cycle of eddic poetry and legendary literature. After slaying the dragon Fáfnir and tasting its blood, Sigurðr comprehends the speech of birds. They warn him of Reginn’s intended betrayal, advise him to take the serpent’s treasure for himself, and direct him towards the valkyrja Brynhildr. The dragon-slaying symbolizes a heroic initiation whereby a numinous ability is acquired. In *Guðrúnarkviða I*, Guðrún tastes Fáfnir’s blood and also gains this skill; and in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, Sigurðr’s daughter Áslaug learns from three birds of her husband Ragnar’s deceitful plan to wed another woman.

Other texts containing bird-human communication will next receive analysis, including examples from *Rígsþula*, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, *Ynglinga saga*, and *Morkinskinna*. The differences between each scenario are significant, but the connections

[1] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. II, p. 215. [“‘Do you know anything about the language of these people?’ …‘No more than the twittering of birds,’ said Asmund. ‘Can you make anything of it?’…‘About as much as you’.” (Trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards 1985, 35)] According to Torfi H. Tulinius, “*Örvar-Odds saga* is the longest of the *fornaldarsögur* and probably the best-loved, from the Middle Ages to our own day, as the large number of extant manuscripts indicates” (Torfi H. Tulinius 2002, 27). The oldest remaining MSS date to the early 14th century and the original text was probably composed in the second half of the 13th century (Torfi H. Tulinius 2002, 27-8).

between them are the most telling. Birds serve narrative, religious, and symbolic purposes. It is typically kingly figures—rulers, royalty, and nobility—who are able to understand the language of birds. Wisdom also emerges as central. A person is considered to be particularly wise if she or he can understand bird-speech; likewise, birds provide useful (and often necessary) insights.

Parallels with mythological material shall also be drawn and the continued themes of kingship and wisdom highlighted.[2] The deity Óðinn arises as a connecting figure: the poem *Hrafnsmál* contains a conversation between two Odinic creatures, a valkyrja ('valkyrie') and a raven; numerous sources depict Óðinn's daily dialogue with the ravens Huginn and Muninn who travel the world(s) to bring him knowledge; and in a symbolically significant act, Óðinn spits the mead of poetry into Ásgarðr whilst in the shape of an eagle.[3]

Human belief in an understandable bird-language can be detected beyond medieval Iceland and the wide chronological and geographical range of this tradition will be examined. Evidence explored will include alternate literary redactions and pictorial representations of the Sigurðr legend, Tacitus' *Germania*, Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, and post-medieval folklore. Both genetic and typological comparison will be considered: in some examples, the comprehensible language of birds can be seen as a

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[2] The distinction between Myth and its related genres is usually "fluid" (Schjødt 2008a, 15). I follow Ármann Jakobsson, who writes "I see no reason to distinguish between myths and legends...Demaraction between the two is far from clear and definitions vary" (2009b, 35). In general, I view myths as occuring in sacred space and time—in the 'other world'—and legends as taking place in 'our world'.

[3] There is more than one species of *fugl* ("fowl, bird") that speak to human characters in Old Norse tradition; often the species is not named, but sometimes it is clarified as, for example, a *kráka* ("crow"), *spǫrr* ("sparrow), *assa* ("eagle"), or *hrafn* ("raven") (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, pp. 177, 354, 585, 25, 281). Ignoring variation between bird species acts in contrast to the approach of many anthropologists who analyze human-animal relations; see e.g. Krech III (2011), who writes "many have remarked [that] it is striking how often people, regardless of culture, name and classify similar discontinuities in birds at the level of the genus or species." For the exploration of bird-language in medieval Icelandic literature, however, the variability between bird species does not appear relevant. The question *what is a bird?* becomes pertinent since cultures vary in categorizing "things that fly" (again, see e.g. Krech III 2011). As a modern definition for "bird", *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers "Any feathered vertebrate animal: a member of the second class (*Aves*) of the great Vertebrate group, the species of which are most nearly allied to the Reptiles, but distinguished by their warm blood, feathers, and adaptation of the fore limbs as wings, with which most species fly in the air" (1989, 214). This definition is clearly informed by modern science (e.g. Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2004, 1-1, 1-2, etc.), but such classification was unknown in the medieval period. Yet, in the examples cited in this thesis, birds are clearly understood to be animals that fly and speak a language. The most succinct definition—for both the contemporary reader and the medieval Icelander (in translation)—is likely found in the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's *Handbook of Bird Biology*: "Every child knows what a bird is" (2004, 1-1).

historical continuum with the medieval Icelandic texts; however, mythic importance is also placed on the language of birds in many other cultural traditions, including ancient Greece and Rome.

The diversity of a language of birds understood by 'the initiated' indicates that this motif is universal to the human condition. Previous theoretical approaches to birds in myth and legend will be explored. Claude Lévi-Strauss offered compelling conclusions about the metaphorical role of birds as a reflection of human thought and society; with the Transcendent Function, Carl Jung proposed that birds can symbolize movement from the conscious to the unconscious mind; and Mircea Eliade wrote extensively on the connection between shamanism and mythical bird-imagery—named the Magical Flight—an idea with clear links to the deity Óðinn. Birds are a special class of species in humanity's perception of nature; medieval Icelandic texts demonstrate this truth. Although other animal species are occasionally able to communicate with people, only birds are considered nature's communicators of numinous knowledge.

Fantastic relations between humans and animals in Old Norse literature provide insight into the environmental beliefs of the medieval North; bird-human communication is an important example of this potential. Application of ecocritical theory challenges the existence of a human-animal dichotomy: the language of birds is one of the many moments in medieval Icelandic sources where the distinction between the 'human' and the 'animal' is blurred with mythical or folkloric fancy. It is a process that can be named 'becoming-animal'. The imagined human ability to understand bird-speech is a marvel that the typical modern reader cannot believe to be true; but in its symbolic complexity, the language of birds represents one of the most desired and universal goals of the human spirit: transcendence.

II. The Völsungs

1. *Sigurðr Fáfnisbani tastes the blood of a dragon*

There is no shortage of scholarship on the Codex Regius and *Völsunga saga* redactions of the Sigurðr legend and, specifically, his slaying of Fáfnir; there is also no one correct way to interpret the killing of a dragon. As a mythic being, dragons are obviously imbued with hidden symbolic meaning. Joseph Campbell wrote in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

(1949) that "the symbols of mythology are not manufactured; they cannot be ordered, invented, or permanently suppressed. They are spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bears within it, undamaged, the germ power of its source."[4] The idea of a hero or god slaying a serpent or dragon can be detected throughout Indo-European mythology and also beyond, in a vast number of cultural traditions.[5] It is a universal motif of the human imagination.

In *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (1995), Calvert Watkins asks "Why does the hero slay the serpent? What is the function of this widespread if not universal myth, or put another way, what is its meaning?"[6] Although no single, fully comprehensive answer can be provided, Watkins does offer a relevant and noteworthy suggestion: "The dragon symbolizes Chaos, in the largest sense, and killing the dragon represents the ultimate victory of Cosmic Truth and Order over Chaos."[7] Moreover, regarding the hero's slaying of the dragon, Watkins posits that "it serves to locate the hero and the narrated event in a cosmology and ideology perceived as permanent and everlasting."[8] In Campbell's terms, the dragon-slaying represents a trial faced during the hero's journey; and in relation, Jungian thought views the dragon as a universal representation of the ego—amongst other things—and the killing of the dragon as the symbolic expression of becoming an adult.[9] These ideas translate well to the legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. Exploring "the narrative purpose and the practical function of the monster"[10], Ármann Jakobsson demonstrates that the dragon is an embodiment of terror and its role is to inspire fear[11]; the young hero must overcome these challenges

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[4] Campbell 1949, 4. Campbell also posits that the same mythic motifs are universal to the human condition; it is always the same story being told: "it will be always the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told" (Campbell 1949, 3).
[5] Watkins 1995, 297.
[6] Watkins 1995, 299.
[7] Watkins 1995, 299.
[8] Watkins 1995, 303.
[9] See e.g. Campbell 1949, 245-246; Henderson 1964, 112-120. As Jungian scholar Joseph Henderson further posits, "For most people the dark or negative side of the personality remains unconscious. The hero, on the contrary, must realize that the shadow exists and that he can draw strength from it. He must come to terms with its destructive powers if he is to become sufficiently terrible to overcome the dragon. I.e., before the ego can triumph, it must master and assimilate the shadow" (Henderson 1964, 112).
[10] Ármann Jakobsson 2009b, 36.
[11] Consider for example the dragon's *ægishjálmr* ('Helmet of Fear'), which Ármann Jakobsson proves to be "a powerful tool to oppress anyone and anything that comes in his way, the Gnitaheiði version of a death star" (Ármann Jakobsson 2010, 43.)

through bravery and courage.[12] The hero's youth is emphasized: he is "a man between childhood and adulthood"[13] and the dragon-slaying "is the climax of the hero's life."[14] While the dragon can be said to symbolize death, the hero in contrast is representative of life; and it is fitting that he be in his youth, for "the man who may defeat a dragon should be far removed from death and full of vitality and zest, the life-force that some might call Eros."[15] Sigurðr is thus at an appropriate time in his life to overcome fear, conquer the dragon, and acquire numinous potential.

The eddic poems *Reginsmál*, *Fáfnismál*, and *Sigrdrífumál* from the Codex Regius describe Sigurðr's mythic youth, and to follow Jens Peter Schjødt's approach, *Völsunga saga* is "the only important account about Sigurðr that gives us an increased understanding by way of a context for the three eddic poems".[16] It is in *Fáfnismál* that Sigurðr hears the birds sing, but its division from *Reginsmál* into two separate texts is an editorial choice based on late paper manuscripts.[17] Both poems combine prose and verse; verse is typically used for the dialogues and is mostly in *ljóðaháttr* meter, although a few stanzas are in *fornyrðislag*.[18] The Codex Regius was written in 1270 CE, though much of its source material was certainly composed at an earlier date.[19] One of the *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*[20], *Völsunga saga* was composed in Iceland by an unknown author in roughly 1250 CE.[21] Jesse Byock notes that although many of the saga's episodes can be dated to historical events that took place in the 4th and 5th centuries CE, the origin of the

[12] Ármann Jakobsson 2009b, 2010.
[13] Ármann Jakobsson 2010, 42.
[14] Ármann Jakobsson 2009b, 41.
[15] Ármann Jakobsson 2010, 46.
[16] Other literary and artistic evidence for the Sigurðr legend is included and briefly explored in *Chapter V: Beyond Medieval Iceland*.
[17] Grimstad 1993, 520.
[18] Grimstad 1993, 520. Re: the poetics of *Fáfnismál*, see further Quinn 1992.
[19] McKinnell 2005, 37. See further *Chapter IV: A Bird God*, *Section 3. Huginn and Muninn*).
[20] "a tale of the Nordic countries in ancient times" (Trans. Torfi H. Tulinius 2005, 447). The term is not a medieval concept, but was developed by the Danish philologist Carl Christian Rafn (1795-1864); distinguished by a distant chronological and geographical setting, the genre consists of 25 sagas and eight shorter texts (Torfi H. Tulinius 2005, 447-8; for a list of relevant texts, see Torfi H. Tulinius 2002, 17-18). The *fornaldarsögur* probably slowly emerged in the end of the 12th and early 13th century and may have originally been an offshoot of the *konungasögur* (Torfi H. Tulinius 2005, 451; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1959; etc.).
[21] Torfi H. Tulinius 2002, 139 (or at least no later than 1260 or 1270, Finch 1993, 711; or between 1200 and 1270, Byock 1990, 3). The one vellum MS is NkS 1824b 4to dates to roughly 1400 CE; there are also many paper derivations which date from the 17th to 19th century (see e.g. Finch 1993, 711; Torfi H. Tulinius 2002, 26).

dragon-slaying and other mythic features can only be a subject for speculation.[22] He further posits that "The saga's frequent crossings of these borders ["between nature and culture and between the world of men and the world of the supernatural"] reveal glimpses not only of fears and dreams but also of long-forgotten beliefs and cultic practices. Not least among these is Sigurd's tasting the blood of the dragon, thereby acquiring the ability to understand the speech of birds."[23]

Upon his foster-father Reginn's urging, Sigurðr sets out to slay the dragon Fáfnir, brother of Reginn and greedy guardian of great treasure.[24] Sigurðr slays the serpent by digging a deep trench and stabbing his sword upwards, and in *Völsunga saga* he escapes the dragon's blood by digging multiple pits at the advice of an old and bearded man (Óðinn). The subject matter of the poem *Fáfnismál*—a dialogue between Sigurðr and Fáfnir—comes next, and Sigurðr is warned that Reginn will betray him. Fáfnir then dies, and the following events are testimony to the mythic power of the Sigurðr legend:

> Þá skar Sigurðr hjartat ór orminum með því sverði, er Riðill hét. Þá drakk Reginn blóð Fáfnis ok mælti: 'Veit mér eina bæn, er þér er lítit fyrir: Gakk til elds með hjartat ok steik ok gef mér at eta.' Sigurðr fór ok steikti á steini. Ok er freyddi ór, þá tók hann fingri sínum á ok skynjaði, hvárt steikt væri. Hann brá fingrinum í munn sér. Ok er hjartablóð kom á tungu honum, þá skildi hann fuglarödd. Hann heyrði, at igður klökuðu á hrísunu hjá honum…[25]

In verses 32-39, seven birds consecutively provide Sigurðr with advice and warn him of Reginn's intended betrayal.[26] In the *Völsunga saga* redaction, six birds summarize the exchange:

> "Þar sitr Sigurðr ok steikir Fáfnis hjarta. Þat skyldi hann sjálfr eta. Þá mundi hann verða hverjum manni vitrari." Önnur segir: "Þar liggr Reginn ok vill véla þann, sem honum trúir." Þá mælti in þriðja: "Höggvi hann þá höfuð af honum, ok má hann þá ráða gullinu því inu mikla einn." Þá mælti in fjórða:

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[22] Byock 1990, 2.
[23] Byock 1990, 5.
[24] For a more complete summary of the events preceeding and following the slaying of Fáfnir from the combined perspective of the eddic poems and *Völsunga saga*, see Schjødt 2008a, 284-288. The following synopsis is informed by Neckel 1927 (ed.) and Guðni Jónsson 1954 (ed.).
[25] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 155. ["Then Sigurd cut the heart out of the serpent with the sword called Ridill. Regin drank Fafnir's blood and said: "Grant me one request, a trifle for you. Go to the fire with the heart, roast it, and give it to me to eat." Sigurd went and roasted Fafnir's heart on a spit. And when the juice foamed out he tested it with his finger to see whether it was done. He stuck his finger in his mouth. And when the blood from the serpent's heart touched his tongue, he could understand the speech of birds. He heard the nuthatches chirping in the brush near him." (Trans. Byock 1990, 65-66)]
[26] Neckel ed., 1927, 182-183.

> "Þá væri hann vitrari, ef hann hefði þat, sem þær höfðu ráðit honum, ok riði síðan til bóls Fáfnis ok tæki þat it mikla gull, er þar er, ok riði síðan upp á Hindarfjall, þar sem Brynhildr sefr, ok mun hann nema þar mikla speki, ok þá væri hann vitr, ef hann hefði yður ráð ok hygði hann um sína þurft, ok þar er mér úlfsins ván, er ek eyrun sá." Þá mælti in fimmta: "Eigi er hann svá horskr sem ek ætla, ef hann vægir honum, en drepit áðr bróður hans." Þá mælti in sétta: "Þat væri snjallræði, ef hann dræpi hann ok réði einn fénu."[27]

Sigurðr takes the counsel of the birds quite seriously: according to *Fáfnismál*, *Sigurðr hió hǫfuð af Regin, ok þá át hann Fáfnis hiarta ok drákk blóð þeira beggia, Regins ok Fáfnis*.[28] The birds then offer further counsel and suggest that he journey to Hindarfjall to see the valkyrja Sigrdrífa (named Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga*) and gain greater wisdom (this advice is included in the previous passage in *Völsunga saga*). The wisdom of birds provides Sigurðr with an escape from death (warning him of Reginn's planned deceit) and offers the path to golden riches and further numinous knowledge. Furthermore, in both redactions of the legend, the valkyrja of Hindarfjall, in Jens Peter Schjødt's succinct wording, "tells him about a long series of various types of runes he must know in order to control a magic universe."[29]

Schjødt's *Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion* (2008a) provides exemplary insight into Sigurðr's dragon-slaying. Schjødt applies perspectives from comparative religion to decipher the symbolism and meaning of initiation in the pre-Christian north, of which the legend of Sigurðr is a prime example.[30] As a preliminary definition, initiation is defined as "a certain sequential structure – ritualistic or narrative – which makes use of a series of symbols that mark the difference and the transition between the initial and the final

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[27] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 155-156. ["There sits, Sigurd, roasting Fafnir's heart. Better he should eat it himself," said a bird. "Then he would be wiser than any man." Another said: "There lies Regin, who wants to betray the one who trusts him." Then a third spoke: "He should strike Regin's head off; then he alone would control the huge store of gold." Then a fourth spoke: "Sigurd would be wise to follow their advice. Afterward he should ride to Fafnir's den and take the magnificent hoard of gold which is there, and then ride up to Hindarfell, where Brynhild sleeps. There he will find great wisdom. He would be wise to take your advice and consider his own needs. I suspect a wolf where I see a wolf's ears." Then a fifth said: "He is not as wise as I thought if he spares Regin after having killed his brother." Then a sixth spoke: "It would be a wise counsel if Sigurd killed Regin and took the treasure for himself." (Trans. Byock 1990, 66)]

[28] Neckel ed., 1927, 183. ["Sigurd cut off Regin's head and then he ate Fafnir's heart and drank the blood of both Regin and Fafnir". (Trans. Larrington 1996, 164)]

[29] Schjødt 2008a, 286.

[30] Alternately, for discussion of the dragon's potential Christian symbolism, see e.g. Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1999.

phases of the sequence."[31] Schjødt clarifies that his focus lies with a 'sequence structure' rather than a 'ritual structure': I follow his approach in attempting "to reveal the semantic universe within which the structure and symbolism of initiation take place" rather than investigating rituals or their reconstruction.[32] An essential element of the sequence is the supernatural knowledge or abilities gained by the acting figure, what Schjødt terms "acquision of a numinous potential".[33]

This framework applies itself exceptionally well to the legend of Sigurðr, who undergoes this initiation in his youth and closely follows the structure and symbolism of initiation. The pit that Sigurðr digs and enters is symbolically indicative of "a journey to the underworld" and he thus "goes *down* into the trench in order to kill a creature that has chthonic connotations."[34] Sigurðr receives numerous objects and abilities that could be described as numinous, but clearly significant among these is the ability to understand the language of birds and the wisdom they offer. Schjødt demonstrates that the dragon-slaying episode reveals "the dichotomy between the upper world and the underworld" and identifies the many oppositional pairings depicted between life and death. Not identified among these, however, is the contrast between the chthonic importance of Fáfnir and the celestial symbolism of birds. He enters the Other World to slay the dragon and achieves transcendent knowledge as a result. His victory over Fáfnir represents a symbolic conquest of immortality, the direct consequence of which is communication with higher states of being.

When birds speak to human characters in medieval Icelandic literature, they consistently offer important and useful advice, and the recipient of this wisdom is typically from a royal family. This is especially clear in the case of Sigurðr, which in Schjødt's argument may be "a reflection of how a young untried man becomes qualified to be a prince."[35] Sigurðr is of noble birth and his descent can be traced to Óðinn. This fact is essential and Schjødt makes a further logical suggestion: Sigurðr may represent "a prototype of a descent of Óðinn himself, therefore perhaps a king or rather a prototypical king, who has so many features in common with Óðinn that he would be able to take care

[31] Schjødt 2008a, 12.
[32] Schjødt 2008a, 13.
[33] Schjødt 2008a, 12.
[34] Schjødt 2008a, 291.
[35] Schjødt 2008a, 298.

of the royal power and its condition".[36] Sigurðr would thus be responsible for "communication with the Other world" and would consequently become "the 'archetypal Germanic king'."[37] Regarding this speculation, Schjødt does acknowledge that "such contentions are ultimately unprovable," but the story of Sigurðr still reflects "the mythology and the rituals which have surrounded the ideology of kingship."[38] If Sigurðr's initiatory coming-of-age involves becoming an appropriate social ruler, then the acquisition of numinous abilities would be a part of this process. His communion with birds may represent a form of divine communication and provides a link between the hero and the progenitor of his monarchical lineage: Óðinn.

Sigurðr Fáfnisbani is not the only member of the Völsung family who understands the language of birds. The 12th century eddic poem *Guðrúnarkviða I* describes Guðrún Gjúkadóttir's inconscolable grief after her husband, Sigurðr, is slain by her brothers.[39] According to the poem's prose introduction, *Guðrún sat yfir Sigurði dauðom. Hon grét eigi sem aðrar konor, en hon var búin til at springa af harmi. Til gengo bæði konor ok karlar at hugga hana; en þat var eigi auðvelt. —Þat er sǫgn manna, at Guðrún hefði etit af Fáfnis hiarta ok hon skilði því fugls rǫdd*.[40] The additional bird-language feature may appear out of place, but it does demonstrate that this supernatural ability can be passed on to another via the heart of Fáfnir. Transfer may also be hereditary: in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, Sigurðr's daughter Áslaug possesses her father's talent.

2. *Áslaug discovers her husband's deceit*

In *Völsunga saga*, the reader learns that the sacred union of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Brynhildr Buðladóttir in Hlymdalr produces an heir—a daughter named Áslaug. As Brynhildr tells her foster-father Heimir (also the future foster-father of Áslaug): *"Dóttur*

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[36] Schjødt 2008a, 298.
[37] Schjødt 2008a, 298.
[38] Schjødt 2008a, 298, 299.
[39] On the composition of *Guðrúnarkviða I-III*, see e.g. Glendinning 1993, 246.
[40] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 197. ["Gudrun sat over Sigurd's dead body. She did not weep like other women and she was on the point of collapsing with grief. Both men and women came to comfort her; it was not easy. People said that Gudrun has eaten some of Fafnir's heart and so she understood the talk of birds." (Trans. Larrington 1996, 177)]

okkar Sigurðar, Áslaugu, skal hér upp fæða með þér.'[41] Áslaug has special importance. In the *Skáldskaparmál* section of his *Edda*, Snorri Sturluson writes that Áslaug is the sole living descendant of the Völsung lineage: *Þá var ok dauð ǫll ætt ok afkvæmi Gjúka. Eptir Sigurð svein lifði dóttir er Áslaug hét er fædd var at Heimis í Hlymdǫlum, ok eru þaðan ættir komnar stórar*.[42]

Áslaug's story is told must fully in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, which directly follows *Völsunga saga* in MS NKS 1824 b 4to; written by an Icelandic scribe, this manuscript of 80 leaves is datable to roughly 1400 CE.[43] Another MS, AM 147 4to, fragmentarily preserves the saga and can be dated to roughly 1250 CE.[44] Rory McTurk argues for the existence of a third, and oldest, redaction that was perhaps completed by 1230 CE.[45] In *Gesta Danorum*, the 12th and early 13th century Danish writer Saxo Grammaticus also includes an even older version of the story; however, he excludes the character Áslaug, who emerges as the true protagonist of the Icelandic version.[46] Carolyne Larrington suggests that "Áslaug is undoubtedly the heroine of *Ragnars saga*: all the key verse sequences and their accompanying narrative tell her story, highlighting her unique status as related to two dragon-slayers and capable of transmitting the sign of that relationship through her body."[47] Torfi H. Tulinius contends that "she can be viewed as the thread that ties together the different parts of the saga."[48] And as Bjarni Guðnason romantically writes, *þar sem Áslaug er, þar er hjarta höfundar*.[49] Áslaug's abilities are described in great detail throughout the saga and begin early in her life. During her upbringing, her foster-father Heimir fears for her life and consequently hides her in a great harp along with many treasures. He travels widely throughout the Northlands and

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41 Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 178. ["Brynhild said: 'My daughter by Sigurd, Aslaug, shall be raised here with you.'" (Trans. Byock 1990, 82)]
42 Faulkes ed., 1998, p. 50. ["Now the house of Gjuki and all his descendants were dead. From his youth, Sigurd was survived by a daughter named Aslaug. She had been born at the home of Heimir in Hlymdales, and from her great families are descended." (Trans. Byock 2005, 102)]
43 Larrington 2011, 1. See also Klaus von See, who argues that the two works should be read as a single text (von See 1994, 584-585; 2001, 391-392). Carolyne Larrington suggests that they "are too different for them to have been conceived thus, [but] they might have been *read* as a single text in the redaction we have in 1824 and its predecessors" (Larrington 2011, 1).
44 McTurk 1993, 519.
45 McTurk 1993, 519.
46 McTurk 1991, 91.
47 Larrington 2010, 66.
48 Torfi H. Tulinius 2002, 130.
49 "where Aslaug is, there is the author's heart." Bjarni Guðnason 1969, 34.

gives her no other food than leeks.[50] Her exceptional talents and wisdom are proved numerous times throughout her life as the saga unfolds. She demonstrates subtle gender transformations, great leadership, prophecy, sound counsel, and the ability to comprehend bird-speech.

Áslaug seemingly inherits the supernatural gifts of her ancestry, which can be traced to Óðinn, and the Völsung family is known for their special abilities. For example, in *Völsunga saga*, the character Signý (daughter of King Völsung) makes this explicit when she tells her father why she does not wish to marry King Siggeir. Her explanation involves an ability to foresee the future (in this case, that the marriage will produce negative results), which supposedly is an inheritable family trait.[51] Áslaug can also tell of future events: she accurately predicts that if Ragnarr sleeps with her on their first night of marriage, then she will give birth to a boneless son. Ragnarr ignores her counsel and forces himself upon her; she gives birth to Ívarr, who is born *beinlauss* ('boneless').[52] And later in the saga, when Ragnarr doubts Áslaug's claim that she is the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, she proves her royal lineage by foreseeing that their next son will be a boy with the mark of a snake around his eye.[53] It is fitting then that Sigurðr's daughter Áslaug is also able to understand the language of birds.

One summer, as was the custom, Ragnarr paid a visit to his close friend Eysteinn, King of Sweden. At the banquet in Uppsala, Ragnarr betrothes himself to Eysteinn's

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[50] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 221.

[51] *Nú mælti Signý við föður sinn: "Eigi vilda ek á brott fara með Siggeiri, ok eigi gerir hugr minn hlæja við honum, ok veit ek af framvísi minni ok af kynfylgju várri, at af þessu ráði stendr oss mikill ófagnaðr, ef eigi er skjótt brugðit þessum ráðahag."* Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, p. 115. ["Then Signy spoke to her father: 'I do not wish to go away with Siggeir, nor do my thoughts laugh with him. I know through my foresight and that special ability found in our family that if the marriage contract is not quickly dissolved, this union will bring us much misery.'" (Trans. Byock 1990, 39)] Note: her prediction of future doom proves accurate.

[52] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 238-9. If Carol Clover is correct, this would have been recognized as a serious problem by the saga's medieval audience. Clover proposes that the predominant power binary in Old Norse literature is not between men and women, but rather "between able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman) on one hand and, on the other, a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men)" (Clover 1993, 380). A man without bones surely falls into the latter category (to the extent that anyone of royal blood could be 'disenfranchised'); and Áslaug demonstrates wisdom in warning Ragnarr to show some restraint. Such female advice is somewhat reminiscent of Giselle Gos' fine study of the women of *Fóstbræðra saga*, in which "there is substantial evidence for women providing a different kind of counsel, "heilræði" (sound counsel), and fulfilling quite a different social role, that of a mediator who works towards diffusing violence, advocating proper social behavior and promoting community integrity" (Gos 2009, 282).

[53] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 245.

daughter, the beautiful Ingibjörg.[54] On the journey home, Ragnarr stops in a forest clearing and commands his men not to tell others about his arranged marriage with Eysteinn's daughter, threatening them with death. Upon returning to his estate, Áslaug (under the name 'Kráka') enters the hall, sits on his knee, places her arms around his neck, and asks him for tidings. He says that there is no news and repeats this answer when she again questions him in bed later that night.[55] Seemingly unimpressed with his responses, the saga tells of Áslaug's knowledgeability: *'Nú mun ek segja þér tíðendi,' segir hún, 'ef þú vilt mér engi segja.' Hann spyrr, hver þau væri. 'Þat kalla ek tíðendi,' segir hún, 'ef konungi er heitit konu, en þat er þó sumra manna mál, at hann eigi sér aðra áðr.'*[56] With her revelation of wisdom, Ragnarr wishes to know the source of her information. It was not his men who told her, however, but rather three birds: *'Þér munduð sjá, at fuglar þrír sátu í trénu hjá yðr. Þeir sögðu mér þessi tíðendi.'*[57] Áslaug thus reveals her true heritage as the daughter of wise and fair Brynhildr and the glorious Sigurðr, which Ragnarr does not believe to be true; and as previously noted, Áslaug then proves herself by accurately predicting that their next son, Sigurðr, will have a serpent about his eye.

Regarding the origin of Áslaug's supernatural ability to understand bird-speech, Carolyne Larrington suggests that it is "a trait presumably inherited from her father [Sigurðr Fáfnisbani]."[58] The argument for heredity is logical: she is also the descendant of Óðinn and the gift of prophecy is an inheritable trait in the Völsung lineage. Based on the research of Rory McTurk, however, it is also possible that, similar to her father, she developed this ability via her own initiation. Just as Sigurðr undergoes a heroic transition into the underworld to conquer the dragon, emerging with numinous abilities (as

[54] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 243.
[55] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 212.
[56] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 213. ["'Now I shall tell thee tidings,' said she, 'if thou wilt give me none.' He asked what they were. 'I call it news,' she said, 'if a woman is betrothed to a king when it is none the less said by certain folk that he already has another wife.'" (Trans. Schlauch 1930, 244)]
[57] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 213. ["Thou must have seen that three birds sat in the three beside thee, and they told me these tidings." (Trans. Schlauch 1930, 244)]
[58] Larrington 2010, 56. This suggestion is further supported by the fact that Áslaug has the mark of a snake on or near her eye in some variants of the story (e.g. later ballad tradition), an external genetic marker of her supernatural heritage as daughter of Sigurðr the dragon-slayer (Larrington 2010, 60; McTurk 1991, 80). Although this feature is not found in the medieval saga, it is there present in Áslaug's son Sigurðr ormr-í-auga (Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 246).

discussed in the previous section), Áslaug too undergoes a form of female initiation.[59] McTurk contends that she is "the 'actual' hero of *Ragnars saga*, while Ragnarr is merely the 'formal' hero."[60] He later develops these ideas further; regarding comprehension of the language of birds in particular, he writes that "while it should be recognized that the motif of her learning of Ragnarr's plans from some birds is almost certainly a reduplication of the motif in VS of Sigurðr…it may be very tentatively suggested that, during her time at Spangarheiðr, Áslaug, after being named Kráka, comes to partake of the nature of a crow to the extent of understanding bird language, and thus acquiring the knowledge she so startlingly reveals."[61] Either explanation is possible and they certainly are not mutually exclusive.

Connections to kingship and wisdom are very clear in this example.[62] Áslaug is the daughter of King Sigurðr and the sole living heir of the royal Völsung lineage that traces its descent to Óðinn. Her wisdom is proved numerous times throughout the saga, including her aforementioned skills in prophecy.[63] One prominent example occurs when Ragnarr has his men inform her that she shall come and meet him, for he wishes that she be his. Ragnarr, however, has certain extreme expectations: *at hún sé klædd né óklædd, hvárki mett né ómett, ok fari hún þó eigi ein saman, ok skal henni þó engi maðr fylgja*.[64] Áslaug then ponders the king's strange demands, but to her foster-mother Gríma it seems impossible: *en Grímu þótti engan veg svá mega vera ok kveðst vita, at sjá konungr mundi eigi vera vitr*.[65] Áslaug demonstrates her intelligence by meeting the King's challenge:

> En þó mun ek verða at breyta búnaði mínum nokkut; þú átt aurriðanet, ok mun ek þat vefja at mér, en þar yfir utan læt ek falla hár mitt, ok mun ek þá hvergi ber. En ek mun bergja á einum lauk, ok er þat lítill matr, en þó má þat

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[59] See McTurk's extensive discussion (2007).
[60] McTurk 1991, 91.
[61] McTurk 2007, 69.
[62] Ármann Jakobsson's statement regarding *Völsunga saga* that "an important function of the legend [is] to sustain the charisma of leadership and the qualities of a noble ruler" may also be true of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (Ármann Jakobsson 2010, 36).
[63] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir aptly explains how many *fornaldarsaga* women consistently offer wisdom and sound counsel. In her words, "these sagas almost universally feature women, mainly of noble descent, as wise figures dispensing beneficial advice to their male kin" (2010, 74).
[64] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, pp. 223-224. ["She shall be neither naked nor clad, and neither fasting nor fed; she shall not come alone, yet no man shall attend her." (Trans. Schlauch 1930, 201)]
[65] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 234. ["but to Grima it seemed impossible, and she said she was sure the King must be lacking his wits." (Trans. Schlauch 1930, 201)]

> kenna, at ek hefi bergt. Ok ek mun láta fylgja mér hund þinn, ok fer ek þá eigi ein saman, en þó fylgir mér engi maðr.[66]

Upon hearing her solution, Áslaug's foster-father *þykkir henni hún mikit vit hafa*,[67] and she is eventually married to Ragnarr.

The three birds that overhear Ragnarr's in the forest are sources of knowledge for Áslaug. They tell her of Ragnarr's deceitful plan to marry Ingibjörg and act as providers of useful information. They are thus essential characters in the plot with clear consequences for the saga's protagonists. In accordance with other examples from Old Norse tradition, birds appear to favour the royal and the wise with their knowledge.

III. Kingship and Wisdom

The following four textual examples—from *Rígsþula*, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, *Ynglinga saga*, and *Morkinskinna*—depict characters in medieval Icelandic literature that understand the language of birds. The themes of royalty and wisdom, clearly relevant to the cases of Sigurðr and Áslaug, are highlighted in each scenario.

The continued connection between royalty and wisdom may point to a link with the idea of sacral kingship[68], and the importance of descent from the gods should not be ignored.[69] In the case of *Völsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, Ragnarr's marriage to Áslaug (the daughter of Brynhildr and Sigurðr, who is a descendant of Óðinn) provides a divine progenitor for Hákon Hákonarson, a Norwegian king whose lineage can be

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[66] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 234. ["…but I must change my raiment somewhat. Thou hast a trout-net, and in that I must wrap myself, and over that I shall let my hair fall down, so that I shall be no whit naked. And I shall taste of a leek; that is but little food, and yet it will bear witness that I have eaten; I shall have thy hound follow me, so that I shall not go alone, and yet no man will be with me." (Trans. Schlauch 1930, 201-202)]

[67] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 234. ["he thought she had great store of wisdom" (Trans. Schlauch 1930, 202)]

[68] Regarding the definition of 'sacral kingship', I shall follow Jens Peter Schjødt and purposefully leave the term open and vague. Schjødt posits that sacral kingship "is not (and perhaps should not be) defined in any precise way" (2010, 167). However, he also continues to provide some apt discussion: "It may denote almost any kind of relation between a ruler and the gods of the society in question. At one end of a spectrum, we have the idea that the ruler *is* a god himself, and at the other, that the ruler merely has some special duties in the performing of rituals or is supposed to experience a certain attention from the gods which is different from that of other people" (167). My use of the term will generally adhere to the latter end of the spectrum: I do not think that the kings under discussion were actually viewed as deities, but perhaps were understood to be engaged with the divine in some special way.

[69] As Emily Lyle notes, "The gods have perhaps been thought of primarily as being responsible for a particular area of human interest (e.g. war, fertility), with their family linkage being secondary. When we put the idea of descent in the centre, the family linkage becomes paramount" (Lyle 2009, 628).

traced to the historical Ragnarr.[70] This would have been of paramount importance to the ruler's attempt to legitimize his power. Gro Steinsland contends that "Myths may explain how a certain dynasty can trace its descent to divine powers and therefore is entitled to hold important social positions."[71] Furthermore, "With the help of myths and rituals a culture can produce a comprehensive system of ideas that may be labeled an ideology of rulership."[72] Tales such as Sigurðr's slaying of Fáfnir may have served precisely this purpose.

The sacral king was understood to be a liminal figure in pre-Christian Scandinavia.[73] In Olof Sundqvist's description, "the king had a specific relationship with the divine world. He was regarded as divine or/and as an offspring of the gods, possessed supernatural powers and controlled the fate of the world."[74] While some scholars have previously doubted the validity of applying sacral kingship to the ancient Norse[75], it is now generally viewed as a useful tool, though few would deem it universal or perfect.[76] The theory of sacral kingship emerged in Europe during the second half of the 19th century in what Sundqvist terms "the glory-days of Positivism, Evolutionism and Diffusionism."[77] Its application to ancient Scandinavia began in the early 20th century and was well established between the 1930s and 1950s, at which time it came under intense criticism.[78] In recent decades, however, the subject has received renewed academic

[70] Finch 1993, 711.
[71] Steinsland 2007, 7.
[72] Steinsland 2007, 7.
[73] For discussion on the relationship between Scandinavian sacral kingship and Christianity, see e.g. Steinsland 2007. Also Schjødt 2010, specifically, pp. 188-90; Schjødt concludes that "not much changed concerning the relationship between ruler and religion from an ideological point of view: there was sacral kingship before Christianity, and there was sacral kingship afterwards" (190).
[74] Sundqvist 2002, 13.
[75] Sundqvist states that "Modern historians of religions have questioned the theory of sacral kingship on grounds of principle. It has been shown that there are serious methodological and theoretical problems involved in applying the pattern of sacral kingship to a wide variety of cultures. Some recent studies have even abandoned it completely" (Sundqvist 2002, 14). And regarding its application to ancient Scandinavian religion specifically, "Some scholars have rejected it for source-criticism reasons, while others have defended it. But few have questioned the category of sacral kingship as such, or its usefulness for interpreting pre-Christian culture and religion" (14).
[76] For a bulleted list of important concerns when applying the theory of sacral kingship to ancient Scandinavia, see Sundqvist 2002, 14-16.
[77] Sundqvist 2002, 22.
[78] Sundqvist 2002, 22.

attention and critical scholarship has successfully elucidated its application to ancient Scandinavia with enticing results.[79]

The sacral king of the pre-Christian North's religious ideology was viewed as a liminal figure endowed with supernatural abilities. One such capacity could certainly be comprehension of the language of birds, a skill that would further serve to link a ruler in this world with a ruler in another, namely Óðinn, and thus good relations between humanity and the divine would be maintained. Although the concept of sacral kingship will not be a subject of major focus in this thesis, it is worthy of consideration because of its clear association with the interrelated themes of royalty and wisdom. The concept is also relevant to the following poem under study, *Rígsþula*, in which another kingly figure with divine descent receives ritual education and demonstrates numinous potential.

1. *Rígsþula, Konr, and the sacred powers of kings*

Rígsþula is an incomplete eddic poem of about forty-eight stanzas preserved in the Codex Wormianus manuscript (AM 242 fol.) of the prose *Edda*, written around 1400 CE.[80] Composed in *fornyrðislag*, it is similar to the mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda* in style, metre, narrative content, and language.[81] Questions regarding its origins and circulation are exceptionally complicated and problematic; even moreso than the mythological *Eddukvæði* because of its unique manuscript situation. According to Thomas Hill, the poem is likely much older than the Wormianus manuscript, and he tentatively suggests that it is possibly "a product of a pre-Christian period, or it might be the work of 11th- or 12th-century Icelandic or Norwegian poets of a somewhat antiquarian disposition."[82]

The story is certainly mythic in nature, telling of the god Heimdallr, under the name Rígr, who travels the countryside visiting, observing, and sleeping betwixt three separate couples, thus creating the different levels of society (the slaves/serfs, the

[79] As Sundqvist posits, "During the last decades new trends in the studies of ancient rulers and religion have appeared and interdisciplinary co-operation has been demanded" (Sundqvist 2002, 25). For a succinct list of common characteristics identified by scholars who apply sacral kingship to ancient Scandinavia—many of which are relevant to the examples under study—see Sundqvist 2002, 27.
[80] Gunnell 2005, 92; Hill 1993, 535.
[81] Hill 1993, 535.
[82] Hill 1993, 535. Moreover, he notes that "These myths reflect apparent archaic insular influences in certain significant respects" (535).

farmers/workers, and the nobility).[83] To the first couple that he stays with, *Þræl* ('Thrall'), is born; to the second couple, *Karl* ('Man'); and to the third, *Iarl* ('Nobleman, Chief').[84] Each child is the future progenitor of a social class. Given the other examples, it is not surprising that it is the descendant of *Iarl* who can understand the language of birds: *Konr* ('King'), *klǫk nam fugla* ('understood birds' speech').[85] He is the youngest son in Iarl's family lineage (*Konr var inn yngsti*).[86] His unique ability may be foreshadowed in the hospitality that Rígr receives from the third couple. Reminiscent of the cooked dragon consumed by Sigurðr and Guðrún, Rígr eats *fugla steikþa* ('roast birds').[87] This connection, however, can only be conjecture: birds are rather fine to eat, and only form one course of the meal (roast pork, wine, and a loaf of bread are also part of the feast).[88]

Comprehension of bird-speech is one of Konr's many talents. According to the poem, *En Konr ungr, / kunni rúnar, / ævinrúnar / ok aldrrúnar; / meirr kunni hann / mǫnnom biarga, / eggiar deyfa, / ægi lægia.*[89] Moreover, in the next stanza, in addition to *Klǫk nam fugla*, more of Konr's impressive resume is revealed: he can apparently *kyrra elda / sæva of svefia, / sorgir lægia: / afl ok eliun / átta manna*.[90] Konr is clearly endowed with numerous practical and magical abilities. Particularly intriguing is his knowledge of runes, a feature shared by two other lordly and knowledgeable figures who can also understand birds: Sigurðr and Óðinn. After slaying Fáfnir and tasting his blood, birds advise Sigurðr to go to Hindarfiall to sojourn with Sigrdrífa, who teaches him to read the runes; and in *Hávamál*, Óðinn self-sacrifices himself by hanging for nine nights on the world-tree Yggdrasil, after which he too 'takes up' the runes.[91] Although knowledge of runes and knowledge of bird-language are not explicitly connected, it is certainly

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[83] According to Cleasby and Vigfússon (1874, p. 499), "it is very likely that the Ríg of the poem is an invented name, a poetical disguise, borrowed from the Gaelic word *Righ,* which means *a king*."
[84] Neckel ed., 1927, pp. 277, 279, 281; Cleasy and Vigfússon 1874, pp. 747, 331, 323.
[85] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 282; trans. Larrington 1996, 252.
[86] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 282; Cleasy and Vigfússon 1874, 350.
[87] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 280.
[88] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 280.
[89] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 282. ["But young Kin knew runes, / life-runes and fate-runes; / and he knew how to help in childbirth, / deaden sword-blades, quiet the ocean." (Trans. Larrington 1996, 251)]
[90] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 282. ["quenched fires / pacified and quietened men, made sorrows disappear, / had the strength and vigour of eight men." (Trans. Larrington 1996, 252)]
[91] Neckel ed., 1927: *Fáfnismál* (st. 40-44), *Sigrdrífumál* (st. 5-19), *Hávamál* (st. 138-139).

important to note that these three figures—Konr, Sigurðr, and Óðinn—are atypical in possessing both of these exceptional abilities.

Konr's uncanny capacities seem to only increase as the stanzas are told. Next, he competes in wisdom with none other than Rígr himself—Heimdallr in disguise—and is victorious: *Hann við Ríg iarl / rúnar deildi, / brǫgðom beitti / ok betr kunni: / þá ǫðlaðiz / ok þá eiga gat / Rígr at heita, / rúnar kunna*.[92] After surpassing a god in wisdom, Konr appears to enjoy a rather amusingly luxurious life in the following stanza—*Reið Konr ungr / kiǫr ok skóga, / kólfi fleygði, / kyrði fugla*[93]—until a crow interrupts the fun, reminding the young king that one must fight battles (perhaps in order to fulfill one of the essential ingredients of proper kingship). In the words of the crow: *Hvat skaltu, Konr ungr, / kyrra fugla? / heldr mættið ér / hestom ríða, / hiǫrom bregða / ok hér fella*.[94] The bird recommends that Konr go to battle to acquire glory and in the final stanza introduces Konr to two other kings, Danr and Danpr. They have supposedly acquired greater glory than Konr and the crow probably suggests that he go to battle to become their equal or that he makes them his target. According to either interpretation, knowledge of bird language represents the means to an end. Following the crow's advice would bring Konr an improvement in social status through the enhancement of kingship. Unfortunately, the full meaning of this scenario remains uncertain; the poem is incomplete.

Unlike the poem, the lineage of divine descent was probably understood to live on. According to Jere Fleck, the royal line originating in the *Rigsþula* is no dead end. In fact, it "seems logical that the poem was constructed to supply a tradition for that line's distinguished origin".[95] Fleck further argues that the figures Rígr, Jarl, and Konr constitute a sacred kingship in which "ritual numinous education" is "customary in the initiation of a sacred king".[96] Of Jarl's twelve sons, it is the youngest, Konr, who becomes king. Fleck demonstrates that the basis of his ascent does not lie in a system of

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[92] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 282. ["He contended in rune-wisdom with Lord Rig, / he knew more tricks, he knew more; then he gained and got the right / to be called Rig and to know the runes." (Trans. Larrington 1996, 252)]
[93] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 283. ["Young King rode through woods and thickets, / shooting bird-arrows, charming down the birds." (Trans. Larrington 1996, 252)]
[94] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 283. ["Why, young Kin, are you charming down birds? / Rather you ought to be riding horses, / conquering armies." (Trans. Larrington 1996, 252)]
[95] Fleck 1970, 39-40 and further references therein.
[96] Fleck 1970, 40.

ultimogeniture, but rather in his possession of runic knowledge, which his brothers probably did not share.[97] Through comparison with *Hyndlolióð* and *Grímnismál*, Fleck thus concludes that it is sacred, numinous knowledge that forms the basic criteria in deciding succession to the Germanic sacred kingship.[98] Understanding the language of birds may have been a knowledge criterion that was indicative of great wisdom, divine descent, and holy favour.

The themes of kingship and wisdom in relation to human comprehension of bird language in Old Norse literature remain prevalent. Konr, who is able to understand birds, is a descendant of the third couple that Rígr visits, thus clearly associating him with the royal class; moreover, the name *Konr* literally attests to his heritage.[99] Furthermore, he is considered to be exceptionally wise, even surpassing Heimdallr in knowledge of the runes. And similar to the other episodes explored in this thesis, the bird offers advice to the king.

2. *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar and the most beautiful women in the world*

Helgakviða Hundingsbana ('The First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani'), *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* ('The Lay of Helgi Hjörvarðsson'), and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* ('The Second Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani') comprise the three 'Helgi Poems'—eddic heroic tales connected by related themes and events that belong to the *Poetic Edda* from the Codex Regius manuscript.[100] They center on two supposedly Norwegian heroes named Helgi and focus on the youth of the hero, specifically his early battles and relationship with a valkyrja; the second and third poems proceed to tell of the hero's death. Regarding the three poems' chronological sequence of events, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* comes first, even though it is placed second in the manuscript.[101] An exceptionally fragmentary and incoherent poem, it is composed in both prose and verse

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[97] Fleck 1970, 41. Consequently, Fleck argues that there exists "a ritual education in numinous knowledge as a part of a younger/youngest son's individual consecration to a godly figure formed the decisive factor in the succession to a Germanic sacred kingship" (42).
[98] Fleck 1970, 46.
[99] *Konr* = "a man of gentle or noble birth"; *Konungr* = "a king" (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, 350).
[100] Gunnell 2005, 87-88; Klingenberg 1993, 280-281.
[101] This is likely a consequence of "haphazard copying from an earlier collection" (Gunnell 2005, 87).

(*fornyrðislag* and *ljóðaháttr*).[102] Only the events at the beginning of this story are specifically relevant to this thesis.

In the poem's prose introduction, the listener or reader learns that King Hiörvarðr, who already has four wives, has nevertheless sworn an oath to marry the woman he considers fairest of all. Hearing that King Sváfnir's daughter Sigrlinn is the most beautiful of all women, Hiörvarðr sends Atli, the son of his earl Iðmundr, to ask for Sigrlinn on his behalf. Atli spends an entire winter with Sváfnir, but without luck; an earl named Fránmarr, foster-father of Sigrlinn, advises against the girl's betrothal and Atli goes home. Inexplicably, a bird understands the conversation of Atli's men on their return journey: *Atli iarls sonr stóð einn dag við lund nøkkorn; en fugl sat í limonom uppi yfir hánom ok hafði heyrt til, at hans menn kǫlloðo vænstar konor, þær er Hiǫrvarðr konungr átti*.[103] The location, *við lund nøkkorn*, is reminiscent of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, for the birds that tell Áslaug of Ragnarr's intended deceit hear him speak when *Þeir koma í eitt rjóðr, er var í skóginum*.[104] In both stories, the uncanny birds are to be found in separate, demarcated, and perhaps in certain sacred spaces that were believed to be liminal between worlds.

This bird is able to understand the speech of men, but it is only Atli who seems to be able to understand the bird: *Fuglinn kvakaði; en Atli hlýddi, hvat hann sagði*.[105] It does not seem to be in agreement with his men, and offers the first stanza of the poem with his speech, asking Atli *Sáttu Sigrlinn, / Sváfnis dóttur, / meyna fegrst / í munarheimi? / þó hagligar / Hiǫrvarz konor / gumnom þikkia / at Glasilundi*.[106] Once again, a bird is offering knowledge, this time correcting the false assumption of Atli's men that the wives of Hiörvarðr—rather than Sigrlinn—are the most beautiful women in the world. The affiliation with wisdom is made explicit in Atli's response: *Mundo við Atla, / Iðmundar*

[102] Klingenberg 1993, 281.
[103] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 136. ["Atli, the son of the earl, was standing one day in a certain grove; there was a bird sitting in the branches up above him and it had heard that his men were saying that the most beautiful women were those married to Hiorvard." (Trans. Larrington 1996, 123)]
[104] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, p. 243. ["They came to a clearing in the wood" (Trans. Schlauch 1930, 212.)]
[105] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 136. ["The bird squawked; Atli listened to what it said." (Trans. Larrington 1996, 123)]
[106] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 136. ["Have you seen Sigrlinn, daughter of Svafnir, / the loveliest girl in the world of desire? / even if the wives of Hiorvard seem pleasing / to men in Glasilund." (Trans. Larrington 1996, 123)]

son, / fugl fróðhugaðr, / fleira mæla?[107] The bird is wise-of-mind and Atli desires its knowledge. Strangely, and unlike the other textual examples of bird-human communication, this bird demands a sacrifice (*blót*) in return for its advice. Atli and the bird then deliberate regarding the terms of their transaction: the bird wants the freedom to choose freely from the king's court, but Atli declares that Hiörvarðr and his wives and sons are not up for trade. The bird clarifies its desires—temples full of sanctuaries and gold-horned cattle from the prince's farm—and then Atli returns to the king and informs him of Sváfnir's refusal. Oddly, no further wisdom is offered by the bird, so the purpose of the supposed exchange is not clear, leaving this section of the story in a state of mystery.[108]

Unlike Konr in *Rígsþula*, Atli is not a king, but when the bird does speak with him he is acting as Hiörvarðr's representative and thus could have been viewed as an extension of the king himself. More importantly, despite not being a king, he is the son of an earl (*iarl*), and would thus definitively belong to the third social class (the nobility) described in *Rígsþula*.[109] It is only Atli, and not the other men who are with him, who is able to understand the bird's wisdom; Atli is special.

3. *Ynglinga saga and the death of the wise king's dear sparrow*

The following two texts—*Ynglinga saga* and *Morkinskinna*—belong to the diverse sub-genre of saga literature known as 'kings' sagas' (*konungasögur*). Most of these sagas were composed between 1180 and 1280 CE, concern the relatively recent past (850 – 1280 CE), and provide biographical histories of mainland Scandinavian kings.[110] This sub-genre is unified by its focus on the ideology of kingship. As Ármann Jakobsson writes, "Kingship ideology is thus very relevant to all attempts to deal with the kings'

[107] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 136. ["Will you speak further, bird so wise-minded, / to Atli, Idmund's son?" (Trans. Larrington 1996, 124)]
[108] The events that follow are also confusing from the 'bird-perspective'. The King decides that they shall all return to Sváfnir, but the land has been raided, and so they camp for the night. Atli goes exploring, finds a house, sees a bird atop the house that has fallen asleep, and throws a spear at the bird, killing it. The bird is Earl Fránmarr, who has mysteriously transformed into an eagle and had been protecting Sigrlinn and his daughter Álof with magic. The meaning of this bird transformation is not explained. Atli marries Álof, Hiörvarðr weds Sigrlinn; they give birth to Helgi Hjörvarðsson.
[109] This generalization does not apply to all of the scenarios under study; specifically, the Kráku-karl of *Morkinskinna* is described as a *búandkarl* ('Farmer') and Óðinn is depicted as a farmer in *Hrólfs saga kraka*.
[110] Ármann Jakobsson 2005, 388.

sagas in generic terms…the ideology of royal power is pivotal to the *raison d'être* of the genre."[111]

Three major and elaborate texts that relate the history of Scandinavian kings were composed by Icelanders in the 1220s: *Heimskringla*, *Morkinskinna*, and *Fagrskinna*.[112] Each of these works contain an episode of bird-to-human communication: chapter 18 of *Ynglinga saga*, the first section of *Heimskringla*, tells of King Dagr; chapter 58 of *Morkinskinna* concerns King Óláfr III and his men's encounter with the Kráku-karl; and the poem *Hrafnsmál* from *Fagrskinna*, which includes a conversation between a valkyrja and raven in praise of the Norwegian king Haraldr hárfagri.

Heimskringla ("The Circle of the World") consists of a prologue and sixteen sagas of Norwegian kings; composition is typically attributed to Snorri Sturluson (1178-1241).[113] Snorri has been its acknowledged author since the 16th century, even though no medieval manuscripts name him as such.[114] The text was probably composed in Iceland between 1220 and and 1235.[115] Following the prologue, *Ynglinga saga* provides an account of the mythical and legendary ancestors of the Ynglingar (Swedish kings) who were thought to be descendants of Óðinn.[116] Snorri seemingly made use of numerous sources in writing this saga, but none moreso than the poem *Ynglingatal*, which was composed in the 9th century by a Norwegian poet named Þjóðólfr of Hvin.[117] Þjóðólfr composed this work in honour of the Norwegian Rögnvaldr heiðumhæri ('the highly honored') Óláfsson, king of Vestfold, tracing his geneology to the legendary Ynglingar.[118] There is some scholarly consensus that the poem was transmitted orally for several hundred years before it was recorded and used as a source by Snorri.[119]

One of the kings listed—King Dagr of chapter 18—is able to understand the language of birds. The association with kingship is thus clear and obvious; he is a king in a text about kings and he understands birds. The text makes the connection with wisdom

[111] Ármann Jakobsson 2005, 388-389.
[112] Ármann Jakobsson 2005, 395-397 ("The Zenith of the Genre").
[113] Whaley 1993, 276.
[114] Ármann Jakobsson 2005, 396.
[115] Ármann Jakobsson 2005, 396.
[116] Rausing 1993, 739.
[117] Rausing 1993, 739.
[118] Clunies Ross 1993, 665.
[119] Clunies Ross 1993, 666.

equally explicit: *hann var maðr svá spakr, at hann skildi fugls rǫdd*.[120] The justification for his *spakr*—wisdom—is his ability to comprehend the speech of birds. The text then describes his sparrow: *Hann átti spǫrr einn, er honum sagði mǫrg tíðendi; flaug hann á ýmsi lǫnd*.[121] The flight of the sparrow over different lands and its return to bring a king wisdom is highly reminiscent of Óðinn (the progenitor of the Ynglingar) and his ravens Huginn and Muninn, who fly over the world(s) every day to bring him knowledge of events (c.f. section 2.4a). The connection is made stronger by a mention of Óðinn's ravens earlier in the saga. According to chapter seven of *Ynglinga saga*, *Frá íþróttum Óðins*, *Hann átti hrafna ii, er hann hafði tamit við mál; flugu þeir víða um lǫnd ok sǫgðu honum mǫrg tíðendi. Af þessum hlutum varð hann stórliga fróðr*.[122] The parallel is clear: in both examples, birds travel widely (*á ýmsi lǫnd* and *víða um lǫnd*) and bring knowledge (*er honum sagði mǫrg tíðendi* and *sǫgðu honum mǫrg tíðendi*). Moreover, not only does the wisdom of King Dagr lie in his ability to understand birds, but the same is also said of Óðinn (*Af þessum hlutum varð hann stórliga fróðr*). One conclusion appears evident: in these cases, Snorri presents birds as a source of kingly wisdom.

Chapter 18 continues to tell of events concerning King Dagr's intimate relationship with the sparrow. Presumably on one of its knowledge-seeking flights, the sparrow flies to a farm called Vörvi in Reiðgotaland, and upon seeing the bird feeding, a farmer kills it. King Dagr is concerned when the sparrow does not return and sacrifices a boar to Freyr to discover its whereabouts. Learning of its death at Vörvi, Dagr raids Gotland, but is killed by a work-slave on the return journey.[123] Snorri then quotes his source (*Svá segir Þjóðólfr*) and cites two verses from *Ynglingatal*.[124] Neither poem offers new insight into the relationship between Dagr and his sparrow, but rather reiterate that Dagr sought vengeance for his sparrow's death by attacking Vörvi.[125]

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[120] Finnur Jónsson ed., 1911, p. 14. ["He was so wise that he understood the speech of birds." (Trans. Hollander 1964, 21)]
[121] Finnur Jónsson ed., 1911, p. 14. ["He had a sparrow which told him many tidings. It used to fly over various countries." (Trans. Hollander 1964, 21)]
[122] Finnur Jónsson ed., 1911, p. 7. ["He had two ravens on whom he had bestowed the gift of speech. They flew far and wide over the lands and told him many tidings. By these means he became very wise in his lore." (Trans. Hollander 1991, 11)]
[123] Regarding these events, see Finnur Jónsson ed., 1911, p. 14.
[124] Finnur Jónsson ed., 1911, p. 14.
[125] C.f. stanza ten: *Frák at Dagr / dauðaorði / frægðar fuss / of fara skyldi, / þás valteins / til Vǫrva kom / spakfrǫmuðr, / spǫrs at hefna*. (Finnur Jónsson ed., 1911, p. 14. ["Heard I have / that high-born Dag, / to

Although the stanza from *Ynglingatal* provides a clear source for much of Snorri's description—e.g. that Dagr's sparrow was slain in Gotland and that he consequently harried there—there is no source provided for King Dagr's supposed ability to understand birds, nor for the sparrow's flight over various countries and role as a supplier of wordly tidings. The source for this information is unknown. It could originate in Snorri's imagination (maybe as a literary parallel with Óðinn) or another (now unknown) text. He also could have learned this (perhaps folkloric) part of the tale during his first stay in mainland Scandinavia from 1218-1220, after which he wrote *Heimskringla*; indeed, scholars have detected local traditions from Sweden and Norway elsewhere in the text.[126] But regardless of how Snorri formulated the existence of a comprehensible bird-language, the motif can clearly be detected in *Ynglinga saga* and the associations with kingship, wisdom, and Óðinn are made explicit.

4. *Morkinskinna's wise farmer and foolish king*

Some *Heimskringla* manuscripts offer yet another example of bird-human communication in the the story of Óláfr III's encounter with the *Kráku-karl* ('Crow-man'). The source of these stories, however, is to be found in the original *Morkinskinna* manuscript.[127] *Morkinskinna*, which translates to English as "Rotten vellum", is the rather inappropriate name given to the text's main (and attractive) manuscript, GkS 1009 fol.; it was written by two Icelandic scribes around 1275 CE.[128] The subject material of *Morkinsinna* focuses on Icelandic poets at the Norwegian court and the text is rich with questions of kingship ideology.[129]

Particularly intriguing for the purposes of this thesis is chapter 58, which concerns King Óláfr III and his encounter with a mysterious man who can understand birds. It should first be noted that this Óláfr is not depicted as particularly wise. When he is introduced in chapter 57, mention is made of many of his positive attributes, in particular

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death doomed, / undaunted came / to avenge / on Vorvi strand, / with spear armed, / his sparrow's loss.). The second stanza concerns his death and does not mention the sparrow." (Trans. Hollander, 1964, 21)]

[126] Whaley 1993, 276-277.

[127] Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, xix.

[128] Louis-Jensen 1993, 419. The original author was Icelandic (name and background unknown), possibly a court poet (Ármann Jakobsson 2005, 295).

[129] Ármann Jakobsson 2005, 295.

his physical appearance: *Óláfr konungr, sonr Haralds konungs, var mikill maðr á vǫxt, ok þat er allra manna sǫgn at engi hafi sét fegra mann eða tíguligra sýndum. Hann hafði gult hár ok bjartan líkama, eygðr manna fegrst, limaðr vel*.[130] Moving on to characteristics of his personality, wisdom and intellectual ability do not emerge as his strengths: *fámálugr optast ok lítt talaðr á þingum, glaðr við ǫl ok fagrmæltr við vini sína ok hófsmaðr um all hluti*.[131] He is not a man of words, but he is happy when drinking and is jolly with his friends. A seemingly limited intellectual resourcefulness can be discerned in comparison with the Kráku-karl.

When Óláfr's men return to the king after travelling the country collecting taxes, he inquires as to where they received the best hospitality. Their response: *þar er einn búandkarl sá gamall er hann veit fyrir marga hluti, ok hǫfum vér margs spurt hann, ok hefir hann ór leyst*.[132] His wisdom and knowledge of worldy events is made evident, and in contrast to Óláfr, his impressive skills of speech are depicted as follows: *Ok þótti oss eigi meðalskemmtan við hann at tala, ok þat hyggjum vér at hann kunni fogls rǫddu*.[133] The king considers this last and uncanny addition—that the farmer knew the language of birds—to be complete nonsense and he does not believe them.

Óláfr is proven wrong in the following episode. When he is sailing one day with his men, he views a house and wishes to know the owner. Upon learning that it belongs to the aforementioned old man, Óláfr demands that they kill the owner's horse by cutting of its head without spilling any blood or letting the man know what they have done. He also requests that they bring the farmer back with them, then asks him to show his party the way around the coast. The following sequence of events is fascinating. As they row, three crows fly past the ship, one after another. Each crow seemingly speaks to the farmer, and the text places an increasing emphasis on the bird-speech's negative

[130] Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson ed., 2011, p.3. ["King Haraldr's son Óláfr was a tall man, and everyone agrees that there has never been seen a fairer man or a man of nobler appearance. He had blond hair, a light complexion, and pleasing eyes, and he was well proportioned." (Trans. Andersson and Gade 2000, 277)]

[131] Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson ed., 2011, p.3. ["He was taciturn for the most part and not much of a speechmaker, although he was good company over drink. He was good-natured toward his friends and moderate in all things." (Trans. Andersson and Gade 2000, 277)]

[132] Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson ed., 2011, p.12. ["there is an old farmer there who is wonderfully knowledgeable. We asked him about many things, and he knew the answers." (Trans. Andersson and Gade 2000, 283)]

[133] Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson ed., 2011, p.12. ["It was a great delight to talk with him. We imagine that he can even understand the speech of birds." (Trans. Andersson and Gade 2000, 283)]

implications: (1) *flýgr kráka fram um skipit ok lætr illiliga*; (2) *flýgr ǫnnur kráka yfir skipit ok skrækir*; (3) *Ok þá fló krákan þriðja sinni, ok lætr sú verst*.[134]

As each crow passes and communicates greater woe, the farmer is impacted more and more. First, he simply looks at the crow, and when the king questions what the farmer thinks of the crow's cawing, the farmer replies *Era þat síðr*.[135] With the second bird, the farmer stops rowing and the oar lies loose in his hand; this time, in response to the king's questioning, the farmer replies *Herra, nú er mér grunr á hvat hon segir*.[136] And when the third crow flies past, the farmer stops rowing completely and stands to face the bird, which screams at him directly. For the third time, the king asks the farmer what the bird is saying, but he simply responds with *Eigi er glíkligt at ek vita þat*.[137] Unconvinced, the king replies *Seg nú* ("Say now"). The old man responds with a verse: *Segr vetrgǫ[mul, / ve]it ekki sú, / ok tvévetr segr, / trúik eigi at heldr, / en þrévetr segr, / þykkira mér glíkligt: / Kveðr mik róa / á merar hǫfði, / en þik, konungr, / þjóf míns féar*.[138] The farmer thus reveals that the birds told him the truth of Óláfr's slaying of his horse. Although initially outraged, the king recognizes the validity of the farmer's claim and rewards him generously.

The theme of wisdom is clearly discernible in this episode. As previously noted, in contrast to Óláfr III, the Kráku-karl is described by the King's men as delightful to speak with and greatly knowledgeable about many things. Moreover, the crows that communicate to him are seemingly well-acquainted with worldly events, as they inform the farmer about the death of his horse and the king's trickery. The theme of kingship in relation to the language of birds is less clear. The farmer, not the king, is able to understand the crows; and it is the farmer, not the king, who is considered particularly

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[134] Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson ed., 2011, p.13. [(1) "a crow flew by the ship and cawed ominously"; (2) "another crow flew over the ship and screamed"; (3) "Then a crow flew by for the third time, with a terrible din." (Trans. Andersson and Gade 2000, 283)]

[135] Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson ed., 2011, p.13. ["It's not unusual." (Trans. Andersson and Gade 2000, 283)]

[136] Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson ed., 2011, p.13. ["Sire, I am now beginning to get the meaning." (Trans. Andersson and Gade 2000, 283)]

[137] Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson ed., 2011, p.13. ["I am not likely to know." (Trans. Andersson and Gade 2000, 283)]

[138] Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson ed., 2011, p.13-14. ["The one-year old [crow] says—it doesn't know—and the two-year old says—I don't believe it either—but the three-year old says—it seems unlikely to me—: it claims I'm rocking on a mare's head, and that you, king, are the thief of my property." (Trans. Andersson and Gade 2000, 283)]

wise. The text may be offering some cultural commentary on the king's lack of wisdom, for the farmer—with his acumen and the respect he gains from the king's men—is endowed with a kingly characteristic that Óláfr III is lacking. This is mere speculation, but the Kráku-karl is undoubtedly an intriguing character.

Interpretive parallels can be drawn between the Kráku-karl and medieval Icelandic literary depictions of Óðinn. The wise old man is introduced to Óláfr as the one who offered his men the greatest hospitality during their travels; in the eddic poem *Hávamál*, Óðinn offers gnomic advice on proper social conduct, and hospitality is consistently given as a hallmark of appropriate behaviour.[139] Assuming the form of a farmer is within Óðinn's repetoire, such as in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, where he appears numerous times as the mysterious farmer (*bóndi*) Hrani who provides king Hrólfr and his men with gifts, hospitality, and advice.[140] As Snorri Sturluson wrote in *Ynglinga saga*, *hann talaði svá snjalt ok slétt, at öllum er á heyrðu þótti þat eina satt; mælti hann alt hendingum, svá sem nú er þat kveðit, er skáldskapr heitir. Hann ok hofgoðar hans heita ljóðasmiðir, því at sú íþrótt hófst af þeim í norðrlöndum*.[141] According to Óláfr's men, the Kráku-karl is also a convincing speaker; in addition, when pressed by the king to reveal what the crows have said, he speaks in poetry rather than prose, the form of speech supposedly used by Óðinn.

The appearance of a mysterious stranger of exceptional wisdom and abilities is entirely in keeping with Óðinn's literary depictions, as is further demonstrated in his strange appearances in, for example, the eddic poem *Grímnismál* and *Völsunga saga*.[142] Also relevant is the character Gestr in *Norna-Gests þáttr*, a mysterious old man who visits Óláfr Tryggvason and entertains the court with his stories. Although the bird-language motif does not appear when he describes Sigurðr's slaying of Fáfnir (see *Chapter V: Beyond Medieval Iceland*), it does emerge when he describes Sigurðr's death. In response to the king who questions how Sigurðr died, Gestr replies: *Sú er flestra*

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[139] Neckel ed., 1927, pp. 16-43.
[140] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda I.*
[141] Finnur Jónsson ed., 1911, p. 7. ["He spoke so well and so smoothly that all who heard him believed all he said was true. All he spoke was in rimes, as is now the case in what is called skaldship. He and his temple priests are called songsmiths, because that art began with them in the northern lands." (Trans. Hollander 1964, 10)]
[142] The same is true of many literary depictions of Óðinn, especially in the *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* (see Lassen 2005, 2011).

manna sögn, at Guttormr Gjúkason legði hann sverði í gegnum sofanda í sæng Guðrúnar. En þýðverskir menn segja Sigurð drepinn hafa verit úti á skógi. En igðurnar sögðu svá, at Sigurðr ok Gjúka synir hefði riðit til þings nokkurs ok þá dræpi þeir hann. En þat er alsagt, at þeir vágu at honum liggjanda ok óvörum ok sviku hann í tryggð.[143] Thus there is again a mysterious old stranger who knows the language of birds and resembles the deity Óðinn.[144]

Returning to *Morkinskinna*, both Óðinn and the Kráku-karl are able to understand the language of birds, but there are clearly further links between these two figures. Unlike the examples previously cited, the text does not explicitly state that the mysterious farmer is Óðinn in disguise, but similar to Gestr in *Norna-Gests þáttr* he presents 'Odinic' characteristics and the association may have been obvious or assumed by *Morkinskinna*'s medieval Icelandic author.

IV. A Bird God

1. *Hrafnsmál: a conversation between a valkyrja and a raven*

The poem *Hrafnsmál*, also known as *Haraldskvæði* and *Haraldsmál,* consists of a conversation between a raven and an unnamed valkyrja, who discuss the life and deeds of the Norwegian king Haraldr hárfagri ('Harold the fairhaired').[145] There is some scholarly disagreement as to whether the poem should be labelled as 'skaldic' or 'eddic', because it offers features of both genres.[146] The meter of the poem is mostly *málaháttr*, though

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[143] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 325. ["It is generally believed that Guthorm the son of Gjuki ran a sword through him while he was asleep in bed with Guthrun. On the other hand, Germans say that Sigurth was slain out in the forest. In the *Guthrún-rætha* again it is stated that Sigurth and the sons of Gjuki had ridden to a gathering and that they slew him then. But one thing is agreed by all—that they set on him when he was down and off his guard, and that they were guilty of gross treachery towards him." (Trans. Kershaw 1921, 30-31)] Note that this translation may be based on a different edition, since *En igðurnar sögðu* should clearly be translated roughly as "But the birds said" (fem. *igða* translates to "a kind of *bird, the nuthatch*", Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, 313).

[144] Gísli Sigurðsson arrives at the same conclusion: "Nornagestr is probably the god Óðinn in disguise" (2005, 289).

[145] Orchard 1997, 205; Kershaw 1922, 77.

[146] Lee Hollander (1936, xi) deems it to be "non-skaldic"; Andy Orchard (1997, 205) writes "skaldic". The fact that scholars disagree indicates that Hermann Pálsson (1988, 59) is correct in suggesting that the division of Old Norse poetry into two mutually exclusive categories is extremely problematic. He writes that "The conventional binary division of early Icelandic verse into "skaldic" and "Eddic" has long outlived its usefulness and should be discarded. This simplistic dichotomy has served to perpetuate certain misconceptions about the nature of our old poetry, and the obvious way to put things right is to abandon the

sections are composed in *ljóðaháttr* and *fornyrðislag*.[147] It is poorly preserved in *Fagrskinna* ('Fair parchment'), a large historical work that contains a history of the Norwegian kings.[148] The name *Fagrskinna* is a post-medieval (17th century) invention; in the Middle Ages, the text was known as *Nóregs konunga tal* ('List of the Kings of Norway').[149] It was likely composed by a Norwegian or Icelandic scholar in the early 13th century, probably in Niðaróss ('Trondheim') or Þrándheimr ('Trøndelag').[150] Regarding *Hrafnsmál* specifically, Þorbjörn hornklofi ('horn-cleaver') is the poem's probable author.[151] The text celebrates the final, victorious battle of King Haraldr hárfagri (860-933 CE) in Hafsfjord, which is famous for resulting in the unification of Norway.[152] Þorbjörn was one of Haraldr's two best-known poets, the other being the aforementioned author of *Ynglingatal*, Þjóðólfr of Hvin.[153]

The text of *Hrafnsmál* begins with a brief invocation for the audience to be quiet and listen and denotes the piece as a praise poem in celebration of King Haraldr's many feats and accomplishments. The following stanza introduces the valkyrja and the raven:

Vitr þóttez valkyrja; verar né váro
þækkir feimo enni framleito er fuglsrödd kunni.
Cvadde en kværkhvíta oc en glægghvarma
Hýmiss hausræyti er sat á horne vinbjarga.[154]

This one passage, in itself, is quite rich with meaning,[155] but two pieces of information are essential to this study: the valkyrja is wise (*Vitr*) and understands the language of birds (*fuglsrödd kunni*). Moreover, as the poem progresses, the raven answers the valkyrja's questions about Haraldr, and thus is the provider of knowledge. A pattern is

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present system and seek a more cogent classification." Under Pálsson's more elaborate proposed system of classification, *Hrafnsmál* belongs to the category *Lofkvæði* ('Encomiastic verse'), poems that praise a Norse-speaking king (p. 62).

[147] Hollander 1936, 57; Kershaw 1922, 77-78.

[148] Hollander 1936, 57.

[149] Ármann Jakobsson 2005, 396.

[150] Bjarni Einarsson 1993, 177.

[151] Fidjestøl 1993, 668; Hollander 1936, 56; Kershaw 1922, 77; however, the poem also has problematic preservation, see Ármann Jakobsson 2009a.

[152] The battle likely took place in 872 CE (Kershaw 1922, 76) or 873 CE (Hollander 1936, 56).

[153] Kershaw 1922, 76.

[154] Kershaw ed., 1922, p. 82. ["The Valkyrie prided herself on her wisdom ;—and the warlike maid took no pleasure in men, for she knew the language of birds. With white throat and sparkling eyes she greeted the skull picker of Hýmir as he sat on a jutting ledge of rock." (Trans. Kershaw 1922, 82).] For an alternate edition, see Finnur Jónsson (1902-1903, 6-7); for an alternate translation, see Hollander (1936, 57-8).

[155] For example, Hilda Ellis Davidson writes that the description of the valkyrie as "the white-throated one with bright eyes" (her translation) "suggests that she herself was in bird form" (Ellis Davidson 1988, 87).

clearly continued here. As an anthropomorphic mythical being, the valkyrjur are reminiscent of the human figures who comprehend bird-speech. The valkyrja in *Hrafnsmál* is wise and thus able to converse with a bird; in turn, the raven offers information about worldly people and events. The association with kingship is equally obvious. The entire poem is in praise of a king and his deeds.

Valkyrjur and ravens are also both closely affiliated with Óðinn, who is a god of wisdom and the supposed ancestor of many kings. In the *Gylfaginning* section of his *Edda*, Snorri Sturluson writes *Enn eru þær aðrar er þjóna skulu í Valhǫll, bera drykkju ok gæta borðbúnaðar ok ǫlgagna*—he then quotes his main source for this information, stanza 36 of the eddic poem *Grímnismál*—and proceeds with *Þessar heita valkyrjur. Þær sendir Óðinn til hverrar orrostu. Þær kjósa feigð á menn ok ráða sigri*.[156] As Óðinn is the ruler of Valhöll, the valkyrjur are intimately associated with him. According to Snorri, Óðinn is the one who sends them to decide the fate of men in battle. The connection between Óðinn and the valkyrjur is made even more explicit in the *Nafnaþulur*. This subsection of Snorri's *Edda* forms the last part of *Skáldskaparmál* and offers a list in verse of names that can be used in poetry.[157] A kenning given for the *valkyrjur* is *Óðins meyjar* ('Óðinn's maids/girls'). The close relationship between Óðinn and ravens is equally clear—specifically Huginn and Muninn—and will be clearly elucidated below.

2. *Óðinn, kingship, and wisdom*

Concerning Óðinn's deep affiliation with kingship and wisdom there is little doubt, for the sources and the scholars are in agreement. As previously noted, Óðinn is depicted in 13th century sources as a progenitor of kings, for he is the original ancestor of both the Völsung and Ynglingar lineages. According to Snorri's euhemeristic *Ynglinga saga*, Óðinn was originally a chieftain (*höfðingi*) who eventually attained divine status, but was first a ruler amongst men.[158] Moreover, in *Gylfaginning*, Snorri portrays Óðinn as a

[156] Faulkes ed., 1982, p. 30. ["There are still others whose duty it is to serve in Valhalla. They bring drink and see to the table and the ale cups…These women are called valkyries. They are sent by Odin to every battle, where they choose which men are to die and they determine who has the victory." (Trans. Byock 2005, 44-45)]
[157] Faulkes ed., 1998, p. 115. The *Nafnaþulur* were not compiled by Snorri and are probably a later addition to his original composition, though they may have been one of its sources. (Faulkes 1998, xv-xviii)
[158] Finnur Jónsson ed., 1911, p. 4-5.

kingly figure amongst the gods: *Óðinn er æztr ok elztr Ásanna. Hann ræðr ǫllum hlutum, ok svá sem ǫnnur guðin eru máttug, þá þjóna honum ǫll svá sem bǫrn fǫður*.[159] Óðinn's kingship is physically manifested by his throne, Hliðskjálf—the magical properties of which are also linked to Óðinn's pursuit of knowledge. In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri writes *Þar er einn staðr er Hliðskjálf heitir, ok þá er Óðinn settisk þar í hásæti þá sá hann of alla heima ok hvers manns athæfi ok vissi all hluti þá er hann sá*.[160]

Óðinn is also characterized by his wisdom, quests for knowledge, and clear association with magic and prophecy.[161] Textual examples include the first four eddic poems from the Codex Regius: Óðinn's questioning the seeress in *Völuspá* for information on the distant past and far future; the *Rúnatal* section of *Hávamál* (stanzas 138-145), in which Óðinn tells of his acquisition of wisdom and runic knowledge through self-sacrifice and hanging; Óðinn's knowledgeable revelations and victory against the jötunn Vafþrúðnir in *Vafþrúðnismál*'s wisdom contest; and in *Grímnismál*, Óðinn again reveals his extensive knowledge of mythological facts during his monologue, firmly demonstrating that he is the master of arcane knowledge.[162] Furthermore, he is central to the myth of the mead of poetry and pledges an eye for a drink from the well of Mímir, *Mímisbrunnr*.[163]

Parallels with Óðinn can be detected throughout the examples of bird-human communication previously cited. He is the ancestor of Sigurðr, Áslaug, and King Dagr; his literary depictions resemble the Kráku-karl in *Morkinskinna* and the aged guest in *Norna-Gests þáttr*; and in *Hrafnsmál*, a valkyrja—an Odinic entity—holds converse with a raven. Atli (*Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*) and Konr (*Rígsþula*) are not as clearly linked with Óðinn, but the themes of wisdom and belonging to a noble lineage connect them. To complete the circle, the following two examples present Óðinn as a god able to understand the speech of birds, specifically the ravens Huginn and Muninn; and a god

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[159] Faulkes ed., 1982, p. 21. ["Odin is the highest and oldest of the gods. He rules in all matters, and, although the other gods are powerful, all serve him as children do their father." (Trans. Byock 2005, 30.)]
[160] Faulkes ed., 1982, p. 13. ["One place there is called Hlidskjalf [Watch-tower]. When Odin sat in its high seat, he could see through all worlds and into all men's doings. Moreover, he understood everything he saw." (Trans. Byock 2005, 18)] Mention of Hliðskjálf is made numerous times in Snorri's *Edda*, as well as the eddic poems *Grímnismál* and *Skírnismál*.
[161] Byock 2005, xviii; Larrington 1996, xv; Lindow 2001, 247; Orchard 1997, 275-276; Simek 1984, 242.
[162] Neckel ed., 1922.
[163] Re: Mead of Poetry, c.f. section 2.4b; re: *Mímisbrunnr*, see *Völuspá* st. 27 (Neckel ed., 1922, p. 7) and *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes ed., 1982, p. 17).

transformed into the shape of a bird, who spits the mead of poetry from his mouth—a clear form of bird-speech in highly mythicized form.

3. *Huginn and Muninn*

Huginn and Muninn are said to fly through the world(s) each day to bring Óðinn knowledge. They are presented in a limited amount of medieval Icelandic prose and poetry, appearing in *Grímnismál*, *Gylfaginning*, *Ynglinga saga*, the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, and Skaldic poetry.[164] Regarding mythological motifs in medieval Icelandic literature, John McKinnell writes that "most of the prose works derive their material from older poetry, so it is the poetic tradition whose evidence is usually primary."[165] Stanza 20 of the Eddic poem *Grímnismál* provides the source material for later prose accounts and offers more elaboration than skaldic verse. It speaks of the ravens' flight and Óðinn's fear for their return:

Huginn ok Muninn
fliúga hverian dag
iǫrmungrund yfir;
óomk ek of Huginn,
at hann aptr ne komit,
þó siámk meirr um Muninn.[166]

Dating *Grímnismál*, as with all eddic poetry, is a challenging endeavour. After acknowledging that the eddic poems are quite difficult to date (especially since they are anonymous), McKinnell suggests that, based on linguistic evidence, "none can be earlier than c.800; most were probably composed between the mid-ninth century and the mid-thirteenth. They were apparently not written down until the early thirteenth century."[167] *Grímnismál* is found in the Codex Regius of the *Poetic Edda* (1270 CE), the manuscript AM 748 (~1270 CE), and sections are included in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (~1220

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[164] Huginn and Muninn may or may not appear in other written sources where ravens are mentioned but not named, especially when connected to the supernatural or Óðinn (e.g. *Völsunga saga*: Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, pp. 111, 124).
[165] McKinnell 2005, 37.
[166] Neckel ed., 1927, p. 59. ["Hugin and Munin fly every day / over the wide world; / I fear for Hugin that he will not come back, / Yet I tremble more for Munin." (Trans. Larrington 1996, 54)]
[167] McKinnell 2005, 37.

CE).[168] The feature of speech between Óðinn and his ravens is not included in the stanza, but can be found in later prose sources.

Snorri Sturluson includes the ravens in the *Gylfaginning* section of his *Edda* (c. 1222 CE).[169] Elaborating on his poetic source, Snorri adds the aspect of speech between the ravens and Óðinn, the element of time, and the name 'Raven God':

> 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 aftr at dǫgurðarmáli. Þar af verðr hann margra tíðinda víss. Því kalla menn hann hrafna guð, svá sem sagt er…[170]

Snorri then quotes stanza twenty from *Grímnismál*, which, according to Gabriel Turville-Petre, is his "chief source for this latter statement."[171] In this prose passage, the aspect of bird-human communication is clear. The ravens sit on the Óðinn's shoulders and tell him of worldly events. In *Heimskringla*, Snorri again mentions Huginn and Muninn. Chapter seven of *Ynglinga saga*, *Frá íþróttum Óðins*, contains the following statement: *Hann átti hrafna ii, er hann hafði tamit við mál; flugu þeir víða um lǫnd ok sǫgðu honum mǫrg tíðendi. Af þessum hlutum varð hann stórliga fróðr*.[172] The *Heimskringla* passage contains an added feature: their relationship is mutually beneficial. While Huginn and Muninn are one of Óðinn's primary sources of knowledge, he provides them with the ability to speak his language (unlike the other examples cited in this thesis, in which a character understands the bird language) and thus is their benefactor.

A surprising reference to Huginn and Muninn is offered in the *Third Grammatical Treatise* (TGT), composed by Snorri's nephew, Óláfr Þórðarson.[173] Óláfr includes a slightly out-of-place, but nonetheless significant, passage: *Flugu hrafnar tveir / af*

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[168] Faulkes 1993, 601.
[169] McKinnell 2005, 43.
[170] Anthony Faulkes ed., 1982, p. 32. ["Two ravens sit on Odin's shoulders, and into his ears they tell all the news they see or hear. Their names are Hugin [Thought] and Munin [Mind, Memory]. At sunrise he sends them off to fly throughout the whole world, and they return in time for the first meal. Thus he gathers knowledge about many things that are happening, and so people call him the raven god. As is said…" (Trans. Byock 2005, 47)]
[171] Turville-Petre 1964, 58.
[172] Finnur Jónsson ed., 1911, p. 7. ["He had two ravens on whom he had bestowed the gift of speech. They flew far and wide over the lands and told him many tidings. By these means he became very wise in his lore." (Trans. Hollander 1991, 11)]
[173] Wills 2006, 1. This text is part of a series of four compositions that apply medieval linguistic thought to European vernaculars, with the aim of providing young Icelandic scholars with basic educational tools to learn proper grammar. Unlike the other grammatical treatises, the TGT has a known author and can be dated (to roughly 1250 CE). (Raschella 1993, 235-236)

Hnikars ǫxlum; / Huginn til hanga, / en á hræ Muninn.[174] Presumably because of its appearance as an eddic poem, it is omitted from *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning* by Finnur Jónsson, but it belongs to no other known poem and thus has an important place in the TGT.[175] Unfortunately, this passage offers little for the purposes of this thesis. It does contain a concrete connection to both battle (the slain) and sacrifice (the hanged) and suggests that Huginn and Muninn flew separately and had different destinations. The feature of speech, as with the *Grímnismál* stanza, is omitted.

Turville-Petre provides a strong overview of the use of Huginn and Muninn in the poetic language—*heiti* and *kennings*—of skaldic poetry. Huginn appears more commonly than Muninn and they are both typically connected to battle, but there are no clear references to language.[176] The significance and antiquity of Óðinn's affiliation with ravens is evident in numerous kennings, but again there is no reference to a vocal relationship.[177] Regarding relevant archaeological evidence, migration period bracteates portray a figure with birds near his head, which many scholars consider to be Óðinn and his ravens.[178] In addition, there are 6th and 7th century CE Vendel Age pictures that depict someone with two birds (likely Óðinn) and, from the same period, decorations on a helmet from a Swedish grave depicting a figure with a spear, riding a horse, accompanied by two birds (again, presumably Óðinn).[179] This evidence suggests that Huginn and Muninn are significant beyond medieval Icelandic texts and were widespread in time and space, a theme that will be further explored in the following chapter.

Although the stanza from *Grímnismál* does not contain the feature of speech, it is included in both Snorri's *Gylfaginning* and *Ynglinga saga*, and the notion that Óðinn's ravens spoke to him was probably common knowledge amongst the poem's medieval Norse audience. Óðinn's relationship with his ravens offers a thematic parallel to the other examples cited in this thesis, representing a continuum between the mythic and human realms. Huginn and Muninn act as providers of worldly knowledge to a deity who

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[174] Krömmelbein ed., 1998, p. 175. ["Two ravens flew from Hnikar's (Óðinn's) / shoulders; Huginn to the hanged and / Muninn to the slain (*lit*. corpses)." (Trans. Wills 2006, 8)]
[175] Wills 2006, 8-9; Finnur Jónsson ed., 1912-1915.
[176] Turville-Petre 1964, 58.
[177] Turville-Petre 1964, 58.
[178] Lindow 2001, 188.
[179] Simek 1984, 164.

is both associated with kingship and wisdom and endowed with the ability to understand the language of birds.

4. Óðinn's transformation into a bird

The myth of the mead of poetry—an intoxicating drink that grants wisdom and bestows the ability to create poetry—is a complex tale told most fully by Snorri Sturluson in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of the *Prose Edda*. The story is also contained in stanzas 104-110 of the eddic poem *Hávamál*, though Snorri provides more detail and elaboration.[180] The specific episode of interest to this paper—Óðinn's transformation into an eagle and the chase with Suttungr—is not contained in the *Hávamál* stanzas.[181] Regarding the aspects of the myth that the *Hávamál* stanzas omit, Meulengracht Sørensen writes *Myten kan ikke forstås alene på grundlag af disse strofer. De forudsætter altså, at den på forhånd er bekendt. Det synes heller ikke at være Hávamál-passagens vigtigste formål at fortælle myten…Eddadigtet forudsætter myten bekendt, og gengiver ofte kun en del af den og tit i specielle sammenhænge*.[182] Moreover, the aspect of Óðinn's bird-transformation is mentioned earlier in *Hávamál* (st. 13-14). In stanza 13, Óðinn proclaims *þess fugls fiǫðrom ek fiǫtraðr vark í garði Gunnlaðar*, which is an obvious reference to his transformation into a bird in the mead of poetry myth. The motif is also discernible on one of the Gotland stones from Lärbro, in Stora Hammars (Stora Hammars III), suggesting that the story was well known and widespread, certainly existing as early as the 8th century CE.[183]

According to Snorri's account, when the Æsir and Vanir end their divine war, the truce is sealed with both sides exchanging hostages and the creation of Kvasir, wise and all-knowing and made from the spittle of all the gods. Kvasir travels the world sharing his knowledge until two malicious dwarves, Fjalarr and Galarr, slay him, pour his blood into

[180] Neckel ed., 1922, p. 32-33. Many poetic kennings also reference the myth, though little new information can be garnered from them (Orchard 1997, 247).
[181] For a summary of the differences and similarities between the two accounts, see Doht 1974, 42-43.
[182] Meulengracht Sørensen 1991, 223. ["The myth cannot be understood on the basis of these stanzas alone. They presuppose that it [the myth] is known beforehand. Nor is it the main purpose of these passages in *Hávamál* to tell the myth... The Edda-poem presupposes that the myth is known, and it often only reproduces part of it and often in a specific connection." (Trans. Schjødt 2008a, 148-149)]
[183] Ellis Davidson 1993, 72. See also *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, where Egill uses 'the seed of the eagle's beak' as a kenning for poetry. C.f. Orchard 1997, 250; Sigurður Nordal ed., 1933, p. 276 (*arnar kjapta* = *Suttungamjöður*).

three vessels (Óðrerir, Boðn, and Són) and mix it with honey to make the mead of poetry. They also kill a jötunn named Gillingr and his wife, but then their son Suttungr seeks revenge and threatens to drown the dwarves, so they give him the mead to save their lives. Suttungr hides the mead in a mountain (Hnitbjörg) and assigns his daughter (Gunnlöð) to be its guardian. In disguise under the name Bölverkr, Óðinn tricks nine slaves of the jötunn Baugi, brother of Suttungr, into killing each other, then takes service with Baugi by agreeing to do the slaves' work in exchange for a drink of the precious mead. Suttungr refuses to pay, so Óðinn has Baugi drill into the mountain with a tool named Rati. Óðinn transforms into a serpent, enters the mountain, escapes Baugi's attempt on his life, and for three nights he sleeps with Gunnlöð, who grants him three drinks of the mead. Then, as Snorri writes: *ok hafði hann þá allan mjǫðinn. Þá brásk hann í arnarham ok flaug sem ákafast. En er Suttungr sá flug arnarsins, tók hann sér arnarham ok flaug eptir honum*.[184] The chase is on.

Óðinn's ability to transform into a bird is attested in other texts. In *Ynglinga saga*, for example, Snorri posits *Óðinn skipti hǫmum, lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þá fugl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr, ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lǫnd at sínum erendum eða annarra manna*.[185] Moreover, in the extant mythology, Óðinn is not the only deity who is able to take flight, see e.g. *Þrymskviða*, where Freyja lends Loki her cloak of feathers.[186] In this and other examples, however, the character who transforms into a bird is not explicitly linked with langage and communication; but in the case of Óðinn and the mead, the association is made manifest. As says Snorri: *En er Æsir sá hvar Óðinn flaug þá settu þeir út í garðinn ker sín, en er Óðinn kom inn of Ásgarð þá spýtti hann upp miðinum í kerin*.[187] That the mead should arrive in the form of spat saliva is appropriate: Kvasir, from whose blood the mead was made, was created from the spittle of the gods.[188] John Lindow notes that "The mead of poetry was, like many precious

[184] Faulkes ed., 1998, pp. 4-5. ["and now he possessed all the mead. Then, changing himself into the shape of an eagle, he flew away as fast as he could. When Suttung saw the eagle's flight, he too put on his eagle shape and flew after him. (Trans. Byock 2005, 86)]
[185] Finnur Jónsson ed., 1911, p. 7. ["Óthin could shift his appearance. When he did so his body would lie there as if he were asleep or dead; but he himself, in an instant, in the shape of a bird or animal, a fish or a serpent, went to distant countries on his or other men's errands. (Trans. Hollander, 1991, p. 10)]
[186] Neckel ed., 1922, p. 107.
[187] Faulkes ed., 1998, p. 5. ["When the Æsir saw Odin flying, they placed their vats in the courtyard, and when Odin entered Asgard he spat the mead into the vats." (Trans. Byock 2005, 86)]
[188] Faulkes ed., 1998, p. 3. This may be a form of "inverted birth" (See Schjødt 2008a, 166).

things, originally fashioned by dwarfs, and like many other precious things, the æsir obtained it from the giants."[189] It is also fitting that Óðinn, the seeker of wisdom, is the bringer of poetic inspiration; and similarly, that it is in the shape of a bird, and from the bird's beak, that the mead should arrive.

Óðinn shares the mead with the gods and humankind. First, because Suttungr is so close to catching him, some of the mead comes out from his behind (excretion? urination?), which is known as *skáldfífla hlut* ('the bad poets' portion').[190] Regarding the rest of the mead, Óðinn gave it to the Æsir and men of poetry: *En Suttunga mjǫð gaf Óðinn Ásunum ok þeim mǫnnum er yrkja kunnu*.[191] Lindow notes that "the mead of poetry is one of the most valuable assets of the gods, for wisdom tended to be encoded in verse."[192] Furthermore, speech and poetry emerge from the mouth, which is where liquid mead is consumed; according to Schjødt, "the mead is, as the skalds were aware, a metaphor for speech."[193] Returning to the notion that birds offer significant knowledge and bird-speech equates wisdom, Óðinn's spitting the mead of poetry takes on new meaning.

Akin to the legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, the entire episode can be viewed as an initiation between two worlds whereby numinous knowledge is acquired. In the guise of Bölverkr, Óðinn undergoes trials, using his cunning to trick nine slaves into killing each other (an intellectual challenge) and then doing their work for a summer (a physical challenge). Next he crawls into a mountain in the shape of a serpent (a life-threatening danger, since Baugi attempts to kill him) and leaves in the shape of a bird. While inside, he sleeps with Gunnlöð for three nights, the same amount of time that Sigurðr sleeps with Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga*.[194] Óðinn enters the mountain, undergoes initiation, and leaves in a new form with the sacred mead. According to Jens Peter Schjødt, "The snake shape is of importance on account of its strong chthonic connotations, which are further strengthened by the contrasting eagle-form [Óðinn] takes when he flees…and this also

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[189] Lindow 2001, 224-225.
[190] Faulkes ed., 1998, p. 5. Trans. Byock 2005, 86.
[191] Faulkes ed., 1998, p. 5. ["Odin gave Suttung's mead to the Æsir and to those men who know how to make poetry." (Trans. Byock 2005, 86)]
[192] Lindow 2001, 226.
[193] Schjødt 2008a, 170; see also Kurke (1989, 113), who demonstrates that liquids are a typical Indo-European traditional symbol for speech or song.
[194] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, p. 177.

applies to the placing of Gunnlöð who sits *inside* the mountain."[195] The mountain is the realm of the dead that Óðinn must pass through before receiving transcendent knowledge/abilities (i.e. the mead of poetry).

The two animals that Óðinn becomes—the binary of a snake and an eagle—symbolize the opposition of low and high, chthonic and celestial, death and life. This oppositional pairing is also represented by the cosmic world-tree Yggdrasil ('Óðinn's horse'),[196] for upon the top of the branches sits an eagle and underneath the roots live the dragon Niðhögg and numerous other serpents.[197] Schjødt also posits that "an opposition appears between the underworld and the upperworld, two symbolic entities that are meaningful in the establishment of the semantic universe within which initiation is deployed."[198] There are additional complementary oppositions between the passive and active and the feminine and masculine. According to Schjødt, "as long as Gunnlǫð is in control of the mead, it is passive, whereas it becomes active with Óðinn's transformation into an eagle...It is the masculine god from the upper world who through intercourse with the feminine giant's daughter from the underworld changes the mead from a passive to an active condition."[199]

There exists a clear movement between two worlds as expressed through the aforementioned series of oppositional pairs. There is the 'this world', which is represented by Óðinn's initial form. There is the 'other world' or 'underworld', reached by Óðinn in the chthonic form of a snake, and the journey is here connected with sexuality and perhaps symbolic death. Then there is the physical transformation or rebirth in a new form—fittingly an eagle—and a return to life, the 'this world' or 'upperworld'. Schjødt succinctly concludes that "The myth thus postulates that there exists two worlds,

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[195] Schjødt 2008a, 164.
[196] Byock 2005, 120.
[197] According to Óðinn's shamanistic speech in the eddic poem *Grímnismál*, *Ratatoskr heitir íkorni, / er renna skal / at aski Yggdrasils; / arnar orð / hann skal ofan bera / ok segia Níðhǫggvi niðr ... Ormar fleiri / liggia und aski Yggdrasil, / en þats of hyggi hverr ósviðra apa*. Neckel ed., 1922, pp. 61-62. ["Ratatosk is the squirrel's name, who has to run / upon the ash of Yggdrasill; / the eagle's word he must bring from above / and tell to Nidhogg below … More serpents lie under the ash of Yggdrasill / than any fool can imagine." (Trans. Larrington 1996, 56)] For more elaboration, see *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes ed., 1982, p. 18).
[198] Schjødt 2008a, 165. Moreover, "There are numerous examples both in Scandinavian mythology and in the phenomenology of religion that the snake and the eagle are representatives of the chthonic and celestial spheres respectively…the empirical observation of these two creatures makes them especially useful as bearers of symbolic opposition." (Schjødt 2008a, 164)
[199] Schjødt 2008a, 168.

two forms of existence, between which mediation must take place in order to realize the numinous potential."[200] The worlds are oriented via a vertical axis, which Óðinn navigates in three forms: snake, anthropomorphic god, and bird. Óðinn shares the transcendence that he acquires in the other world through a clear form of speech when he spits the mead from his beak.

Óðinn is the character that most clearly unites the multiple thematic parallels between the different texts that feature a comprehensible bird-language. He is an ancestor of kings and a kingly figure himself in the Old Norse pantheon; moreover, wisdom is one of his central characteristics. With the myth of Huginn and Muninn, Óðinn is shown to understand the speech of ravens and to receive knowledge from them. And with the myth of the mead of poetry, Óðinn becomes the eagle that offers sacred knowledge by bringing poetic inspiration to the gods and humanity. The myths of Óðinn may together entail the original formula for the Old Norse figure who can comprehend the language of birds, from which the other texts found their inspiration. It would consequently be no coincidence that many of his descendants understand bird-speech (e.g. Sigurðr, Áslaug, and King Dagr), nor that the Kráku-karl in *Morkinskinna* and Gestr in *Norna-Gests þáttr* resemble him so closely, nor that it is a valkyrja who holds converse with a raven in *Hrafnsmál*. To an extent, Óðinn can be considered a god of birds. When birds speak to human characters in medieval Iceland literature, they present divine knowledge. Perhaps they were meant to represent the wisdom of Óðinn; or perhaps they were understood to be Óðinn himself.

V. Beyond Medieval Iceland

The texts studied thus far were all composed in medieval Iceland, but the characters and events they describe are set in the past, either in mainland Europe or mythical space. In this chapter, I intend to explore the spread of a supernatural belief—or literary motif, depending on perspective—of a bird-language comprehensible to humanity. The medieval Icelandic sources are the most informative, but I will here explore its chronological and geographical range.

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[200] Schjødt 2008a, 171.

Birds not only played important roles in medieval literature, but can be detected throughout early medieval and viking Scandinavian material culture more generally. For example, Anne-Sofie Gräslund writes of "birds on horse-collars, bird-shaped brooches, birds on pendants, falcon motifs on chapes. On the picture stones and the rune stones there are several representations of birds – in some cases obviously birds of prey, but also other kinds of birds."[201] According to osteological analyses at fourteen cremation graves in the Swedish valley of Lake Mälaren, numerous animals were sacrificed including trained falcons and hawks, indicating that falconry was practiced as early as the 6th century CE.[202] Beyond Scandinavia, birds are common to both early Anglo-Saxon and Germanic art (e.g. on bracteates, helmets, etc.), typically birds of prey (eagle, raven, or hawk).[203] Detecting bird-language specifically in this non-literary evidence, however, is usually impossible (except in cases where the art relates to a specific story, e.g. Sigurðr and Fáfnir, Óðinn with the mead of poetry, see below). The continued theme of kingship, however, may remain prevalent. For example, based on the Swedish grave sites, Sten and Vretemark argue that falconry can only confidently be said to have been practised by the wealthy—and thus presumably those affiliated with some level of nobility/royalty.[204]

The range of literary and artistic references to the Sigurðr legend, many of which include birds acting as providers of knowledge after Sigurðr slays Fáfnir, provide testament to this tradition's far-ranging captivation. The entire Völsung-Niflung cycle comprises a great wealth of texts in poetry and prose, as well as various artistic depictions. In addition to the *Fáfnismál* and *Völsunga saga* redactions of the legend, medieval Icelandic literary sources also include Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, and *Nornagests þáttr*.[205] Beyond medieval Iceland, other literary sources include the *Nibelungenlied*, *Beowulf*, the late Icelandic *Völsungsrímur*, and a variety of ballads in Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and Faroese.[206] Characters from the cycle are

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[201] Gräslund 2006, 127. According to Kristina Jennbert's *Animals and Humans: Recurrent Symbiosis in Archaeology and Old Norse Religion* (2011), the following bird species have been discovered in early medieval towns and rural sites: "hens, tame geese, wild geese, ducks, swans, hawks, eagles, falcons, game birds of field and forest, cranes, gulls, auks, waders, doves, cuckoos, owls, woodpeckers, crows, passerines, cormorants, herons, ibises, divers and swifts" (84).
[202] Sten and Vretemark 1988.
[203] See e.g. Speake 1980, 81-85.
[204] Sten and Vretemark 1988.
[205] Finch 1993, 709.
[206] Finch 1993, 709.

also mentioned in a number of other texts composed in Danish, Latin, German, Old English, and Old Norse.[207] Moreover, scenes from the legend can be found in wood and stone carvings from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, England, and the Isle of Man.[208]

There clearly existed numerous different and yet parallel versions of the story, but not all of them include the features of Sigurðr's slaying of Fáfnir and comprehending the language of birds. As Kaaren Grimstad notes, "Although the legend of Sigurd is known throughout the medieval Germanic literary world, this particular sequence of events is unique to the Norse tradition."[209] The prose accounts of this episode are based on the eddic poems *Reginsmál* and *Fáfnismál*, such as the *Völsunga saga* expansion, and are summarized in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of the *Prose Edda*.[210] *Norna-Gests þáttr*—typically dated to roughly 1300 CE[211]—includes a summary of Sigurðr's slaying of Fáfnir and Reginn, the taking of treasure, and the meeting with Brynhildr on Hindarfjall, but there are no birds of wisdom.[212]

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[207] Finch 1993, 709. According to Finch, these include "the *Hven Chronicle*, a Danish translation made in 1603 of a lost Latin original; while in Germany there are, in addition to certain of the Dietrich poems, *Seifrid de Ardemont* (where Siegfried becomes a knight of the Round Table), the *Anhang zum Heldenbuch*, and the late *Lied vom Hürnen Seyfrid*. References to characters from the cycle are found in *Eiríksmál*, in *Flateyjarbók*, in the Old English poems...*Fight at Finnsburh*, *Widsith*, and *Waldere*, in the medieval Latin *Waltharius*, and occasionally in medieval historical chronicles, such as Simon Kezai´s *Chronica Hungarorum*. Such names as Haguno, Kriemhilt, Nipulunc, Sigfrid, and Welisunc (Völsungr) appear in German deeds and charters as early as the 8th century" (1993, 709).

[208] The Swedish Överhogdal tapestry also depicts Völsung motifs (Finch 1993, 709). In addition, the legend can be found in a post-medieval cycle of Faroese ballads, the *Sjúrðarkvæði* (Grimstad 1993, 520).

[209] Moreover, "If the legend of Sigurðr originated in Germany, as is generally agreed, then the Norse version of the origin of the treasure and the specific details of the dragon fight can be considered innovations" (Grimstad 1993, 520).

[210] Texts that include a comprehensible bird-language are included; otherwise, texts will only be referenced. So wrote Snorri: *En er Sigurðr steikti hjartat ok hann hugði at fullsteikt mundi ok tók á fingrinum hvé hart var, en er frauðit rann ór hjartanu á fingrinn þá brann hann ok drap fingrinum í munn sér. En er hjartablóðit kom á tunguna þá kunni hann fugls rdd ok skilði hvat igðurnar sǫgðu er sátu í viðnum* (Faulkes ed., 1988, p. 46-7). The text proceeds to quote stanzas 32 and 33 from *Fáfnismál* (c.f. Neckel ed., 1927, p. 182). Trans.: "Sigurd roasted the heart, and when he thought it was cooked, he touched it with his finger to find out if it was still raw. The boiling juice from the heart ran on to his finger, scalding it, and he stuck his finger into his mouth. When the heart's blood ran on to his tongue, he suddenly understood the speech of birds. He heart nuthatches speaking as they sat in the trees" (Trans. Byock 1990, 97-8).

[211] Harris and Hill 1989, 105.

[212] As the *þáttr* simply states, *Tók Sigurðr þá gull Fáfnis ok reið á burt með* (Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, p. 332); "Sigurth took Fafnir's gold and rode away with it" (Trans. Kershaw 1921, 27). On manuscripts and dating, see e.g. Würth 1993, 435-436. Intriguingly, although the bird-language motif does not appear in the description of Sigurðr, it does appear later when Gestr (a guest at the royal Norwegian court of Óláfr Tryggvason) describes how Sigurðr was killed (see *Chapter III: Kingship and Wisdom, 4. Morkinskinna's wise farmer and foolish king*).

The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, composed between the late 6th century and 1000 CE, includes the feature of the hero (here named 'Sigemund') slaying the dragon but excludes the element of bird-speech entirely.[213] Likewise, the *Nibelungenlied*, composed in roughly 1200 CE by an anonymous poet in Austria, has the hero 'Sîfrit/Siegfried' slaying a dragon, but again without any bird language motif.[214] Also relevant from German tradition is *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, which was compiled between the late 12th century and 1250-1251 CE.[215] This saga tells of many heroes from medieval German literature and is probably a translation from Low German.[216] The element of bird-speech is readily apparent in this episode, with Sigurðr slaying the *ormr*, tasting its blood, and consequently hearing the conversation of two birds that advise him to slay his deceitful foster-father, here named Mímir.[217] The birds may have been in the original German tale or could have been a later inclusion by the Icelandic scribe. The latter is more likely, since the birds do not appear in other Germanic depictions of the legend (e.g. *Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied*) but are so common throughout the Scandinavian versions. Belief in a comprehensible bird-language is not entirely foreign to German tradition (see e.g. the discussion of Tacitus below), but if the belief began in Germania, it certainly gained momentum in Scandinavia—the various depictions of the Sigurðr legend certainly support this conclusion. Not only do birds feature in the Icelandic literary redactions of the Sigurðr legend, but can also be detected in physical art of various kinds, which offer testimony to the widespread importance of the Sigurðr legend in the medieval North.

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[213] See *Klaeber's Beowulf* (2008, ed. Fulk et al.), ll. 884-895, pp. 31-32; Trans. Heaney 2000, p. 59. Authorship is unknown and dating is approximate; see e.g. Fulk et al. 1008, clxii; Heaney 2000, ix.

[214] See Hoffmann ed., 1972, p. 14, v. 100; Trans. Hatto 1965r, p. 28. Intriguingly, although the feature of bird-speech is omitted, the dragon's blood remains significant, since the hero bathes in its blood and consequently his skin grows horny so that no weapon can pierce him (In *Völsunga saga* and other texts, tasting the dragon's blood confers the ability to understand the language of birds). The author of the poem may have been Konrad, a cleric in the Episcopal chancery of Passau (Goullet 2000, 1014); re: dating to roughly 1200 CE, see e.g. Goullet 2000, 1014; Andersson 1987, 3; etc.

[215] Finch 1993, 662.

[216] The legends were probably originally compiled in Soest (Susa in the saga, the capital city of Attila); the saga author may have also made use of additional material from oral lore (Finch 1993, 662).

[217] *En er soð rann á hans tungu ok í hans háls, þá heyrir hann, at fuglar tveir sátu á viðinum ok klakast við, ok nú heyrði hann, hvat þessi annarr mælti...* (Guðni Jónsson ed., 1951, p. 236); "When the broth ran onto his tongue and down his throat he heard two birds that were sitting in the forest and were gossiping, and now he heard what one said to the other..." (Trans. Haymes 1988, 107).

Consider, for example, the stave churches of Norway, which were built between the late 11th and mid-14th century—ending with the Black Death.[218] Of the 800 or more stave churches that were built, only 32 remain. These wooden buildings are typified by their carved decorations, but only three of the surviving structures with carvings of human figures render scenes from the Bible; the rest depict the pre-Christian Norse legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani.[219] The carvings of Sigurðr are typically found at the entranceway, where he could represent "a symbolic protector of the church."[220] Stave-church portals depicting the Sigurðr legend are spread throughout Norway, including "Hylestad, Vegusdal, and Austad in Aust-Adger, Lardal in Vestfold, and Mael in Upper Telemark."[221] Some of these carvings clearly include the feature of birds; e.g. doorway planks of a Hylestad stave church (roughly 1200-1250 CE) from Setesdal, Norway, contain scenes depicting a human figure slaying a dragon and sucking his thumb with birds sitting in a nearby tree.[222] Rock carvings of the Sigurðr legend are also extensive and clear regional differences in themes and motifs can be discerned between Gotland, the Swedish mainland, Norway, and the Island of Man.[223] Carvings that depict Sigurðr slaying a dragon with birds shown nearby include some of the 11th century Swedish Gök stones and the rockface (not runic) carving on the Ramsundsberget (Sö 101).[224] Slate

[218] Byock 1988, 619. Most were built around 1200 CE (Staecker 2006, 366).
[219] Byock 1988, 619. Byock posits that "By late Viking times, Sigurðr had been transferred from myth into the realm of heroic legend. In the process, his tale lost any pagan ritual function that it may once have had, while retaining the abstract spiritual power inherent both in the act of slaying the dragon and in the person of the dragon slayer" (624). Sigurðr thus "became a transition figure who crossed, intact, the line between pagan hero and Christian protector" (620). Staecker offers a different perspective: "the Norwegian stave-church portals do not mirror a transition from paganism to Christianity, but instead it was their task to remind the church visitor constantly that the king's power was grounded generations before in the Sigurd lineage" (2006, 366). Accordingly, the images were "used to legitimize royal power on the facades of the churches" (2006, 366).
[220] Byock 1988, 628. The entranceway was not only a "divinely appointed passageway leading to the sacred presence" (627), but also represented "the vulnerable spot where the spiritual defense of the sacred interior was positioned" (627).
[221] Byock 1988, 619.
[222] Image viewed in Karlsson and Magerøy 1993, 727.
[223] Staecker 2006, 365. Regarding these regional differences, see pp. 365-6. For a map of the Sigurðr motif's destribution in pictorial representations throughout Northern Europe, see p. 366.
[224] Staecker 2006, 364; Sawyer 2000, 126. As mentioned in *Chapter IV: A Bird God, 4. Óðinn's transformation into a bird*, the bird-language concept also appears in one of the Gotland stones, Stora Hammars III, which depicts the myth of the Mead of Poetry (Ellis Davidson 1993, 72).

carvings from the Isle of Man also represent the dragon-slaying and bird motifs; dated to 950-1000 CE, these represent some of the earliest depictions of the Sigurðr legend.[225]

There can be no doubt that the tale of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani was widely known throughout the medieval North. Indeed, certain texts that thematically parallel the legend have not even been considered, including the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus' (1150-1220) Latin *Gesta Danorum*. In Book V, the character Craca serves her son and stepson, Regnerus and Ericus, a bowl of stew, which was prepared with three snakes—two pitch-black and one white—hanging above, dripping saliva from their jaws to provide the mixture with liquid.[226] The concoction reflects the hues of the snakes—half black with yellow flecks and half whitish—and although the darker portion is meant for Regnerus, it is consumed by Ericus; the consequences are remarkable:

> Ericus itaque fausta iam dape refectus interna ipsius opera ad summum humanę sapientę pondus euasit. Quippe epuli uigor supra quam credi poterat omnium illi scientiarum copiam ingenerauit, ita ut etiam ferinarum pecudaliumque uocum interpretatione calleret. Neque enim solum humanarum rerum peritissimus erat, uerum etiam sensuales brutorum sonos ad certarum affectionum intelligentiam referebat. Prętereа tam comis atque ornati eloquii erat, ut, quicquid disserere cuperet, continuo prouerbiorum lepore poliret.[227]

Although the text does not mention bird-speech specifically, birds are presumably counted in the category of "wild animals" whose speech Ericus can now understand. Also striking is the fact that it is the consumption of snakes that renders this ability—a creature with clear parallels to Sigurðr's serpent-dragon, as well as the "authoritative human wisdom" that he has thus acquired. Moreover, lateral cultures provide parallel evidence,

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[225] Hall 1990, 40-42. As Hall describes one of the images: "Sigurd bends over the triple-flamed fire to roast three rings cut from the dragon's heart. Above him are his horse Grani and the head of a bird" (42).

[226] Friis-Jensen ed., 2005, p. 288; Trans. Fisher 1979, 124. For brief but effective discussion of the life of Saxo Grammaticus, the manuscripts of *Gesta Danorum*, and the history of its scholarship, see e.g. Ellis Davidson 1980, 1-14. Although here it is the black snakes that render supernatural powers, in later folklore that attribute is often assigned to the white snake. See e.g. "The White Snake" (Kvideland and Sehmsdorf ed., 1988, pp. 189-190), in which the boiling of a white snake produces three stars, consumption of the first grants wisdom, the second gives second sight, and the third brings madness. On the white snake motif in European folklore, see further Scott 1930.

[227] Friis-Jensen ed., 2005, p. 290. ["So Erik, now refreshed by his meal of good omen, achieved through its internal workings the most authoritative human wisdom. This potent feast generated in him a bulk of knowledge beyond credence in all subjects, so that he was even skilled in understanding the speech of wild animals and cattle. For he was not only an expert in man's affairs but could interpret the way animal noises conveyed sense and indicated their feelings. Besides this, his conversation was so gracious and refined that whatever he chose to discourse upon was embellished with a string of witty maxims." (Trans. Fisher 1979, 124)]

such as the legend of Fionn mac Cumhaill and the Salmon of Knowledge from the Fenian Cycle of Irish mythology, which has clear parallels with the Sigurðr legend.[228] According to an old prophecy, whoever first consumes the Salmon of Knowledge from the River Boyne shall become the wisest of men; while cooking the salmon for his master, Fionn accidentally burns himself and sticks his thumb in his mouth; and consequently, the prophecy comes true.[229]

In "Birds of Another Feather: French Song-Birds in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature" (1989), Marianne Kalinke explores the significance of bird-song in the *riddarasögur*. Using *Göngu-Hrolfs saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Völsunga saga* as examples, she notes that in native medieval Icelandic literature "the appearance of birds has a utilitarian rather than an asthetic value for most narratives."[230] Regarding the romances, she also effectively posits that "As a rule, bird song is intimately associated with love."[231] The following statement, however, proves problematic: "Although the Icelanders themselves chose not to include song birds in their indigenous literature – if one excepts such anomalies as the twittering birds in *Vǫlsunga saga*..."[232] As this thesis demonstrates, the feature of bird-speech is widely spread throughout medieval Icelandic literature—an inheritance that is relatively universal to Old Norse tradition. Whereas the language of birds is probably connected with love in the romances—and its role in that genre is certainly worthy of study in its own right—it is repeatedly linked with knowledge, wisdom, and royalty in the native traditions of the North, and consequently, for thematic reasons, is best viewed as a separate system of meaning.

As previously demonstrated, knowledge of bird-language is more of a 'Nordic' than 'Germanic' feature of the Sigurðr legend, but the motif may still have very ancient roots and is common to Europe's pre-medieval cultures. The earliest literary work that can be said to indicate belief in a comprehensible language of birds by early 'Germanic' peoples with some assurance is Tacitus' *Germania*. To make use of the comparative linguistic terms posited by Antoine Meillet in *La méthode comparative en linguistique*

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[228] For extensive discussion of the connection between this episode and the Sigurðr legend, see Scott 1930.
[229] From "The Boyhood of Finn mac Cumhal": Trans. and ed. Rolleston 1910, pp. 106-115.
[230] Kalinke 1989, 1. She further contends that, in the romances, "nature as an aesthetic phenomenon is not absent" (2).
[231] Kalinke 1989, 8.
[232] Kalinke 1989, 11.

historique and recently well-articulated by Calvert Watkins in *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*, this marks the earliest convincingly *genetic*—rather than *typological*—comparative evidence. Though here used in relation to a mythic motif rather than a linguistic feature, the terms are relevant: whereas *typological* comparison establishes universal characteristics or laws, such as the supposition that birds are a ubiquitous symbol of transcendence as posited below—the goal of *genetic* comparison is history, as in the comparative method applied to historical linguistics (e.g. the different depictions of the Sigurðr legend).[233] Although Old Norse beliefs were never a unified religion, some general themes and ideas were known throughout pre-Christian northern Europe. As Jens Peter Schjødt writes, "It is obvious that the religion of the Vikings differed from that of the Germanic peoples by the time of, let us say Tacitus, but on the other hand there is no doubt that certain gods as well as mythical and ritual structures must be seen as continuity."[234]

One of the great historians of the Roman Empire, the politician and writer Publius (or Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus was born in 56 or 57 CE from a Gallic and equestrian background.[235] Following his (possibly forced) retirement in 97 CE, Tacitus wrote two small works, *Agricola* and *Germania*, in 98 CE.[236] Whereas most of *Agricola* recounts the life of Tacitus' father-in-law, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, with a brief geographic and ethnographic overview of ancient Britain, *Germania* is essentially an ethnological treatise on the Germanic tribes.[237] The first part of *Germania* (chapters 1-27) tells of Germany's territory, the origins of its people and their physical appearance, social and political organization, cultural traditions, and beliefs and customs; in the second section of the

[233] Meillet 1925; Watkins 1995, 3-4. Both *typological* and *genetic* comparison should be seen as "equally legitimate but with two distinct goals" (Watkins 1995, 3).
[234] Schjødt 2008b, 221.
[235] Mattingly 1948, 9; Shotter 1989, 1. Regarding his prename as either Publius or Gaius, see e.g. von Albrecht 1994, 1096; also see von Albrecht re: further discussion of Tacitus' birth as occurring soon after 55 CE and his potential places of birth (1994, 1096). Tacitus probably died in 117 CE (Shotter 1989, 5).
[236] Mattingly 1948, 10; Shotter 1989, 1. Tacitus' source material for *Germania* likely consisted of a mixture of literary sources (in particular, Pliny's non-extant *Bella Germaniae*) and new information, such as reports from merchants and military campaigns (Dorey 1969, 13; Mattingly 1948, 25). Furthermore, according to Mattingly, *Germania* can be considered fairly historically reliable due to its agreement with archaeological evidence (1948, 27-28; see further e.g. Rives 1999).
[237] Shotter 1989, 2. According to T.A. Dorey, ethnographical literature was "a genre that had a long tradition in the Classical world, both in the works of professional geographers such as Hecataeus, Strabo, and Pomponius Mela, and in historians like Herodotus, Posidonius, Sallust, and Caesar" (Dorey 1969, 13).

text, the differences between individual tribes are described.[238] Chapter 10 of *Germania* describes the practices of Germanic peoples to detect omens, typically via cleromancy; in the words of Tacitus, *Auspicia sortesque ut qui maxime observant*.[239] Significantly, observance of the language and flight of birds is a method used for acquiring knowledge: *et illud quidem etiam hic notum, avium voces volatusque interrogare: proprium gentis equorum quoque praesagia ac monitus experiri*.[240] The text delves into great detail regarding the importance of horses in Germanic superstition, including *hinnitusque ac fremitus observant*[241] and the belief that *se enim ministeros deorum, illos conscious putant*.[242] The fact that horses receive such emphasis suggests that they were held in greater esteem than other animals, but it must be noted that birds may be mentioned in passing because augury was common practice in Rome at the time and would thus be less striking to *Germania*'s audience.

Other literary evidence supports Tacitus' insinuation that the practice of observing birds to gain knowledge was widely known in the ancient Mediterranean. Divination, which can be defined as "attempting to predict the future or to determine if the gods approve of a course of action", was practiced in ancient Rome by a group of priests named augurs.[243] These public officials determined the will of the gods by "taking the auspices", which involved observing the flight and behaviour of sacred chickens and wild birds.[244] Augustus, for example, was an augur and thus belonged to a religious college that was consulted for the auspices, a necessary act for any public undertaking and indicative of the extent to which politics and religion were intertwined in ancient Rome.[245] Regarding the language of birds specifically, the augury of the Romans is seemingly exceeded by the ornithomancy of the ancient Greeks.

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[238] von Albrecht 1994, 1102; Dorey 1969, 12.
[239] Allan Lund ed., 1988, p. 76. ["For omens and the casting of lots they have the highest regard." (Trans. Mattingly 1948, 109)]
[240] Allan Lund ed., 1988, p. 78. ["Although the familiar method of seeking information from the cries and the flight of birds is known to the Germans, they have also a special method of their own – to try to obtain omens and warnings from horses." (Trans. Mattingly 1948, 109)]
[241] Allan Lund ed, 1988, p. 78. ["taking note of their neighs and snorts." (Trans. Mattingly 1948, 110)]
[242] Allan Lund ed., 1988, p. 78. ["who think that they themselves are but servants of the gods, whereas the horses are privy to the gods' counsel." (Trans. Mattingly 1948, 110)]
[243] Gagarin and Fantham 2010, 434-5.
[244] Gagarin and Fantham 2010, 435.
[245] Gagarin and Fantham 2010, 337.

The notion of a bird-language understood by gods and humans can be detected throughout Greek myth and literature.[246] Some examples are as follows: Athena granted the clairvoyant Tiresias the gift of prophecy and ability to understand the language of birds.[247] Coronis, a beautiful maiden from Larissa in Thesally, was loved by Apollo and pregnant with his child; while 'lying' with a young Thessalian man, she was observed by a raven—the bird of Apollo—who told the god of her actions.[248] In Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*, the seer Melampus was granted the ability to understand the speech of birds and other animals when he honoured two snakes killed by his servants by burning their bodies and raising their offspring. This story offers an exciting return to the theme of the serpent found in the legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, and the ability was granted to Melampus only after the young snakes licked his ears.[249] Continuing the serpent motif, the Trojan prophetess Cassandra supposedly acquired the gift of prophecy as a child when she was left with her twin brother Helenus in the temple of Apollo one night; the next morning they were discovered with serpents coiled around them, licking their ears.[250] Other examples include Porphyrt's writing on abstinence from animal food, where he mentions the philosophers Thales and Apollonius of Tyanæa as further examples.[251] According to Robert Scott, "Philostratus, in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, records that the Arabs gained an understanding of the language of animals through eating the heart or liver of a serpent, and also that certain peoples in India attained a knowledge of the language of animals by eating a dragon's (serpent's) heart of liver."[252] Lastly, the Roman author Pliny writes in his *Natural History* that the Greek philosopher Democritus mentioned a process by which the mixing of the blood of certain birds would produce a

[246] Regarding the role of birds in general in Greek divination, Gagarin and Fantham posit the following in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*: "Though less prominent than the consultation of oracles, divination was an essential part of Greek religious practice. One of the oldest and most popular forms was divination by interpreting the behavior and song of birds (ornithomancy). Indeed, Calchas and Helenus, two prophets in Homer's *Iliad*, are both described as excelling in interpreting the flight of birds. Bird omens are common in Greek literature, notably the omen of the snake and the sparrows in Homer's *Iliad*, the twin eagles and the hare in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, and the ominous birds observed by Tireseias in Sophocles' *Antigone*. In Aristophanes' comedy entitled *The Birds*, birds boast that people rely on them to foretell the future in every matter of business or love" (2010, 434).
[247] Littleton 2005, 1371.
[248] Morford and Lenardon 1999, 177.
[249] Morford and Lenardon 1999, 484; Rennie 1833, 256; Scott 1930, 183.
[250] Morford and Lenardon 1999, 357; Rennie 1833, 257; Scott 1930, 183.
[251] Rennie 1833, 256.
[252] Scott 1930, 182.

serpent—again returning to the serpent-bird motif of Sigurðr and Fáfnir—and the person who eats of this special creature granted the ability to understand the language of birds.[253]

There is a significant amount of evidence from Greco-Roman myth and literature suggesting belief in a comprehensible bird-language. The connection to the Nordic realm is probably *typological* and not *genetic*, since the plethora of cross-cultural evidence indicates that the motif is universal to the human condition.[254] Examples of a sacred and mysterious language of birds understood by the select range from King Solomon from the Islamic Qu'ran to the alchemists of Renaissance magic, for whom their existed "cabalistic processes drawing on the language of the bird that veils enigmatic truths."[255] Throughout mythology, medieval literature, and occultism, there exists a mystical language used by birds to communicate with the initiated. For an incomplete but still useful listing, see for example Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1932).[256] As Thompson rightfully asserts in *The Folktale* (1946), "A skill which provides convenient to the heroes of a number of tales is that of speaking and understanding the language of animals...This motif in all its details forms the introduction to one of the best known traditional stories of Asia and Europe, The Animal Languages (Type 670)."[257] Thompson cites the aforementioned examples of "Siegfried in Norse myth and Melampus in Greek" and also writes that the "[serpent/dragon] motif is found in Grimm's tale, The White Serpent (Type 673) and in an Estonian and three Finnish analogues."[258] It is in Robert Scott's *The Thumb of Knowledge in Legends of Finn,*

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[253] Rennie 1833, 257; Scott 1930, 182.
[254] Although impossible to prove, *genetic* comparison should not be completely discarded; medieval Icelandic authors were familiar with classical lore (see e.g. Lassen 2011).
[255] Guénon 1969; Rivière 2004, 114. The language of birds was also known as "the green language" (Rivière 2004, 22). Scholarship on the language of birds in Renaissance magic appears limited, but see e.g. Gunn 2005, 22; Holmyard 1957, 110; etc.
[256] See Vol. I, e.g. B130. Truth-telling animals (p. 299); B131. *Bird of truth*. A bird which reveals the truth (p. 300); B140. Prophetic animals (p. 302); B141. *Prophetic bird* (p. 302); B200. Animals with human traits (p. 312); B210. Speaking animals (p. 312); B211. *Animal uses human speech* (p. 312); B211.9. *Speaking bird* (p. 313-4); B215. *Animal languages* (p. 314); B215.1. *Bird language* (p. 314); B216. *Knowledge of animal languages* (p. 314-5); B217. *Animal language learned* (p. 315). A complete comparative study of these and other examples from different cultures exceeds the bounds of this thesis but would be a fascinating subject for future research. For contemporary and interdisciplinary discussion on how birds are perceived by various (specifically 'indigenous') cultures, see *Ethno-Ornithology: Birds, Indigenous Peoples, Culture and Society* (various authors; edited by Gosler and Tidemann 2010).
[257] Thompson 1946, 83.
[258] Thompson 1946, 83.

Sigurd, and Taliesin (1930), however, that the most impressive array of folkloric parallels to the Sigurðr legend can be found.

In comparison to the Norse legend of Sigurðr and Celtic tales of Finn and Taliesin, Scott explicates an impressive array of analogous post-medieval folklore.[259] These typically consist of the consumption of a cooked snake (usually white) through insertion of a thumb or finger into the mouth, which consequently renders numinous insight and/or supernatural powers, including the ability to understand the language of animals and, often, of birds in particular. Beginning with Scottish legends and oral tradition, Scott moves through tales that are Bohemian, Tyrolean, Austrian, Breton, German, Estonian, and even a potential parallel in Swahili.[260] Also included are the aforementioned examples from Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* and ancient Greece and Rome. Scott also posits (with references) that "In Norway, Sweden, and Jutland, down to the present century [20th CE], the flesh of the white snake was supposed to confer supernatural wisdom on the person who ate it."[261] Moreover, he further writes that "In Wendish belief, a man who ate a serpent understood what the birds said...[and] in a Syrian story, the drinking of serpent water...enables a person to understand the language of serpents and birds".[262] Despite the widespread significance of this motif, it holds a special place in Old Norse tradition and found its most extensive expression in medieval Icelandic literature. In post-medieval Iceland, however, some level of belief continued in folkloric tradition.

Numerous Icelandic post-medieval figures, specifically men of the church, are also able to understood bird-language. These include Bishop Sveinn Pétursson the wise (1420-76), Oddur Gottskálksson (1514-56), Oddur Einarsson (1559-1630), and Þorleifur Skaftason (1683-1748).[263] The writings of Jón lærði include two tales of the Reverend Árni Jónsson of Látrar (14th c.) talking to ravens and Reverend Friðrik Eggerz mentions

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[259] Scott 1930. For all references, see pp. 173-192.
[260] The collection of relevant material is vast and impressive. Further study of the continuation of the mythological/medieval bird language motif should work closely with Scott's work. It is also testimony to the large range of material relevant to the Sigurðr legend and the importance that this story and its related forms must have held for numerous cultural traditions.
[261] Scott 1930, 183.
[262] Scott 1930, 183.
[263] Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1940, 189. Some have speculated that the origin of certain churchmen's ability to prophesize lies in their understanding of the speech of birds (189).

that Reverend Guðmundur Jónsson (1667-1716) also had this ability.[264] Jón Árnason's *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Ævintýri* contains a large number of folktales containing the bird-language motif.[265] Akin to the medieval literature, it is the speech of birds and not of other animals that humans comprehend; indeed, in the Index (Vol. VI), the heading "Animal languages"[266] simply directs the reader to the heading "Bird languages".[267] The tales listed typically feature ravens offering people advice or a prophecy that turns out to be true.[268] Also included are the following two passages that describe occult methods to acquire the ability to understand bird-language:

> Þá er að minnast nokkuð á fuglana þó of fátt sé mér kunnugt sögulegt um þá. Mörgum hefur þótt það meinlegt að þeir hafa ekkert skilið fugla og það því fremur sem margar fróðlegar sögur hafa farið af því bæði að fornu og nýju hversu margvísir þeir væri og segðu mönnum ýmsa hluti orðna og óorðna. En til þess að skilja fuglamál hafa fróðir menn fundið það ráð að taka smyrilstungu, en hún er blá, og láta hana liggja í hunangi tvo daga og þrjár nætur; þegar hún er síðan borin undir tungurótum skilur sá fuglamál sem hana ber þar; en ekki má bera hana annarstaðar í munninum því sá fugl er eitraður.[269]
>
> Með því að það hefur bæði þótt örðugt og þó æskilegt að skilja hrafnamál hafa fróðir menn fundið ráð til þess, auk þess sem áður er greint, til að skilja fuglamál, en það er þetta: Maður skal kryfja lifandi hrafn og taka úr honum hjartað og geti hann flogið eða færzt þar á eftir um tvö spor er þeim gefið að

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[264] Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1940, 112-3.

[265] In the 19th century, Jón Árnason (1819-88) and Magnús Grímsson (1825-60) undertook the collection of Icelandic folklore—including legends, stories, superstitions, beliefs, customs and more—which can only be considered "one of the outstanding masterworks of Icelandic literature" (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1940, 139). Inspired by the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, Jón and Magnús collected folklore materials and published *Íslenzk æfintýri* in 1852, with Magnús offering the greater contribution of sources. In the autumn of 1858, Jón composed an exhortation which he sent to fourty people, detailing several categories of folklore about which he wanted to receive information (Magnús' contribution during the two years prior to his death in 1860, and thus to this second work, was probably limited). Jón received a large amount of material on top of what he had previously learned, and continued to make additions afterwards. In 1862 the first volume of *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Ævintýri* was published and in 1864 came the second (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1940, 134-9).

[266] "B 215. Animal languages, see B 165." Jón Árnason 1852-4, Vol. VI, p. 326.

[267] "B165. Bird languages: I 611, 617-18, II 302-3, 307, IV 647, V 142-4" (Jón Árnason 1852-4, Vol. VI, p. 326). Note however the following: "B 211. Animals use human speech, cows: I 609-10, birds: IV 503-4, tilberi I 418-20, III 453-5, skuggabaldur I 610" (326). When it comes to comprehending animal languages, however, birds are the exclusive animals in this category, and the special role of birds in relation to language is thus nonetheless maintained. Humans are seemingly unable to understand the language of other creatures, or they do not listen to them, in the same way as birds.

[268] An in-depth study of these stories would surely render fascinating results and should be the subject of future research, especially in comparison with the mythological/medieval material with which it seems to be thematically aligned.

[269] Jón Árnason 1852, Vol. I, p. 611.

> skilja hrafnamál eftir það, sem hjartað hefur, en annars ekki. Hrafnshjartað skal maður hafa undir tungurótum sér á meðan maður vill fræðast af hröfnum, en geyma það þess á milli í keri því sem ekkert hefur í komið. Af því þessi aðferð, að fræðast af hröfnum um ýmsa hluti, hefur ekki verið öllum kunnug hafa menn tekið mark á ýmsu öðru, t. d. á flugi hrafnanna og athæfi, og á því hvernig þeir krunka þó þeir ekki hafi skilið hrafnamálið sjálft, og skal hér telja til þess nokkur dæmi…[270]

The Icelandic-Canadian anthropologist Vilhjálmur Stefánsson paraphrases these passages in his 1906 article "Icelandic Beast and Bird Lore"[271]:

> Many men have been anxious to learn the language of birds, for they are wise and can tell many things, both of the past and future. There is but one way to learn the bird language and that is a dangerous one, for it is by keeping the tongue of a kite in the mouth, and this bird is of a poisonous nature. The tongue is to be cut out and kept in honey two days and three nights. It is then to be kept under the tongue, but nowhere else in the mouth, for it will cause sudden death if allowed to slip from under the tongue.[272]
>
> It is very desirable, on account of their many-sided wisdom, that men should be able to understand the language of the raven, and this wise men have discovered a method of accomplishing. The heart of a raven is to be taken out of the bird while it is yet alive, and if it flies two or more paces after the operation, the heart will prove a key to all the secrets of ravens. It is to be put in the mouth whenever one desires to understand their language, and to be held under the tongue..."[273]

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[270] Jón Árnason 1852, Vol. I, 616.

[271] Vilhjálmur Stefánsson was born in Gimli (Manitoba, Canada) to Icelandic parents who had emigrated two years earlier. He may have collected these tales during the summers of 1904 and 1905: while studying at Harvard, he moved to Iceland and conducted research on the relationship between tooth decay and cereal-consumption, finding that cereals had a negative effect on dental health. Although Icelandic folklore was not part of his research, it must have been a subject of some interest for him, and with his supervisor Frederick W. Putnam's encouragement he wrote the article "Icelandic Beast and Bird Lore" in 1905 and published it in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1906 (Gísli Pálsson 2003, 45-51; Hunt 1986, 13; Vilhjálmur Stefánsson 1964, 58-9).

[272] Vilhjálmur Stefánsson 1906, 304-5.

[273] Vilhjálmur Stefánsson 1906, 308. There are other interesting references to birds in this article. Regarding the eagle (*assa*), "The feather is put to a more useful purpose when one of the large wing feather stems is taken and a child made to drink milk through it. This strengthen's the child's memory greatly" (306). Also, re: ravens: "One of the strangest things about ravens if the fact that they have great semiannual assemblies at which they determine the general policy to be followed during the next summer or winter. In the fall their meeting is conducted in a manner very similar to the town meeting..." (306-7). And elsewhere in the article: "When ravens are cawing together they are usually talking about the death of some man or other, and whom they are discussing may be told from various signs, too numerous and complicated to mention" (308). All animals are supposedly able to speak for one hour after midnight on new year's eve (340).

There clearly still existed superstious beliefs regarding birds and bird-language in 19th century Icelandic folk belief. Moreover, the insinuations in both examples that birds purvey wisdom is a continued theme from the medieval sources.

Folkloric interview recordings, accessed from *Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum*, reveal some continuation of this tradition into the 20th century. Consider for example the following interview conducted by Hallfreður Örn Eríksson with Kristína Sölvadóttur in Sauðárkrókur, Iceland, on September 8, 1985:

> HÖE: Heyrðirðu nokkuð um sagnir af mönnum sem að kunnu hrafnamál?
> KS: Ekkert annað en það sem er í þjóðsögunum, maður hefur sko lesið um það þar að…
> HÖE: Já, já.
> KS: Já, já. En, en það var [hlær] svo skrítið, ég held að Kristján [bróðir hennar] hafi einu sinni sagt við, við krumma … þá var hann eitthvað þarna á ferð upp frá: „Komdu klukkan tólf þá skal ég hafa til mat handa þér.“ [hlær] Jæja, það vildi hvorki betur til að Kristján er um tólfleytið þarna upp frá og auðvitað kom hrafninn [hlær] það var hreint eins og hann hefði skilið þetta [hlær]. En það er nú … þeir eru dálítið skrítnir, þeir eru, þeir eru nú ekki vitlausir, krummarnir.[274]

Although this passage speaks to communication from a human to a raven, rather than vice-versa, the exchange of thoughts and comprehension of language are continued and important ideas. A supernatural ideology of birds does not seem to have altogether disappeared, but is retained in folklore, superstitious beliefs, and by those who approach nature with an open and honest imagination.

The range of a comprehensible language of birds clearly moves beyond medieval Icelandic literature. The Sigurðr legend provides an apt example of the belief's spread throughout Scandinavia. The tradition extends forward and backward through time, with *genetic* comparison leading from ancient Germania to modern folkloric belief. *Typological* comparison also brings in various other cultures and the symbolism of birds as providers of transcendent wisdom may be universal to the human condition. Although the motif appears in numerous traditions, the idea that select people are capable of

[274] I thank Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir for her assistance in accessing folkloric material. ["HÖE: Did you hear any stories about people who knew the language of ravens? KS: Nothing other than what is in folk tales, one has read about it there that… HÖE: Yes, yes. KS: Yes, yes. But it was [laughs] so strange, I think that Kristján [her brother] once has said to, to a raven … when he was somewhere up there on a trip: 'Come at twelve o'clock then I shall have food for you.' [laughs] Well, it so happened that Kristján was there around twelve [laughs] and of course the raven came [laughs] it was as if he had understood what he said [laughs]. But it is so… they are a little strange, they are, they are so not witless, the ravens." (My translation)]

understanding the language of birds is seemingly more common and meaningful in the Old Norse material than anywhere else in human history.

VI. Why Birds?

The question *what is a bird?* was swiftly resolved at the beginning of this thesis. Far more complicated is the question *why birds?* Why is it that birds, of all animal species, are nature's purveyors of truth in Old Norse tradition? Jacob Grimm long ago speculated in *Teutonic Mythology* that "With *birds* the men of old lived on still more intimate terms, and their greater nimbleness seemed to bespeak more of the spiritual than was in quadrupeds."[275] Such is certainly the case in medieval Icelandic literature; of all animal species, birds are clearly the communicators of wisdom. The situation appears quite different when other animals speak. In *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, for example, the speech of birds—as a form of enlightening wisdom—acts in stark contrast to the language of the cow Síbilja, of whom it is said *Hún var svá mjök blótin, at menn máttu eigi standast lát hennar*.[276] Belonging to King Eysteinn of Sweden, he would unleash this troll of a cow against opposing armies, and *svá mikill djöfuls kraftr fylgdi henni, at óvinir hans urðu svá œrir, þegar þeir heyrðu til hennar, at þeir börðust sjálfr ok gáðu sín eigi*.[277] It seems that there is little wisdom to be discerned in understanding cow-speech in this episode and elsewhere in the saga.[278]

One of the most famous animals in all of saga literature is surely the stallion Freyfaxi in *Hrafnkels saga*. It is the favourite horse of the farmer Hrafnkell, who swears to slay any man who rides it without his permission. The shepherd Einarr, however, rides Freyfaxi without Hrafnkell's consent and despite his warning. Covered in mud and soaked with sweat—and thus evidently ridden—Freyfaxi departs from Einarr and comes to Aðalból where Hrafnkell is eating, and when *hestrinn kemr fyrir dyrr, hneggjaði hann*

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[275] Grimm 1883, 669.

[276] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, p. Vol. I, 242. ["She had been so much worshipped with sacrifices that men could not endure the noise she made." (Trans. Schlauch 1930, 244)]

[277] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. I, p. 242. ["so great was the devil's power attending her that his enemies grew mad when they heard her, and fought one another, taking no care of themselves." (Trans. Schlauch 1930, 244)]

[278] For the effects of Síbilja´s noise/language in action, see pp. 248, 258-9 (Guðni Jónsson ed., Vol. I, 1954). For two similar cows belonging to the people of Hvítabær, see p. 241 (Guðni Jónsson ed., Vol. I, 1954).

þá hátt.[279] Hearing the neigh, Hrafnkell asks a woman to go outside, stating "*ok þótti mér líkt vera gnegg Freyfaxa*."[280] Informed that it is in fact Freyfaxi outside, Hrafnkell goes outside and says *Illa þykki mér, at þú ert þann veg til gǫrr, fóstri minn, en heima hafðir þú vit þitt, er þú sagðir mér til, ok skal þessa hefnt verða. Far þú til liðs þíns*.[281] There is a clear distinction to be made between the language of Freyfaxi and the language of birds. Whereas Hrafnkell knows that it is Freyfaxi neighing, the saga does not state that he also understands the horse's language, but only that he recognizes its voice.

A third example—and one that highlights the chthonic symbolism of dragons—is offered by *Yngvars saga víðförla*.[282] When Yngvarr and his company are abroad on an expedition, they see a massive dragon covering a great amount of gold. Coaxing him with a giant's foot on a path covered by salt (so that he would be required to continuously turn back for water), they stole all of the dragon's gold while it was distracted. Yngvarr orders his men to hide, but some stand and see its wrath: *utan fáir menn stóðu ok sáu, at drekinn varð illa við skaða sinn.*[283] Those men who stood up also heard the dragon whistle like a human and died as a result: *Hann reistist á sporðinn ok lét sem þá maðr blístrar ok snerist í hring á gullinu. Þeir sögðu slíkt er þeir sáu ok fellu síðan dauðir niðr*.[284] The dragon's anthropomorphic whistle is reminiscent of a serpent's hiss, and clear chthnonic symbolism arises since the end result is death. This acts in contrast to the language of birds, which is consistently seen to provide numinous knowledge and transcendent wisdom. Combined, these three examples demonstrate a greater fact: no other animal

[279] Jón Jóhannesson ed., 1950, p. 104. ["the stallion reached the door, he neighed loudly." (Trans. Gunnell 1997, 264)]
[280] Jón Jóhannesson ed., 1950, p. 104. ["and it sounded to me like the neigh of Freyfaxi." (Trans. Gunnell 1997, 264)]
[281] Jón Jóhannesson ed., 1950, p. 104. ["I don't like the way you've been treated, my *foster-son*. But you had your wits about you when you told me of this. It shall be avenged. Go to your herd." (Trans. Gunnell 1997, 265)]
[282] One of the *fornaldarsögur*, *Yngvars saga víðförla* was put to vellum in the beginning of the 13th century and was based on an earlier and now lost 'Life of Ingvar', composed in Latin by Oddr Snorrason c. 1080 CE (Holman 2003, 149). Yngvarr's expedition is also described in a group of roughly 25 runic inscriptions from central-eastern Sweden (Holman 2003, 149).
[283] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. II, p. 442. ["a few stood upright and saw the fury of the dragon over its loss…" (Trans. Pálsson and Edwards 1989, 56)]
[284] Guðni Jónsson ed., 1954, Vol. II, p. 442. ["…rising up on its tail, whistling like a human being and whirling round and round above its gold. These men described what they had seen, then dropped down dead." (Trans. Pálsson and Edwards 1989, 56)]

species communicates with humanity in the extant Old Norse literature in the same way as birds.

In the Prologue to his *Prose Edda*, Snorri Sturluson posits that God granted men many gifts, including *spekina svá at þeir skilðu alla jarðliga hluti ok allar greinir þær er sjá mátti loptsins ok jarðarinnar*.[285] With this ability to discern separate elements, Snorri further writes *Þat hugsuðu þeir ok undruðusk hverju þat mundi gegna at jǫrðin ok dýrin ok fuglarnir hǫfðu saman eðli í sumum hlutum ok var þó ólíkt at hætti*.[286] The separation between birds and animal species is made clear. The earth, animals, and birds are all distinct entities in the humanity's conception of their physical environment. Birds, therefore, are not categorized as an animal species, but as something else entirely. Aquatic animals are probably the closest parallel to birds in medieval Icelandic literature. In his article "The idea of fish: land and sea in the Icelandic world-view" (1990), Gísli Pálsson explores the place of water-based animals in Icelandic ideology, its evolution over time, and correspondence to human society. Much of his theoretical discussion is here relevant.

A pioneer of structural anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss once posited that animals are not only good for eating, but also good for thinking. As he wrote in *Le Totémisme Aujourd'hui* (1962), "Les animaux du totémisme cessent d'être, seulement ou surtout, des créatures redoutées, admirées, ou convoitées: leur réalité sensible laisse transparaître des notions et des relations, conçues par la pensée spéculative à partir des données de l'observation. On comprend enfin que les espèces naturelles ne sont pas choisies parce que « bonnes à manger » mais parce que « bonnes à penser »."[287] This statement forms a seemingly positive response to the work of structural anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, to whom Lévi-Strauss consistently makes reference;

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[285] Anthony Faulkes ed., 1982, p. 3. ["the wisdom to understand all earthly things and all the separate parts that could be seen of the sky and the earth." (Trans. Byock 2005, 3)]

[286] Anthony Faulkes ed., 1982, p. 3. ["People thought about these things, wondering what it could mean that the earth and animals and birds were in some ways similar, even though their natures were not alike." (Trans. Byock 2005, 3)]

[287] Lévi-Strauss 1962a, 128. ["The animals in totemism cease to be solely or principally creatures which are feared, admired or envied: their perceptiple reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations. We can understand, too, that natural species are chosen not because they are 'good to eat' but because they are 'good to think'. (Trans. Needham 1963, 161-2)] For the famous phrase « bonnes à penser » some have proposed translations other than "good to think", see e.g. Krech III: "good for thinking, that is, good to think about or reflect upon" (2009, 26) or, rather, "good to contemplate" (2009, x; 2011), a translation he considers "more felicitous" (2011).

specifically, Radcliffe-Brown's 1951 Huxley Memorial Lecture 'The Comparative Method in Social Anthropology', which attempted to demonstrate a comparative method through which anthropology could formulate « propositions générales », 'general propositions' such as those that universally relate to the roles of animals in the human mind.[288]

Although medieval Icelandic literature probably does not reflect totemic belief *per se*, the sentiment is still valid: animal species in Old Norse tradition are often imbued with a specific meaning and ideology that reflects their particular positionality in nature. It is for this reason that Gísli Pálsson writes "that some animals, because of their anomalous position, are better to think with than others."[289] Gísli Pálsson's interests lie in the aquatic realm and he further questions "To what extent, one may ask, does the fish world serve as a vehicle of symbolic thought?"[290] Using ethnology and folklore, he convincingly argues against the assumptions of some anthropologists "that fish are rarely used as a metaphors for human society because there are relatively few 'obvious points of resemblance' with human beings."[291] Far less convincing is the notion that "the bird lore was quite limited" and the suggestion that "birds were less 'good to think'".[292] A dangerous proposition to which medieval and post-medieval Icelandic myth, legend, and folklore clearly contrasts.[293]

In *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962), Claude Lévi-Strauss offers powerful insight into the human experience of birds. He depicts bird society as alternate and yet parallel to human society, suggesting that the combination of difference and resemblance is the cause of the significance and universality of birds in mythology and folklore. In his words:

> Si, plus aisément que d'autres classes zoologiques, les oiseaux reçoivent des prénoms humains selon l'espèce à laquelle ils appartiennent, c'est qu'ils peuvent se permettre de ressembler aux hommes, pour autant que, précisément, ils en diffèrent. Les oiseaux sont couverts de plumes, ailés,

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[288] Lévi-Strauss 1962a, 120 (Trans. Needham 1963, 155).
[289] Gísli Pálsson 1990, 119. He notes that this theoretical position follows the work of Edmund Ronald Leach (*Culture and communication: the logic by which symbols are connected*, 1976), Mary Douglas (*Purity and danger: an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*, 1966), and others.
[290] Gísli Pálsson 1990, 119.
[291] Gísli Pálsson 1990, 120.
[292] Gísli Pálsson 1990, 122. Vilhjalmur Stefánsson's
[293] Re: post-medieval folklore, see *Chapter V: Beyond Medieval Iceland*.

> ovipares, et physiquement aussi, ils sont disjoints de la société humaine par l'élément où ils ont le privilège de se mouvoir. Ils forment, de ce fait, une communauté indépendante de la nôtre, mais qui, en raison de cette indépendance même, nous apparaît comme une société autre et homologue de celle où nous vivons: l'oiseau est épris de liberté; il se construit une demeure où il vit en famille et nourrit ses petits; il entretient souvent des rapports sociaux avec les autres membres de son espèces; et il communiqué avec eux par des moyens acoustiques qui évoquent le langage articulé.
>
> Par consequent, toutes les conditions sont objectivement réunies pour que nous concevions le monde des oiseaux comme une société humaine métaphorique: ne lui est-elle pas, d'ailleurs, littéralement parallèle à un autre niveau? La mythologie et le folklore attestent, par d'innombrables exemples, la fréquence de ce mode de représentation...[294]

The features that Lévi-Strauss identifies as both separate to human society—in particular their ability to fly—and greatly similar to human society—such as language and nesting—are (not surprisingly) supported by biological research.

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's *Handbook of Bird Biology* (2004), "The power of flight is the quintessential characteristic of birds, the central adaptation around which many of the most interesting aspects of avian anatomy, physiology, and behavior have been molded."[295] Moreover, vocalization is a universal feature of bird species, and "In all songbirds that have been studied, researchers have discovered some kind of learning."[296] And lastly, the same is true of nesting: "Birds nest in virtually every

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[294] Lévi-Strauss 1962b, 270-271. ["Birds are given human christian names in accordance with the species to which they belong more easily than are other zoological classes, because they can be permitted to resemble men for the very reason that they are so different. They are feathered, winged, oviparous and they are also physically separated from human society by the element in which it is their privilege to move. As a result of this fact, they form a community which is independent of our own but, precisely because of this independence, appears to us like another society, homologous to that in which we live: birds love freedom; they build themselves homes in which they live a family life and nurture their young; they often engage in social relations with other members of their species; and they communicate with them by acoustic means recalling articulated language. Consequently everything objective conspires to make us think of the bird world as a metaphorical human society: is it not after all literally parallel to it on another level? There are countless examples in mythology and folklore to indicate the frequency of this mode of representation." (Trans. George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd. 1966, 204)]

[295] Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2004, 5-1. See further 5-2 through to 5-51. Also noteworthy: "Although flight is not exclusive to birds—bats, for example, have also evolved true flapping flight—no other vertebrate is so thoroughly modified for proficiency in the air. Most birds can fly, and those that cannot, such as penguins, evolved from ancestors that were capable of flight" (1-2).

[296] Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2004, 7-23. Intriguingly, the method is similar to language acquisition in our own species: "Just as in humans, this learning involves listening to a model sound, memorizing the model, and practicing until the sound matches with great fidelity the young bird's memory of the original sound" (7-23). The organ responsible for producing bird sounds is the syrinx, which consists of "a pair of chambers located along the trachea, where it splits to form the two bronchi heading to the lungs…The muscles of the syrinx control the details of song production" (7-38). See further 7-1 through to 7-92.

terrestrial or shallow water habitat on earth…Other than the surface of the open ocean and thin air, it is difficult to think of a habitat birds do not use for nesting."[297] Although birds are truly unique, Gísli Pálsson notes that Lévi-Strauss may have later changed his views on the universality of bird symbolism.

In a footnote, Gísli Pálsson writes that "Later Lévi-Strauss seems to have taken the view that the choice of species for symbolic expression is entirely arbitrary" and uses the following statement as evidence: "Each culture settles on a few distinctive features of its environment, but no one can predict which these are or to what end they will be put…"[298] The quoted passage comes from Lévi-Strauss' *The View from Afar* (1985); the specific chapter is entitled "Structuralism and Ecology" and was originally a lecture given in English in honour of the memory of Dean Virginia Gildersleeve to alumnae of Barnard College in New York (1972). Upon closer inspection of this essay in its entirety, a different picture emerges, and it remains fair to assume that Lévi-Strauss maintained his views on the universality of bird symbolism and their distinctiveness in human experience. Lévi-Strauss appears to have been acting on the defensive in opposition to criticism. He posits that his "Anglo-Saxon colleagues" have often assessed and labeled "the structural approach [he has] followed for over a quarter of a century" as "idealism", "mentalism", and/or "Hegelian."[299] He further argues that "Certain critics have accused me of seeing structures of thought as the cause of culture, sometimes even of confusing them. Or else they believe that I claim to tackle the structure of the human mind directly in order to seek what they ironically call 'Lévi-Straussian universals.'"[300] Lévi-Strauss proceeds to provide illumination regarding certain misunderstandings of his work.

Lévi-Strauss' essential argument is that anthropology is an empirical science in which every culture "is a unique situation which can be described and understood at the cost of the most painstaking attention…Empirical study allows access to structure."[301] Consequently, the scholar cannot come to any conclusions about a culture from a cross-cultural perspective without first studying that culture in isolation: "no general principle

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[297] Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2004, 8-20. See further 8-15 through to 8-59.
[298] Gísli Pálsson 1990, 131; Lévi-Strauss 1985, 104.
[299] Lévi-Strauss 1985, 102.
[300] Lévi-Strauss 1985, 102. As Lévi-Strauss rightly notes, "If this were the case, study of the cultural contexts within which the mind operates, and through which it manifests itself, would, indeed, be of little interest" (1985, 102).
[301] Lévi-Strauss 1985, 103.

or deductive process allows us to anticipate…the unpredictable way each has chosen to interpret historical events or aspects of its habitat, out of the many possible events or aspects that it could have endowed with meaning."[302] And thus, "although the choice of elements may appear arbitrary, these become organized into a system, and the connections between them form a whole."[303] Lévi-Strauss next returns to *The Savage Mind* (*La Pensée Sauvage*), where he wrote that "the principle underlying a classification can never be postulated in advance; it can only be discovered *a posteriori* by ethnographic observation—that is, by experience."[304] Lévi-Strauss is attempting to compromise between the extremes of anticipating universals everywhere and of ignoring their existence.[305]

The existence of a comprehensible language of birds appears to be cross-culturally ubiquitous and the association of bird symbolism with transcendent wisdom is universal to the human imagination. This does not mean that the discovery of this connection in Old Norse tradition should have been assumed; rather, the subject required the focused study that this thesis has tried to pursue. The following statement from Lévi-Strauss aptly encapsulates this approach:

> Behind every ideological construct, older constructs stand out; and they echo back in time to the hypothetical moment when, hundreds of thousands of years ago and maybe more, a stammering mankind thought out and expressed its first myths. And it is also true that, at each stage of this complex process, each ideological construct becomes modified by prevailing technological and economic conditions; they warp and deform it in several ways.[306]

The flight and language of birds has inarguably had an inspirational and profound effect on the human imagination for millennia and this truth can be detected in humanity's

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[302] Lévi-Strauss 1985, 103.
[303] Lévi-Strauss 1985, 103.
[304] Lévi-Strauss 1985, 103; Lévi-Strauss 1966, 58.
[305] To quote Lévi-Strauss again: "we are guided by the linguists, who are well aware that all the world's grammars exhibit common properties, and who hope to find language universals…If and when universals are reached, they will appear as open structures: one will always be able to add definitions and to complete, enlarge on, or correct earlier ones" (1985, 104).
[306] Lévi-Strauss 1985, 104. Also consider the recent research by Shepard Krech III, who argues that not only are birds in general viewed similarly in different cultural contexts, but different species of birds also receive analogous cross-cultural treatment. He duly notes that "Social anthropologists invested in the analysis of human-animal relationships tend to be alert to cultural difference and assume that no two societies whose cultures differ will conceive or of perceive animals in precisely the same way", but also posits that "it is striking how often people, regardless of culture, name and classify similar discontinuities in birds at the level of the genus or species" (Krech III 2011).

various myths and traditions. There are also features that are culturally specific to the Nordic region, including the affiliations with Óðinn and sacred kingship that emerge as culturally unique.

The universality of transcendent bird symbolism offers penetrating insight into the human spirit. The absolute biological uniqueness of birds amongst all living species on our planet shall not be ignored. In the comparative scholarship of Carl Gustav Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist made famous for founding analytical psychology, there exists incredible potential to interpret mythic narratives and their symbols.[307] One of Jung's theoretical creations, the Transcendent Function, represents the movement from the conscious to the unconscious realms of the psyche, and in myths and dreams its most common symbols are birds. According to Jung, the unconscious can be defined as "the image-creating mind" and "the matrix of all those patterns that give apperception its peculiar character."[308] There exists "an edge of certainty beyond which conscious knowledge cannot pass."[309] Our knowledge of reality—as informed by rational consciousness—is incomplete. The unconscious mind consists of the aspects of the psyche that we do not consciously acknowledge; and while it is difficult to obviously access unconscious material, dreams and the symbols they produce are one clear source of unconscious inspiration; myths are another. These patterns can "explain why certain mythological motifs are more or less ubiquitous, even where migration as a means of transmission is exceedingly improbable."[310]

There are certain symbols and patterns that are universal to the human mind; birds and flight are one of these, represented by the Transcendent Function. Jung and Jungian scholars view the Transcendent Function as a psychological transition from the conscious to the unconscious, whereby their contents merge and the separation between the two is transcended.[311] In *Jung in Context* (1979), Peter Homans writes that "it consists of an enhanced sense of individuality, and because the self is free from collective forces it is

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[307] For brief but useful discussion on the application of Jungian ideology to Old Norse sources, including possible concerns and important promise, see McKinnell 2005, 29-32.
[308] Jung 1938, 490.
[309] Jung 1964, 4.
[310] Jung 1938, 490.
[311] Campbell 1971, 279. As a psychological phenomenon, it should be viewed as a mathematical function rather than a metaphysical event (Campbell 1971, 273).

capable of a wider and more spacious sense of relation to the world at large."[312] It is cross-culturally universal and, according to Jungian scholar Joseph Henderson, the symbolism of this function points "to a man's need for liberation from any state of being that is too immature, too fixed or final" and concerns "man's release from—or transcendence of—any confining pattern of existence."[313] Consequently, "a sense of completeness is achieved" which permits "the full realization of the potential of [the] individual Self."[314]

Birds are the most cross-culturally common symbol of the Transcendent Function. In myths and dreams they represent flights of intuition and an individual's attainment of arcane knowledge through a trance-like state.[315] As a symbol of transcendence, birds "provide the means by which the contents of the unconscious can enter the conscious mind, and they also are themselves an active expression of those contents."[316] Indeed, birds are "the most fitting symbol of transcendence" and represent an "individual who is capable of obtaining knowledge of distant events—or facts of which he consciously knows nothing—by going into a trance-like state."[317] A symbol should be defined as "a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us."[318] Imagery, such as that of birds, is symbolic "when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning."[319] Birds in Old Norse tradition act as granters of transcendent knowledge. Their ability to fly grants them the symbolic power of the Transcendent Function, through which they represent the conscious mind's yearning for release, freedom, and wisdom.

The myths of Óðinn explored in this thesis are indicative of the Transcendent Function and his figure can be seen as indicative of the psychic state experienced by a particular figure in Old Norse societies: the shaman. As Rudolf Simek writes somewhat generally, "parallels with shamanistic practices in which ecstatic states play an essential

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[312] Homans 1979, 107.
[313] Henderson 1978, 146.
[314] Henderson 1978, 146.
[315] Henderson 1978, 147.
[316] Henderson 1978, 147.
[317] Henderson 1978, 147.
[318] Jung 1964, 3.
[319] Jung 1964, 4.

role may be assumed as a result both of Odin's acquisition of runic knowledge and poetic art and his particular kind of magic."[320] Simek posits that "ecstatic states are also an integral part of Odin's cult" and concludes that Óðinn has shamanistic origins.[321] Shamans were liminal figures in pre-Christian Norse cultures; according to Thomas DuBois' *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (1999), "the shaman could restore or assure productive relations between the human community as a whole and its surrounding spirit milieu, generally through undergoing ecstatic trance during which one or more of the shaman's souls would travel forth on supernatural quests."[322] In his groundbreaking work *Shamanism* (1951), Mircea Eliade's first ("and perhaps the least hazardous") definition of shamanism is a *technique of ecstasy*.[323] Kris Kershaw offers a useful definition of ecstasy as "the shaking up of the person's entire nervous system…experienced as an intoxication; it is the source of powers far beyond the ordinary [and] The mind, or consciousness, is raised to the point where it is cut off from the sensations of the body, and the real world, with its limitations."[324] This permits a broader view of the shamanic—as a biological phenomenon that is cross-cultural in its diversity.[325]

There exists shamanistic features that are universal to the human condition, and Eliade accesses one of these ubiquitous elements in his discussion of the Magical Flight, which he links explicitly to shamanism (and is clearly related to the principles of Jung's Transcendent Function). In its basic essence, the Magical Flight is a universal mythological symbol for an ecstatic's psychic shift. In *Shamanism*, Eliade posits that this 'flight' expresses "intelligence, understanding of secret things or metaphysical truths…[it] is the expression both of the soul's autonomy and of ecstasy."[326] Akin to

[320] Simek 1984, 242.
[321] Simek 1984, 242.
[322] DuBois 1999, 53.
[323] Eliade 1951, 4.
[324] Kershaw 2000, x.
[325] In the classic and strict sense of the word, shamanism is primarily associated with the nomadic peoples of northern Siberia (the word came to English, through Russian, from the Tungusic *saman*. Eliade 1951, 4). Clive Tolley approaches the question of Norse shamanism with incredible rigor in *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*. In his conclusions, Tolley posits that there are "little grounds for proposing the presence of shamanism in pre-Christian or later Scandinavia, if by that is meant the classic form of shamanism typical of much of Siberia" (Tolley 2009, 581). He also acknowledges that "the evidences does…support the likelihood of *some* ritual and belief of a broadly (but not classically) shamanic nature as existing and being remembered in tradition" (Tolley 2009, 581). It is this broader definition of shamanism that is the most relevant to bird symbolism in Old Norse tradition.
[326] Eliade 1951, 479.

Jung's Transcendent Function, the Magical Flight is intimately connected to birds: "The point of primary importance here is that the mythology and the rites of magical flight peculiar to shamans and sorcerers confirm and proclaim their transcendence in respect to the human condition; by flying into the air, in bird form or in their normal human shape."[327] The symbolism of flight and the mythology of the bird-soul become intimately interlinked—and "the mythical image of the soul in the form of a bird" emerges.[328]

Eliade seemingly expands upon these ideas in his *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* (1957). The Magical Flight is again described as a "surpassing of the human condition"[329], a celestial journey attributed to "sovereigns…magicians, sages and mystics of every kind."[330] Eliade also reiterates the connection between the Magical Flight and shamanism, positing that "the ecstatic character of the ascension is in no doubt" and that "techniques of ecstasy are constitute of the phenomenon generally known by the name of shamanism."[331] To commit oneself to flight is to induce ecstasy and it is through this ecstasy that "the shaman renders himself equal to the gods, to the dead and to the spirits."[332] Eliade again posits that the flight is universal: "at every level of culture and in spite of their widely different historical and religious contexts, the symbolism of the 'flight' invariably express[es] the abolition of the human condition, transcendence and freedom."[333] It is the structure of the flight that is universal, despite the "many and various revalorisations" that the symbols of the magical flight have undergone.[334] He warns that "it would be absurd to minimize the differences of content that diversify examples of 'flight', 'ecstasy' and 'ascension'" but also notes that "it would be just as absurd not to recognize the correspondence of structure which emerges from such comparisons."[335]

The shamanistic experience of ecstatic trance invokes a change in consciousness; this is the Transcendent Function best symbolized by the flight of birds. The notion of a

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[327] Eliade 1951, 480.
[328] Eliade 1951, 479.
[329] Eliade 1957, 101.
[330] Eliade 1957, 100.
[331] Eliade 1957, 101.
[332] Eliade 1957, 102.
[333] Eliade 1957, 110.
[334] Eliade 1957, 107.
[335] Eliade 1957, 110.

soul's travel on a supernatural quest is strikingly similar to Óðinn's transformation into a bird after accessing the mead of poetry and, perhaps moreso, the journeys that Huginn and Muninn daily undertake in search of wisdom. Recognizing Óðinn's shamanistic features, Eliade makes a further significant suggestion: "we may ask if Odin's two crows, Huginn ("Thought") and Muninn ("Memory") do not represent, in highly mythicized form, two helping spirits in the shape of birds, which the Great Magician sent (in true shamanic fashion!) to the four corners of the world."[336] Eliade's idea is accurate.[337] Etymologically, Huginn is derived from *hugr* and Muninn from *munr*[338], and both *hugr* and *munr* are aspects of the Old Norse notion of soul. In *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic* (2009), Clive Tolley provides extensive scholarship on the relationship between different souls and spirits in Old Norse tradition and shamanism. He contends that "The notion of the *hugr* and *munr* as semi-independent entities, able to act outside the body, no doubt forms the basis of the mythic image [of Huginn and Muninn]; the widespread image of the soul as a bird…would be in accord with this idea."[339] Huginn and Muninn symbolize the ecstatic trance of a shamanistic figure in Old Norse tradition. Through their flight, Óðinn is able to transcend his initial condition and access arcane knowledge.

Birds are nature's purveyors of wisdom because they are able to fly. They transcend the boundary between ground and sky, earth and air. The human imagination universally uses birds as a mythic symbol for this movement and Old Norse tradition is no exception. It is the ability for birds to fly that makes them so unique in the human experience of nature, and their ability to communicate in an articulate language that resembles human speech is the probable reason for their presumed ability to speak to people in various cultural traditions. To understand their language implies understanding their wisdom; this in turn suggests a knowledge of 'the flight', the transcendent movement from the conscious to the unconscious, the freedom and release that is so universally desired by the human psyche. The Old Norse shaman underwent such a mystical journey and the symbol consequently lies imprinted in myth, legend, and literature.

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[336] Eliade 1951, 381.
[337] For other scholarship connecting Huginn and Muninn with shamanism and/or the psyche, see e.g. Ellis Davidson 1964, 147; Orchard 1997, 258; Lindow 2001, 188.
[338] Turville-Petre 1964, 58
[339] Tolley 2009, 182.

As a mythic deity associated with kingship, wisdom, and shamanism, Óðinn is perhaps the clearest example of the symbolism associated with the language of birds in Old Norse sources. He understands the language of his two ravens, Huginn and Muninn; and both are best understood as souls and aspects of his own psyche. In the myth of the mead of poetry, Óðinn undergoes an initiation between worlds when he become a snake to enter the mountain Hnitbjörg and then transforms into a bird to make his escape with the inspirational mead, which he eventually spits out from his mouth whilst still in bird-shape. Óðinn is thus not only capable of understanding bird-language, he is also capable of becoming a bird both psychically and physically. The wisdom of birds can be viewed as numinous 'Odinic' knowledge.

It is indeed possible that, in some of the stories under study, Óðinn was understood to be the bird or birds that were speaking to humans, simply in a transformed state. According to Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, "Birds and beasts often appear in wonder-tales, and talk or do things which need human intelligence to perform. Icelanders explain these things to themselves by saying that they are people under spells."[340] Physical transformation into a bird is of course in Óðinn's magic repetoire. Moreover, the ravens Huginn and Muninn were probably understood in connection to the metaphysical entities *hugr* and *munr*, both of which are types of pre-Christian Norse souls. On the distinction between souls and spirits, Tolley describes souls as "spiritual entities which are part of, or reflections of, the human being [or, presumably, a mythic deity]" and a spirit was "intended to convey the idea of an entity independent of the beholder."[341] Connected to the Old Norse notions of soul *hugr* and *munr*, the ravens Huginn and Muninn appear to be metaphysical representations of Óðinn and not birds proper or spirits external from their deity.[342] The idea that it is Óðinn who presents useful knowledge to those who he

[340] Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1940, 246. Though not a person proper, it is reasonable to view Óðinn—as an anthropomorphic mythical deity—in a similar light.
[341] On souls, see Tolley 2009, 167-99; and on spirits, see 200-71. Tolley does warn however that "any distinction made between souls and spirits is bound to be somewhat arbitrary" (167).
[342] This suggestion acts in contrast to Tolley, who writes that "To some extent the birds therefore appear in the poem as helping spirits – if we wish to use shamanic terminology at all – rather than embodied manifestations of aspects of the psyche" (Tolley 2009, 193). He also posits, however, that their relationship to Óðinn is "apparently something between a free soul and an animal helping spirit" (193), and it is in this ambiguous capacity that they are better understood. I view them as mythological constructs that are unambiguously linked with Óðinn's psyche, but they take the form of birds that resemble helpful animal spirits found elsewhere in the extant sources.

favours—e.g. royalty, his descendants, and the initiated—is enticing given the evidence explored thus far. Óðinn appears in various texts as a mysterious stranger who provides wisdom; the notion of Óðinn as a bird or birds is thus in keeping with his other literary personifications.

Óðinn's descendant Sigurðr offers the clearest example of the means by which a human king may learn the language of birds, and he undergoes a heroic, coming-of-age initiation when he slays Fáfnir and tastes the dragon's blood. The other figures examined in this thesis who understand bird-speech are associated with these two ancient figures through kinship and/or analogy (e.g. the repeated themes of kingship and wisdom). Óðinn may represent the original formula for bird-transformation, and Sigurðr may represent the original formula for human comprehension of bird-language. Both acquire these abilities by entering and overcoming the underworld and its serpentine chthonian symbolism, regardless of whether such an initiation is undertaken in the time and space of this world or that of another, mythic place.

Jens Peter Schjødt convincingly suggests that "in every religious worldview, the cosmos is divided into at least two areas, one being the world in which we live, and the other being some form of other world, in which all manner of supernatural or counterintuitive beings are situated."[343] Schjødt continues to provide characteristically important elucidation:

> Because the two worlds are different in nearly all respects, however, the communication must take place in a scenario established in this world but imitating some characteristics of the other; this zone and time of communication we may call liminal. Now, in order to achieve communication, it is necessary that someone listens in the other world, and the establishing of these listeners is part of what myths are: they are narratives about the beings of the other world and the interrelationship between this world and the other world, and these narratives eventually come to create an entire mythological universe.[344]

Perhaps the communicator in this world is the sacral king and the deity in the other world is the figure that most resembles his defining characteristics of kingship and wisdom: Óðinn. Regarding sacral kingship, Schjødt posits that "There is no doubt that the ruler in Scandinavia in pagan times was seen as responsible for maintaining a good relationship

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[343] Schjødt 2010, 169.
[344] Schjødt 2010, 170.

between the two worlds (that of humans and that of gods)…"[345] And significantly, regarding Óðinn he concludes that "Therefore, it seems reasonable to maintain that, ever since the early Iron Age (and possibly also earlier), Óðinn (or a god of the Óðinn type) was viewed as the god to whom rulers were initiated because of the numinous knowledge he possessed."[346] Consequently, communication between the sacral king of this world and the mythic king of the other world is enabled; returning to Schjødt's words, "Óðinn seems to be the god who gives the ruler the sort of numinous knowledge necessary for him to rule, creating the right relationship between this and the other world."[347] If the question *Why Birds?* is answered, then hopefully the question *Why Óðinn?* is answered too. Birds are Óðinn's physical manifestations in Miðgarðr and wisdom is the defining mythic feature of both. Divine guidance consistently enters a liminal space—such as a sacred grove—or a liminal time—such as an individual's sacred initiation—in the form of birds and communication occurs through human comprehension of their language. Birds are the ideal animal for this symbolism because of their liminal habitation between the earth and whatever may be above. Their flight represents transcendence and their songs signify the numinous knowledge that follows.

The Greek messenger god Hermes is said to have had a staff with two intertwined snakes on it, which during the Olympian period of Greek myth gained wings above the serpents; Hermes was also able to fly with his winged hat and sandals. Regarding the serpent and bird symbolism of his staff, Joseph Henderson writes that "Here we see his full power of transcendence, whereby the lower transcendence from underworld snake-consciousness, passing through the medium of earthly reality, finally attains transcendence to superhuman or transpersonal reality in its winged flight."[348] The very same process and symbolism is true of the mythic journeys undertaken by Óðinn and Sigurðr. They overcome their fear of death and thus overcome death itself; the reward is the wisdom of life. Birds symbolize this achievement and represent all that stands in opposition to the chthonic: life and freedom and the wisdom of what lies beyond. To

[345] Schjødt 2010, 181.
[346] Schjødt 2010, 184.
[347] Schjødt 2010, 186.
[348] Henderson 1964, 155.

understand their language one must first overcome death. To become a master of life one must first become a master of death.

To approach this material from a difference perspective, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari theoretically explore the process of "Becoming-Animal" in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980).[349] They write that "in his study of myths, Lévi-Strauss is always encountering these rapid acts by which a human becomes animal at the same time as the animal becomes . . . (Becomes what? Human, or something else?)."[350] Human characters that understand the language of birds have undergone a process of becoming-animal. But when, for example, Sigurðr undergoes a becoming-bird and understands the language of birds, what then have these birds become? Something else entirely. They have become-divine and, in this specific cultural context, become-Óðinn. One could counter that Óðinn too has birds whose language he understands—the ravens Huginn and Muninn—so what do they become? But Huginn and Muninn are Óðinn's *hugr* and *munr* and thus, while they may be physically separable from him, they are still elements of his anthropomorphic psyche. Óðinn's processes of becoming-animal—through physical transformation in the myth of the poetic mead and the psychological transformation of his ravens—are not really becoming-animal whatsoever; rather, they involve becoming-oneself. This is because Óðinn is a bird.

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[349] On the application of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of Becoming-Animal to Norse Mythology, see Larrington 2007 (conference paper; not yet published).

[350] Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 237.

VII. Afterword: Conclusions for the Modern World

"This sudden silencing of the song of birds, this obliteration of the color and beauty and interest they lend to our world has come about swiftly, insidiously, and unnoticed by those whose communities are as yet unaffected."
(Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*)[351]

Today, humanity has created an age of ecological crisis and birds are facing its effects. Recent research indicates that we have caused approximately 500 bird species to go extinct over the last five millennia; 21st century extinction rates are expected to accelerate to an additional 10 species per year unless the trend is reversed.[352] There are only around 10,000 bird species on the planet.[353] Without human influence, the natural extinction rate for bird species would be about one species per century, but since 1500 CE, birds have been going extinct at an approximate rate of one species per year—and the rate is increasing.[354] The Cornell Lab of Ornithology posits that "the massive spread of modern *Homo sapiens* has directly caused the total loss of 8,000 species or indigenous populations of land birds…This means that as many as 50 percent of earth's living bird species became extinct within just a few thousand years."[355]

Whereas humanity's first ancestral beings appeared roughly 14 million years ago and modern humans appeared about 125,000 years ago, birds have been running and flying for approximately 150 million years.[356] The primary cause of bird species loss is habitat destruction, but selective hunting, invasive species, chemical toxins, global warming, and other human activities have also had a negative effect.[357] Modern conservation efforts have had some success and are reducing extinction rates to roughly

[351] Carson 1962, 103. The importance of Rachel Carson's work shall not be understated. The opening words of Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* are as follows: "It is generally agreed that modern environmentalism begins with 'A Fable for Tomorrow', in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962)" (Garrard 2012, 1). According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, "Publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 alerted the world to the widespread use of harmful chemical herbicides and insecticides throughout the countryside. Carson's worst fears proved well-founded a few years later, when many raptor species began disappearing from long-occupied habitats." (2004, 10-51 – 10-52).
[352] Duke University 2006.
[353] Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2004, 7-25. 9,775 species of birds are known to modern science (Duke University 2006).
[354] Duke University 2006.
[355] Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2004, 10-4 – 10-5.
[356] Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2004, H-1.
[357] Duke University 2006; Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2004, 10-38 – 10-61. For further discussion of primary causes and potential solutions, see Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2004, 10-1 through 10-116.

one bird species every three to four years; without human intervention, an estimated 25 additional bird species would have gone extinct over the past 30 years.[358] Despite improvement, an expected 1,200 more species of birds are expected to go extinct during the 21st century.[359] All potential solutions for the protection of endangered bird species require human initiative.[360]

The academic community has approached the contemporary environmental crisis with incredible rigour and from numerous perspectives. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*[361], Jacques Derrida challenges the meaning of "the animal", which he deems "a name [men] have given themselves the right and authority to give to the living other."[362] He claims that neither Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Levinas, nor Lacan have given "sustained attention to the question of the animal" and, as Kari Weil further writes in her review of his work, he demonstrates "a gracious indebtedness to those he follows for what he has learned from them, and for the tools he now turns against them."[363] Derrida's judgment of the modern human treatment of animals is both poignant and scathing. The human condition identifies itself in opposition to the animal other that we have so named, subjected, and claimed superiority over. The means and volume of the modern subjection of the animal is described with harsh words—including "holocaust" and "genocide"—and Derrida argues that "No one today can deny this event—that is the unprecedented proportions of this subjection of the animal…Neither can one seriously deny the disavowal that this involves."[364] It is important to remember that not all societies have approached the question of the animal in the same way. We can turn to cultural

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[358] Duke University 2006. The problems with bird species extinction and the reasons for thwarting it seem too self-evident to be discussed here; see e.g. "Why Protect Birds?", Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2004, 10-104 – 10-110.
[359] Moreover, an additional ~1,200 endangered bird species are so rare that they will require special protection or they too will disappear (Duke University 2006). Research indicates that other animal species may be even more greatly endangered than birds, an unfortunate fact that will not be further broached in this thesis (Duke University 2006).
[360] Consider e.g. 'habitat mangement', 'ecosystem management', 'adaptive management', 'translocation', 'legal protection', etc. (Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2004, 10-76 – 10-104).
[361] Jacques Derrida's first treatise on animal philosophy, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* began with Derrida's ten-hour address to the 1997 Cerisy conference "The Autobiographical Animal" (Weil 2008). Published in 2008; first published in French (2006) as *L'Animal que donc je suis* (Derrida 2008; Weil 2008). On sections of the text published elsewhere, see Weil 2008.
[362] Derrida 2008, 23.
[363] Weil 2008, 1-2.
[364] Derrida 2008, 25.

worldviews in which animals are appreciated, respected, trusted, befriended, acknowledged, and embraced for inspiration to undercut false humanist hierarchies.

In *The View from Afar*, Lévi-Strauss suggests that the study of different cultural traditions can "encourage us to reject the divorce between the intelligible and the sensible declared by an outmoded empiricism and mechanism, and to discover a secret harmony between humanity's everlasting quest for meaning and the world in which we appeared and where we continue to live".[365] Numerous societies have constructed the meaning of the animal through a more intimate lens; in Old Norse mythological and literary tradition, select humans were capable of understanding the language of birds, which was a source of wisdom and numinous potential. Lévi-Strauss further argues that Structuralism can teach us to better "love and respect nature and the living beings who people it, by understanding that vegetables and animals, however humble they may be, did not supply man with sustenance only but were, from the very beginning, the source of his most intense esthetic feelings and, in the intellectual and moral order, of his first and even then profound speculations."[366] Furthermore, if the human and the animal were not defined as opposites but rather as similar or the same, then we would pursue greater efforts and make greater sacrifices in the name of environmental conservation and the prevention of species extinction.

In his groundbreaking article "Beyond Nature and Culture", anthropologist Philippe Descola classifies human societies into four ontological systems, categorized by shared or disconnected physicality and interiority with non-human species.[367] One of these categories, Animism, closely resembles the human-animal relationships found in the Old Norse corpus, in which humans view animals as having a different physicality but a similar interiority. Features of animistic ideology—such as metamorphosis,

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[365] Lévi-Strauss 1985, 119.
[366] Lévi-Strauss 1985, 120.
[367] As Descola succinctly describes and defines: "The range of identifications based on the interplay of interiority and physicality is thus quite limited: when confronted with an as yet unspecified *alter*, whether human or non-human, our hypothetical subject can surmise either that this object possesses elements of physicality and interiority analogous to his, and this I call totemism; or that this object's interiority and physicality are entirely distinct from his own, and this I call analogism; or that the object has a similar interiority and a different physicality, and this I call animism; or that the object is devoid of interiority, but possess a similar kind of physicality, and this I call naturalism. These formulae define four types of ontologies, that is of systems of distributions of properties among existing objects in the world, that in turn provide anchoring points for sociocosmic forms of aggregation and conceptions of self and non-self" (2006). Descola clarifies that "these four modes of identification are not mutually exclusive" (2006).

personal relationships, and significant to this thesis, communication via speech—are extremely common in saga literature and Old Norse myths.[368] According to Descola, animism can be expressed "as a continuity of souls and a discontinuity of bodies".[369] A society in which humans and animals do not simply share similar bodies but similar minds, or souls, is one in which the realm of social relations is not limited to the human at the exclusion and expense of the animal. Animals become part of the cultural system of humanity; humanity becomes part of the natural system of nature. Returning to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, this process can be termed "Becoming-Animal".[370] Becoming-animal is not a matter of falsehood or fancy; Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate that "becoming does not occur in the imagination, even when the imagination reaches the highest cosmic or dynamic level…Becomings-animal are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here?"[371] Old Norse tradition demonstrates that it is possible for the human condition to achieve becoming-animal processes such as understanding the language of birds.

In "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", Lynn White Jr. contends that "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them." Regarding the environment, it is thus imperative that we now "rethink and refeel our nature and destiny."[372] The social criticism and personal investigation of literary study is a means to comprehending this potential for change.[373] We must find new ways to understand nature and our relation to the world around us. In *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of*

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[368] Regarding human-animal relations in pre-Christian Scandinavia, for example, the literary sources and archaeological evidence are in agreement. In her fine study *Animals and Humans: Recurrent Symbiosis in Archaeology and Old Norse Religion* (2011), Kristina Jennbert demonstrates that "The bones found in the archaeological contexts…indicate that, in certain circumstances, human bodies and animal bodies were disposed of by similar methods and in manners much more varied than those included in our Western burial concept. The rites used and the pre-Christian notion of death seem to unify humans and animals in such a way as almost to obliterate the distinctions between humans and beasts" (23).
[369] Descola 2006.
[370] Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 232-309.
[371] Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 238.
[372] Lynn White Jr. 1967.
[373] Specifically *Ecocriticism*, which can be defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" or more broadly "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human" (Garrard 2012, 3, 5). For examples from modern literature that describe the human experience of birdsong in nature, see e.g. Lawrence 1950, 109-113; and Abram 2010, 183-200.

American Culture, Lawrence Buell shows that "environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it."[374] Modern science may have rendered belief in such processes of becoming-animal as supernaturally comprehending bird-language impossible, but as humans we can look to our past to discover the notion and thus the potential for more intimate relationships with non-human species. Besides, the ideas inherent in these myths and stories were perhaps never intended to represent truth *per se*, but rather the greatest desires of the human spirit, possibility, and hope.

In the *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, Robert Graves defines Mythology as "the study of whatever religious or heroic legends are so foreign to a student's experience that he cannot believe them to be true."[375] In a similar spirit, Clive Tolley writes that "Imagination is central to myth. A myth conveys an unreality that is imagined as real."[376] Myths however can do more than convey what we imagine to be real. They also express the deepest fears, preoccupations, and aspirations of the human psyche. Humans have always wanted to fly; and thus in myths the gods can fly. Myths may be too foreign for the educated student to *believe* them to be true, but that does not mean that one should not *want* them to be true. Indeed, in the case of animals and the environment, one may discover what humanity *needs* to be true to survive and live sustainably with the other species of our gracious planet.

In Old Norse myth, legend, and literature humans are clearly endowed with physical, psychological, and metaphysical animal characteristics. Animals are also multifaceted in role and expression: they variously act as guides, threats, visionaries, communicators, and saviours; and most importantly, humans can become-animal too. The dividing line between 'human' and 'animal' is blurred and the existence of a human-animal dichotomy is challenged. Applying these ideas to the modern world, it is this type of process that David Abram speaks to in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*:

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[374] Buell 1995, 2.
[375] Graves 1959, v.
[376] Tolley 2009, 9. Tolley acknowledges Ursula Dronke's contribution for such a succinct description. These broader definitions of Mythology and Myth also apply to the legends and other stories under exploration in this thesis, for they contain clear mythic motifs even if they are not Myths proper.

> Caught up in a mass of abstractions, our attention hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only reflect us back to ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities. Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth – our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.[377]

To listen to the songs of birds is to feel the power of nature. It is to engage the wild with our entire being and experience the sensation of feeling alive, which Abram expresses as follows:

> It is by a complementary shift of attention that one may suddenly come to hear the familiar song of a blackbird or a thrush in a surprisingly new manner—not just as a pleasant melody repeated mechanically, as on a tape player in the background, but as active, meaningful speech. Suddenly, subtle variations in the tone and rhythm of that whistling phrase seem laden with expressive intention, and the two birds singing to each other across the field appear for the first time as attentive, conscious beings, earnestly engaged in the same world that we ourselves engage, yet from an astonishingly different angle and perspective.[378]

To conduct genocide and holocaust upon birds will not only destroy another species, it will also devastate our own. Killing the songs of birds will also bring an end to our own music:

> As technological civilization diminishes the biotic diversity of the earth, language itself is diminished. As there are fewer and fewer songbirds in the air, due to the destruction of their forests and wetlands, human speech loses more and more of its evocative power. For when we no longer hear the voices of warbler and wren, our own speaking can no longer be nourished by their cadences. As the splashing speech of the rivers is silenced by more and more dams, as we drive more and more of the land's wild voices into the oblivion of extinction, our own languages become increasingly impoverished and weightless, progressively emptied of their earthly resonance.[379]

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[377] Abram 1997, 22.
[378] Abram 1997, 81.
[379] Abram 1997, 86.

We require myths of the planet through which the earth and its biodiversity is respected and sustained. But these myths cannot be kept as literary constructions or figments of the imagination; they must be the global ethos of a multispecies society.

Abram believes that this shift is possible and contends that the senses "are the primary way that the earth has of informing our thoughts and of guiding our actions", and thus "it is only at the scale of our direct, sensorial interactions with the land around us that we can appropriately notice and respond to the immediate needs of the living world."[380] By becoming aware of the earth's other inhabitants, we will gain a heightened awareness of ourselves; by awakening the senses to the world, one can awaken their inner being. This approach constitutes a new and needed environmentalism through which we enter and inhabit "the sensorial present" and "become ever more awake to the other lives, the forms of sentience and sensibility that surround us in the open field of the present moment."[381] What we must recognize is that such a process is truly achievable and has been accomplished by multiple cultures in human history. Old Norse tradition provides an apt example of a meaningful negotiation of humanity's place in the world; the characters that understand the language of birds demonstrate an old worldview with new potential.

We live on a more-than-human planet and yet are often too self-absorbed and obsessed with our own activities to recognize this simple fact. Our metaphysics and ethics need revision. We must strive to live in harmony with the earth, become attuned to the beauty that surrounds us, creatively engage our interactions with the non-human other, and become-animal as a consequence. Realization and expansion of the human condition will ensue and a whole world of profound meaning shall reveal itself. The experience of life will never again be the same. Birds are communicating nature's wisdom for humanity to hear; it is time we listen to what they say.

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[380] Abram 1997, 186.
[381] Abram further concludes, "For the other animals and the gathering clouds do not exist in linear time. We meet them only when the thrust of historical time begins to open itself outward, when we walk out of our heads into the cycling life of the land around us. This wild expanse has its own timing, its rhythms of dawning and dusk, its seasons of gestation and bud and blossom. It is here, and not in linear history, that the ravens reside" (1997, 272-273).

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