

From Divine to Earthly:
**Ravens and Crows in Celtic and Norse Mythology Before
and After the Emergence of Christianity**

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1. Introduction

1.1 Ambiguous associations of crows and ravens

What one sees, one believes. What one believes, one sees. To give another meaning for these phrases, it can be claimed that on the one hand beliefs affect what we write and on the other hand what is written affects what we believe. Early manuscripts that have survived to the modern day reflect – at least to some extent – the beliefs of the people who lived during that era. Texts of our ancestors bring us some echoes from the past – Celtic and Norse epics from the magical world in which animals were connected with the daily chores, warfare, sickness and health, and *The Bible* takes us to a different place – the warm Middle East where animals had significance to people but perhaps in a slightly different sense. Birds were no exception, and crows and ravens had their meanings for people as well. People of the era of *Edda*, *The Táin* and *The Bible* saw crows and ravens in two very different ways. Very often, when there was death and desolation, there were also crows and ravens present. This links these birds rather closely to loss and sorrow. On the other hand, these birds are capable of problem-solving, which makes them seem astonishingly intelligent. This was most likely noted by the composers of at least *Edda* and *The Táin*. This ambiguity can be noted in *The Bible* too, but do these birds appear in the same light in the Middle East?

Ravens (or raven-like birds) started inspiring culture very early (Marzluff 2005: 110). Through the ages these birds have been included in many stories and myths and still have several connotations for a modern-day person as well. Bad luck of some kind is usually associated with these birds in literature but their intelligence is noted as well. Celtic and Norse mythology as well as biblical texts all utilize such associations of these birds. These cultures and their view of nature are still of great interest in the modern-day world, as well.

1.2 The aim and relevance of the thesis

The aim of the thesis is to study what ravens and crows symbolize in Celtic and Norse mythology and to find similarities as well as to indicate differences in the kinds of associations they had for people who lived in the era these epics were composed. After this, occurrences of ravens and crows in *The Bible* are looked into and compared with those in Celtic and Norse mythology. It is of course not possible to precisely reconstruct the thoughts and ideas of people who lived thousands of years ago. As stated by Davidson (1993, 7), we cannot go back to the mythological thinking of the older times: it lies outside our world like our disappeared childhood world. Therefore, the interpretation of the epics is that of a modern-day person, bearing in mind, however, that the world view of a modern-day person differs a great deal from that of the people who lived so long before us. The thesis concentrates on five research questions. First, are there any shared meanings in Celtic and Norse mythologies with regard to ravens and crows, and in what respect do these meanings differ in Celtic and Norse mythologies? After this it is quite natural to consider whether there are any possible reasons behind Celtic and Norse mythologies using these birds in a (possibly) similar manner in some context, and in a (possibly) different manner in the other. The question as to whether the use of raven and crow in these epics is interchangeable is also looked into. Fourth, after looking into ravens and crows in the Celtic and Norse mythologies, their symbolical meanings in *The Bible* are studied. Finally, by comparing these meanings this thesis aims at studying whether emerging of Christianity would have, based on these texts, changed the way people regard these birds.

Mythologies of different cultures have been studied a great deal. However, as far as crows and ravens are concerned, those very often conflicting associations people have and have had about them are fascinating and deserve to be looked into in more detail. Furthermore, studying historical and mythological aspects of Celtic, Norse and biblical literature as well as common beliefs together has a good deal of interdisciplinary value. Rather than seen as separate areas of study,

interests of, say, history, cultural anthropology and English Philology can be and often are overlapping and intertwined.

2 Research Material

Firstly, this thesis concentrates on the Celtic and Norse beliefs related to crows and ravens during the time Christianity had as yet not gained ground in Ireland and the Nordic countries. Secondly, the views of these birds in the Middle East as presented by *The Bible* will be examined in detail. There are at least two possible means through which information of this kind can be obtained: archaeological evidence and texts that have survived to the modern day. This thesis concentrates mainly on the latter – manuscripts containing mythological stories: *The Táin* (with regard to Celtic mythology), *Edda* (with regard to Norse mythology) and *The Douay-Rheims Bible*. Other sources are referred to when they either complement or explain the role of crows and ravens in these texts or in the mythology of their period. Kinsella's translation from 1969 forms the basis of the section that deals with *The Táin*, but also Faraday's (2010) translation is referred to. With regard to *Poetic Edda*, Tynni's (1980 and 1982) and Hollander's (1969) translations are used.

One of the limitations of the thesis is the fact that Anglo-Saxon mythology is not discussed at all. However, according to Greenblatt and Abrams (2006: 128-129), Celtic myths and legends have had a significant effect on English as well as European medieval literature. Greenblatt and Abrams also remind us that famous literary works such as the legends about King Arthur and his Knights have a good deal of Celtic elements in them (2006: 128-129). Therefore Irish tradition cannot be said to hold any less for a student of English philology than the Anglo-Saxon tradition and it is definitely a significant part of English philology. In this thesis the criteria for excluding Anglo-Saxon mythology are, first of all, the fact that there is no such epic in Anglo-Saxon literature that could be paralleled with *Edda*, *The Táin* or *The Bible*. Secondly, both Norse and Irish culture had remained uninfluenced by Christianity for a longer time than the Anglo-Saxon.

As far as crows and ravens are concerned, the decision to limit the thesis to merely these birds was guided by the research material. Although it is possible to make a difference between several species in the *corvidae* family, such difference is not made in *Edda*, *The Táin* or *The Bible*. In these texts no hooded crow, rook or jackdaw, for example, is mentioned, but the birds are rather referred to in a non-specific, perhaps one could also say more populist, way. The assumption in this thesis is thus that either the composers of these tales did not differentiate between several species of the *corvidae* family or, if they did, from this family only crows and ravens had symbolical meaning. Since the thesis is based on the actual texts, and even while assuming that these texts reflect the beliefs of the people of those days, this will not be addressed in this context and as to whether these people had classified different species of birds to the extent they have been differentiated, say, in a modern-day encyclopaedia, will similarly not be addressed.

Faraday (2010: xxx) states: “an enthusiasm for Irish literature is not always accompanied by a knowledge of the Irish language”. One could go on stating that neither is an enthusiasm for Old Icelandic literature necessarily accompanied by fluency in Old Norse or enthusiasm for Bible studies accompanied by fluency in classical Greek. Even though one ought to strive to use the source text written in its original language, it can be justified to base this thesis on the translations of the three aforementioned texts. As the aim of the thesis is to study ravens and crows both in Celtic and Norse mythology as well as in biblical literature, and find similarities as well as differences with regard to what they symbolize, the thesis will not address the nuances or orthography of the literature of the time of either of these cultures, translations are an adequate source for this information. Furthermore, even though *Edda* has been translated into several languages, for a Finnish reader it is natural to choose the translation by Tynni that is in Finnish, to better capture all the details.

The decision to use *Douay-Rheims Bible* as a source text in this thesis bases on the assumption that since the language of the church in the Nordic countries and in the British Isles was for a long time Latin, the missionaries operating in these areas would also rely on the Latin translation of *The Bible*, i.e. *The Vulgate*. *Douay-Rheims*

Bible has been translated from *The Vulgate* and dates back to the time before King James. Since the King James version of *The Bible* has a good deal of revision from the older versions, it can be deemed justified to use *Douay-Rheims Bible* when studying the aspects that Christianity brought to these areas when it first emerged.

2.1 The Táin

According to Raftery (2000:13), in Ireland a long oral tradition stretches back, at least to some extent, to the pre-Christian Iron Age. This tradition, Raftery continues, was written down in the early Christian monasteries. As stated by Raftery (2000:13-14), the so-called Ulster Cycle is the oldest and most extensive of the early Irish sources and it consists of about eighty separate tales. *The Táin* is the chief epic of the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology and the oldest vernacular epic in Western literature (Drabble 1996: 969; Kinsella 1969: vii). The other tales of the Ulster Cycle are either foretales which “set the scene for the main events or explain elements of the principal drama, or side-tales loosely connected with the principal characters (Raftery 2000:14).

The earliest known form of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* is included in a manuscript from the 12th century, *The Book of Dun Cow* (Kinsella 1969: vii; Raftery 2000:14). Another manuscript, *The Yellow Book of Lecan* from the 14th century, also contains a partial version of the story (Kinsella 1969: vii). According to Raftery (2000:14), a fuller version of *The Táin* was written in the second half of the 12th century and it is included in the volume called *the Book of Leinster*.

The Táin is a story of the war between two Irish kingdoms, Connacht and Ulster (Greenblatt & Abrams 2006: 129). Kinsella’s translation is a modern one, and it is based on the abovementioned two manuscripts (Drabble 1996: 969; Kinsella 1969: vii). However, prior to Kinsella *The Táin* was translated into English also by Faraday (1904), Dunn (1914) and O’Rahilly (1967). In addition to the *Táin Bo Cuailnge*

itself, Kinsella has included in his translation eight tales that lead up to the actual story and thus shed some light on the characters (Kinsella 1969: vii, x, xxiv). These tales used to be grouped by the medieval Irish as *Remscéla* or ‘Foretales’ since they lead up to or explain something about *the Táin* (Knott & Murphy 1967: 129). The chief hero in *The Táin*, Cúchulainn, is one of the superheroes in Irish mythology. According to Drabble, his great deeds are supposed to have taken place in the 1st century AD (Drabble 1996: 247). As stated by Green (1997: 70), Cúchulainn is a supernaturally strong, great warrior who also possesses qualities such as gallantry, beauty and youth. His life is short, but full of glorious battles. The most important of these battles is the one told by *The Táin*; Cúchulainn’s defending Ulster against Medb, the queen of Connaught who tries to steal Ulster’s Brown Bull of Cuailnge (Drabble 1996: 247) because she wants her wealth to match that of Ailill’s, her spouse.

The justification for using *The Táin* to study the beliefs and mythology of the time before Christianity gained ground in Ireland can be found from Kinsella’s introduction to the book. Christianity was brought to Ireland in the fifth century. Even though the two manuscripts which contain the versions of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* were composed after this, and Kinsella admits that the written form of the epic was created in monasteries and that in the process it also gained “a few traces of Christian colour” (Kinsella 1969: IX), he also emphasizes that, like Eddic poetry, *The Táin* existed in oral form well before it received its written form. Furthermore, there is plenty of evidence that suggest the Ulster cycle refers to the time of Christ. In addition to this, since Ireland is geographically somewhat isolated, it is possible that the culture presented in *The Táin* had remained in Ireland much longer than elsewhere. (Kinsella 1969: IX) Furthermore, as stated by Knott & Murphy (1967: 114),

Irish Heroic cycle is unique in being the only branch of European literature which has preserved something of the warrior spirit and tradition of the ancient Celts as known to writers of classical antiquity.

2.2 The Poetic Edda

What the *Vedas* are for India, and the Homeric poems for the Greek world, that the *Edda* signifies for the Teutonic race: it is a repository, in poetic form, of their mythology and much of their heroic lore, bodying forth both the ethical views and the cultural life of the North during late heathen and early Christian times. (Hollander 1969, ix)

As stated by Gunnell (2006: 82) and Orton (2006: 307), rather than a certain genre of poetry, the concept of Eddic poetry (or *the Poetic Edda*) usually refers to *Codex Regius of the Elder Edda*. This is a single manuscript written in the medieval times, c. 1270, and it contains 29 poetic works. The poems in the first part of the manuscript are of a mythological kind. They tell about the universe; its history and the future as well as about gods and goddesses and the supernatural beings; the second part concentrates on several ancient heroes and kings. According to Gunnell, *Codex Regius* “is today regarded as one of the national treasures of Iceland” (Gunnell 2006: 82). Gunnell sees the reason for its importance in that it provides some insight into the pagan religious world of not only Iceland but the whole of Scandinavia (Gunnell 2006: 82).

The older mythic and didactic lays among which there are some of the most well-known Eddic poems are *The Prophecy of the Seeress* (*Voluspá*), *The Sayings of Hár* (*Hávámál*), *The Lay of Vafthrúthnir* (*Vafþrúðnismál*), *The Lay of Grímnir* (*Grimnismál*), *The Lay of Hárbarth* (*Hárbarzljóð*), *The Lay of Skírnir* (*Skírnismál*), *The Lay of Hymir* (*Hymiskviða*) and *The Lay of Ríg* (*Rígsþula*) (Hofsten 1957: 7). A problem which has been discussed a good deal is *Edda*'s age and homeland. Poems are Nordic, or Icelandic, because, as stated by Askeberg (cited in Hofsten 1957: 7) they could not have been compiled had there not been the Icelandic. The oldest of the poems among the mythic and didactic lays are from the 10th century. However, there are younger additions in many of them. This has caused a good deal of scepticism and therefore researchers have been rather cautious to make very final conclusions of the age of the poems. It can be, however, be stated that these older mythic and didactic lays date back to time before year 1000 AD. (Hofsten 1957: 7)

A reservation should be made for the later additions, for instance, *The Sayings of Hárr*, which is a combination of several poems and fragments. Also *The Lay of Ríg* and *The Lay of Hymir* which according to Vries (cited in Hofsten 1957, 8) could be from the 12th century. The *Prophecy of the Seeress* seems to be rather young and has been composed a short time before the year 1000 (Hofsten 1957, 8). There indeed seems to be a good deal of Christian colour in this poem, the prophecy of the war between gods and Aesir when the world would be destroyed, and the gods after this build a new world were only good people would live.

The heroic poems are *The Lay of Volund* (Volundarkvida), *The Helgi Lays* which include *The Lay of Helgi Hjorvarthsson* (Helgakvida Hjorvarthssonar), *The First Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer* (Helgakvida Hundingsbana I) and *The Second Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer* (Helgakvida Hundingsbana II). Furthermore, the heroic poems include *Sinfjotli's Death* (Frá dayda Sinfjotla), *The Prophecy of Grípir* (Gripisspá), *The Lay of Regin* (Reginismál), *The Lay of Fáfnir* (Fárnismál), *The Lay of Sigrdrífa* (Sigrdrífumál), *Fragment of a Sigurth Lay* (Brot af Sigurthakvidu), *The First Lay of Guthrún* (Guthrúnarkvida I), *The Short Lay of Sigurth* (Sigurthakvida hin skamma), *Brynhild's Ride to Hel* (Helreid Brynhildar), *The Fall of the Niflungs* (Dráp Niflunga), *The Second (or Old) Lay of Guthrún* (Guthrúnarkvida II), *The Third Lay of Guthrún* (Guthrúnarkvida III), *The Complaint of Oddrún* (Oddrúnargrátr), *The Lay of Atli* (Atlakvida), *The Greenlandish Lay of Atli* (Atlamál hin groenlenzku), *Guthrún's Lament* (Guthrúnarhvot) and *The Lay of Hamthir* (Hamthismál). In addition, there is *Grottasong* which is not a poetic or heroic poem but it happens to be put in this category. Heroic poems are very different from the *Poetic Edda*. It is humans in the central role. Heroic poems, with exception of *Grottasong*, handle mostly heroes and heroic deeds, wild passion, love and hate, erotic, high-mindedness and dark crimes. Hofsten (1957, 68) states that *The Lay of Volund* is surely among the oldest Eddic lays and can be dated back to year 900.

The question of home land of Edda is related to its age. Moreover, both these questions are related to poems' history of development. How much in the poems is of pre-poetic tradition, how much is included in the oral poems, and what ingredients

have come along when the poems got their written form. With regard to homeland of *Edda*, Hofsten (1957) has studied the plants and animals present in *Edda*, and states that they are mostly those which are present in Norway (Hofsten 1957, 8). However, some researchers have also suggested *Edda* to be of Celtic origin, which according to Hofsten (1957, 8) is a hypothesis now already abandoned.

Hofsten (1957, 9) suggests that the composer of Eddic poems knew that nature he or she was talking about rather than that the poet built this knowledge on myths only. The poems have been suggested to consist of parts of different origin, but according to Hofsten (1957, 10), there is a good deal of proof that they are mostly coherent. How much of the nature description comes from the poet who composed *The Prophecy of the Seeress* as we know it, or how much of description comes from the later addition is not clear.

Hofsten (1957, 10) refers to Sigurdur Nordal who has in his analysis opinion that whoever composed *The Prophecy of the Seeress*' visions of Ragnarök and omens of catastrophe has to have experiences of volcanic eruption, earth quake and geysers. This refers to Iceland. In general, however, the mythic and didactic lays can be said to be of Norwegian-Islandic origin, with more Norwegian traces of written form in them (Hofsten 1957, 10-11).

Tynni's translation, to which the thesis owes a great deal, is based on *Codex Regius*. Outside this manuscript Tynni has taken only *Grottismál* and three excerpts from *Völsungasaga*. This she has done in order to fill in an eight-page gap in *Codex Regius*, thereby making the story more consistent. Tynni has maintained the archaic forms for the names of people and places. However, in order for these names to be more readable for Finnish people she has replaced the Icelandic letters ð and þ with d and th, respectively (Tynni 1980: 16). Hollander uses the same convention. In the thesis, the spelling of the names in Hollander's translation is followed, since such a solution makes the text easier to read for an English-speaking person as well.

2.3 The Bible

Kuula et al. (2003) describe the canon of *The Bible* as an endpoint in a long development: *The Bible* has not been written at once, but it has been formed little by little. The people involved in writing the texts which are today included in *The Bible* did not know they were working on a text which later would end up in this collection of texts. The composition of *The Old Testament* took several centuries. Its oldest parts are dated to the beginning of 1000 BC whereas the “youngest” book, *Daniel*, was written in 160 BC. The most crucial period in the birth of *The Old Testament* is from 587 BC until 200 BC. (Kuula et al. 2003, 19)

An important point Kuula et al. (2003) make is that the text of *The Old Testament* has, during the entire process of its composition been in a constant state of flux. In the books, old source texts are used but these have extended when new readings have emerged. Single books were originally written on separate papyruses or rolls of leather. New rolls were copied from the old ones, and in the process clarifications and interpretative extensions could be made to the text. Furthermore, Kuula et al. point out that the texts of *The Bible* were not to be regarded as a masterpiece of single writers, neither was the emphasis on how much a certain writer had knowledge of a given subject. The texts were of pragmatic value, they were common property which was subject to formulations of their users who would update them when deemed necessary. (Kuula et al. 2003, 20) A modern-day example of such texts could be Wikipedia. According to Kuula et al., interpretations, too, had left their traces to the texts. However, in the course of time the authority of certain texts started to grow and they started to establish themselves. Some of the Jewish texts were permanently left outside the Hebrew *Bible* regardless of the fact that among the Jews these texts were valued a great deal. (Kuula et al. 2003, 20-21)

Marty begins his account of *The New Testament* by stating that the boundary of two religions, Christianity and Judaism, was established by Jesus Christ: some believed him to be the Messiah, while others denied this. Followers of Jesus Christ claimed

that many of the strictures of the Jewish law did not apply to them. In these years the statements by Jesus, stories of him as well as the beliefs of his followers were preserved in texts which today are known as *The New Testament*. The texts were mainly created a generation or two after Jesus and over a century later Christians put them together to form a collection of established original texts, a canon. Christians all over the world respect these texts side by side with *The Old Testament*. Together these collections, *The Old Testament* and *The New Testament* form the Christian *Bible* which has been translated into number of languages. Christians study and preach their message on the bases of these texts. (Marty 2010, 39-40; Marty 2007, 14) As Marty states, Christians have used these texts “to judge, inspire, or console each other and still argue about their meanings” (Marty 2007, 14).

The above accounts of the composing of *The Bible* show, most importantly, that it was not composed by a single writer, and that the texts were under a constant change, update and they were also translated to number of languages. Hence *The Bible* has the history of different composers, revisions and translations. Therefore, it can be said to be in a state of turbulence which is still ongoing: revised translations are published in several languages. *The Bible* has never been something stable, permanent. This already gives forth a certain attitude towards *The Bible* as opposed to *The Táin* and *Edda*. Certainly these epics have also been subject to change and revision, not to forget that their tales had been existing in oral form well before they had their written form. Regardless, *The Bible* has had influences from much larger number of people than *The Táin* or *Edda*. Finally, the issue which cannot be ignored in this thesis is the fact that *The Bible* has its epic characteristics but above all it is a religious text, which *The Táin* and *Edda* are not. As stated by Knott & Murphy (1967: 106), mythology is largely creation of poets and storytellers and it does not give that much information concerning the essential elements of a people’s religion. Knott & Murphy (1967: 107) are dealing with the mythological stories of the pagan Celts only for their story value. This thesis follows the same principle. This does not, however, make it impossible to compare these texts. The idea of the thesis is not to compare the style or the purpose of these texts as such but to look for the differences

in which *The Bible* brings to the Celtic and Norse pagan world with regard to crows and ravens.

2.4.1 Vulgate Bible

Kuula et al. discuss the emergence of the *Vulgate Bible*. In the churches of the Western world, Latin translations of *The Bible* started emerging as early as from 100 A.D. These translations, that are called *Vetus Latina*, were based on *Septuagint*. In order to establish the Latin text of *The Bible*, Hieronymus (also known as St. Jerome) (347-420) was assigned to correct *Vetus Latina* based on *Septuagint*. Hieronymus did translate the psalms from Greek, but afterwards he became convinced the Hebrew text would rise above *Septuagint*, and therefore began to translate the text again based on the Hebrew text. This translation, which was later named *Versio Vulgata*, was completed in 405, but was brought into use only centuries later because *Septuagint* was valued more. (Kuula et al. 2003, 24-25)

What is stated above of course begs the question of why *Septuagint* is not used as a source text in this thesis. Even though more value was placed on *Septuagint*, and *Versio Vulgata* was not established at the time Christianity emerged in Ireland, the missionaries in Ireland were fluent rather in Latin than in Greek, so it is justified to use an English translation that is based on *Versio Vulgata* in this context.

3 Emergence of Christianity in the Nordic Countries and in the British Isles

3.1 The British Isles

Marty (2010) describes how in Europe Christians were in the middle of the Muslims of Spain and The Near East. At the same time as Christians were blocking the way

from Muslim armies, they tried to conquer areas in the north. It was in the north where they could better create the empire which meant they first had to defeat Franks in France and then win England. Marty sees the British Isles as a best example of how the western rulers were conquering the pagan areas. In the furthest edge of the isles lived the Celts of Ireland. (Marty 2010, 126; Marty 2007, 86)

Heikkilä (2004) and Arffman (2004) provide an account of monasticism in the British Isles. While Benedictine monasteries were gaining ground in continental Europe, the British Isles had a unique Celtic monasticism which practised strict asceticism. This monasticism had developed in the 300's and 400's especially in Ireland which had avoided Roman conquest, and in Wales. However, in the 300's and 400's, in these areas Christianity was not the only important religion. (Arffman 2004: 63; Heikkilä 2004, 55) St. Patrick (d. 493) is usually regarded as to have Christianised Ireland (Heikkilä 2004, Marty 2007, 86). Apparently St. Patrick indeed was one of the most important Christian missionaries in Ireland (Arffman 2004: 63; Heikkilä 2004: 55; Marty 2010: 126; Marty 2007: 86). It is worth looking into how Irish society was formed during the time Christianity found its way there. Since the local society was largely built on the bases of clans, also monasteries usually had tight relationships to powerful families of the nearby areas. Conversion was conducted one tribe at a time. The life in Irish monasteries was very strict, asceticism was highly valued. The enthusiasm of Irish monks for missionary work has been explained by the combination of Irish giving plenty of emphasis for family ties and the aforementioned admiration for asceticism. Because Irish society was largely based on family ties, the complete breaking of these ties and leaving to foreign countries to preach of God was one of the most extreme forms of asceticism and self-torment. Therefore Ireland became the centre of Catholic mission. On the other hand, the pursuing of homelessness is known also from outside of Ireland. (Arffman 2004: 64; Heikkilä 2004: 57)

3.2 The Nordic countries

Christianity found its way to Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland during the 10th and the 11th centuries (Hellström 1996: 50; Orton 2006: 302). According to Hellström, Christianity came to the area at present known as Sweden partly through on initiative and contribution of church (such as bishops and monks who operated as missionaries), partly through Viking raids and trade or commercial contacts (Hellström 1996: 49). Medieval Swedish, as well as Norwegian and Icelandic provincial laws offer some good insight to Christianization. From this it can be seen that pagan cult was forbidden and Christian cult or belief was promoted, respectively. (Hellström 1996: 46-47) However, people did not convert to Christianity at once but the orientation from pagan religion to Christianity took place gradually. Furthermore, Scandinavians were not too eager to abandon their pagan religion that they had relied on for centuries. Therefore, Orton rightly argues that “paganism nowhere simply collapsed at the first touch of Christian doctrine” (Orton 2006: 302). Given this, it can be argued that *Codex Regius*, and thereby Eddic poetry contains more pagan elements than Christian. Even though Gunnell (2006:83) states that the manuscript was written “nearly 300 years after the official acceptance of Christianity in Iceland”, and Orton (2006: 308) sees in it influence of Christian mythology, Gunnell also reminds the reader that *Edda*, as *The Táin*, it has most probably existed in oral form a great deal before its written form (Gunnell 2006: 83). Furthermore, Orton states that the heroic poems included in *Codex Regius* are his primary sources when studying the mythology associated with Norse pagan religion. Orton justifies this by stating that there are “mythological narratives or references” in some of these poems. (Orton 2006: 306-307) Therefore it is justified to say that *Codex Regius* provides a good view of Norse beliefs before the emergence of Christianity.

4 Ravens and Crows in *The Táin*

According to Green, crows and ravens are “cruel birds” which “scavenge on dead flesh, so they symbolize both the pitilessness and the carnage of war” (1998: 88). This becomes clear also when studying *The Táin*. War is going on throughout the epic and ravens and crows are often used in expressions that describe the outcomes of war: dead bodies lying on the battlefields. However, the birds appear also in less gloomy expressions: in praising a person as a warrior or describing one’s appearance. The usage that is perhaps most striking, and what Green emphasizes the most is the metamorphosis of some goddesses to raven or crow (Green 1998: 88, 143, 178). The occurrences of raven and crow in *The Táin* can be divided into five different categories according to what the bird in each instance symbolizes or what the purpose of using it in that piece of a text is. The first category deals with goddesses taking form of a raven or a crow. In the second category, ravens in the descriptions of appearance are discussed. In the third category there are expressions in which the raven is used in paying tribute to fierce warriors. The fourth category discusses how ravens and crows are utilized in the descriptions of war. Fifth, Cúchulainn’s death has a category of its own, by reason of the several uses for these birds in this context.

An important characteristic in Irish mythology with regard to this thesis is the aforementioned ability of certain goddesses to transform themselves into birds, very often into ravens or crows. This is a feature that is present in *The Táin* as well. The Badb (or Badbh Catha) and Mórrigan are the goddesses who have an important role in the epic. According to Green, these two goddesses of war are able to change to a form of a raven or a crow, “squawking dreadful omens and terrifying armies by their presence”. Sometimes even in their human form they could bring to mind ravens or crows when dressed in black rags and hereby wearing, as Green states, “the semi-guise of carrion birds”. The name Badbh Catha stands for ‘Battle Crow’ and this goddess could often be seen in the battlefields by dying warriors. (Green 1998: 88, 161, 178) Different spellings (such as The Badbh used by Green) exist for the name. In this thesis, Kinsella’s spelling (the Badb) is followed. The Badb is quite often

referred to in *The Táin*, both as symbolizing different entities or giving certain meaning to them, or as a participant in certain actions. One of the categories deals with the incidents where the Badb shows herself as a raven or a crow or the phrases containing the name “the Badb” that suggest the association of a raven or a crow.

The war goddess Badb is present in *the Táin* also without implications to ravens or crows. One example of such of usage of the name of the goddess is found, for instance, in the section describing Cúchulainn’s preparation for a battle: “Cúchulainn pulled the sword from his Badb’s scabbard--” (Kinsella 1969: 167). This metaphor suggests the Badb being referred to as a goddess of war and not that the scabbard would have to do with crows or ravens. Such metaphors are not studied in this thesis.

In *Cúchulainn’s Boyhood Deeds*, Eogan Mac Durthacht has challenged Ulster to battle. The other warriors of Ulster are beaten while Cúchulainn is sleeping. When he wakes up, he goes to the battlefield looking for Conchobor, the ruler of the Ulaid. Before finding him Cúchulainn runs into a man carrying a corpse on his back. Despite the man’s requests, Cúchulainn refuses to help him carry the body. The man attacks Cúchulainn and throws him down. The Badb calls from among the corpses: “It’s a poor sort of warrior that lies down at the feet of a ghost!” This raises a rage in Cúchulainn and he knocks off the head of the man who, as the Badb says, actually is a ghost. (Kinsella 1969: 79-80; 262) Even though it is not directly communicated that Badb would have taken the form of a raven or a crow, its being among the corpses and near a ghost suggests rather a form of a carrion bird than that of a goddess. The Badb is presented as described by Green above: as hovering over dead warriors in the battlefield. Furthermore, she is provoking Cúchulainn. In addition to this, it is possible that only after hearing what the Badb utters does Cúchulainn realize that the man carrying a corpse is a ghost – at least this is revealed to the reader only then. This would make the goddess as a carrion bird deliver a message as well.

In the tale *Death Death*, Mórrígan has taken the form of a bird and speaks to the brown bull: “--the wise raven / groans aloud / that enemies infest / the fair fields...”, “...the Badb / the raven ravenous / among corpses of men--” (Kinsella 1969: 98). In

the first manifestation of a raven in this piece of text, raven's ability to foretell the future or deliver a message is made clear. With regard to the Badb, there is some obscurity in the expression. Billington and Green argue that even though in the text the goddess is introduced as "the Mórrígan in the form of a bird", she later refers to herself as the Badb (1998: 145). This would suggest that she herself, in the form of a raven, will be present in the battlefield to communicate the horrors of war.

Furthermore, even though the Mórrígan appears in a form of a bird a species of which is not further specified, there might be an underlying implication of the ravens as messengers in this expression as well. Despite this obscurity, at least the words "...the Badb / the raven ravenous / among corpses of men...", regardless of whichever of the goddesses is referred to as "the Badb" present raven as a carrion bird, emphasizing the horrible outcome of war.

As Cúchulainn goes out to revenge the death of the Ulster young men, he jumps in his chariot and makes a "circle of the Badb round about the great four provinces of Ireland to stop them fleeing and scattering from him --" (Kinsella 1969: 155). It is not clear whether the Badb in this context means merely the goddess of war or her alter ego as a raven or a crow. However, one possible interpretation could be that since Cúchulainn makes the "circle of the Badb" around his enemies in order to prevent them from escaping from him, they could already be considered as deceased. Hereby Cúchulainn's enemies, left inside this circle, would soon turn to dead flesh for ravens and crows to eat.

In the following extract of the chant of Cúchulainn's foster-brother Ferdia and his charioteer, the Badb seems to represent ravens in general, flying over the battlefields seeing – or foreseeing – corpses to scavenge on. Medb has in part persuaded and in part trapped Ferdia into a battle against his own foster-brother. Before Ferdia is to face Cúchulainn in a battle he encourages his charioteer and chants:

"Let us go to do battle
with the man waiting
down at the ford
where the Badb will screech."
(Kinsella 1969: 176)

If one sees Ferdia as less self-complacent, this reference to the Badb can be understood to describe the battle of these two warriors. The Badb would screech down at the ford since that is the place where the battle would take place and one of the warriors would die in the battle. However, since the purpose of the chant is to encourage the charioteer, Ferdia's referring to the Badb is likely to implicate that he is bolstering up his own warrior skills, claiming that ravens and crows will be having a feast by Cúchulainn's body. Ferdia was, however, mistaken. The Badb does screech, but it is Ferdia's doom this predicts. Ferdia cannot beat Cúchulainn, and after the victorious battle Cúchulainn says: "Never will the red-mouthed Badb screech like this at the shield-bright sheltering hosts in the gap of battle." (Kinsella 1969: 199). This sentence suggests that the raven had already had a feast and screeches "red-mouthed", after having had a taste of the corpse. Furthermore, the metaphor is likely to reflect Cúchulainn's grief over the loss of his foster-brother. "Badb to never screech like this" would hence emphasize the special nature of this battle. Cúchulainn has slain a great number of enemies, but these enemies did not grow up with him. As he has told Ferdia before the battle:

My high heart is a knot of blood,
my soul is tearing from my body,
I'd rather face a thousand fights,
Ferdia, than this fight with you.
(Kinsella 1969: 192)

Raven is utilized in the description of appearance in the tale *the Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*, where Conchobor, Derdriu's foster-father, is skinning a calf on the snow. Derdriu sees a raven drinking the blood on the snow. This sight inspires Derdriu to describe the man of her dreams:

"I could desire a man who had those three colours there: hair like the raven, cheeks like blood and his body like snow." (Kinsella 1969: 11)

In this metaphor, all the elements belong together to form a figure of a man with rather striking characteristics. Therefore, one should not focus merely on the raven in this context. However, the metaphor does utilize one characteristic of raven: its black

colour. Even though the raven is drinking blood, its nature as a scavenger is not of the greatest emphasis here. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the raven is drinking blood, not pecking at flesh. Even though blood is a part of the description of a desirable man, in order for the raven to be included in that same description without emphasizing too much its “scavenger-side”, the raven is not presented as it actually behaves while consuming carrion: drinking blood is perhaps a more sublime action than pecking at dead flesh.

Warriors are praised throughout *The Táin* and it is very usual that the praises compare the warrior to an animal of some kind. The warriors also boast with their deeds, and as stated by Knott & Murphy (1967: 114), boasting is not considered a fault. However, it must be equalled by a deed as well.

Cúchulainn’s warrior skills are praised throughout *The Táin*. In the following extract Ailill has asked Fergus what kind of warrior they have against them. Fergus describes Cúchulainn for instance with the following words:

You’ll find no harder warrior against you – no point more sharp, more
swift, more slashing: no raven more flesh-ravenous,
(Kinsella 1969: 77-78)

What is worth noting here is that Cúchulainn is paralleled with a raven in a rather direct manner. The expression can be understood as referring to Cúchulainn as combative and probably also as a fearless warrior who seeks to slay as many enemies as he can. With regard to raven, then, the text makes a statement also about characteristics of the bird. It is assumed that ravens crave for flesh, which makes also them slightly more warrior-like than they perhaps, in reality, are.

In *The Táin*, ravens and crows are utilized when describing the cruel outcomes of war. Their nature as scavengers is emphasised when these birds are present in the battlefields looking forward to their next meal.

As Scáthach tells Cúchulainn about his future, one of the things she says is:

[--]the field of slaughter growing red
 on chopped flesh ravens feed
 the crow scours the ploughed ground[--]
 (Kinsella 1969: 35).

Even though it is made clear throughout this prophetic chant that Cúchulainn is a skilled warrior, these words seem to, in a general manner, refer to battles in which Cúchulainn is involved. It is not only Cúchulainn who in these battles provides the food for ravens and crows such as the heroes in *Edda* will be shown to do in the next section. This extract is an example of ravens and crows being used in an intertwined and perhaps interchangeable manner, both of the birds symbolizing the same theme. Using the birds like this, on consecutive lines, both raven and crow referring to cruelty of war, they complement each other and thus reinforce the impression of a desolate sight of the battlefield.

Another gloomy vision is spoken out by Dubthach. This time it is Medb's army which should be concerned since "a dark march lies ahead them":

One man, worth a whole host,
 comes to guard Murtheimne's herds.
 Two pig-keepers were friends once –
 now crows will drink a cruel milk. (Kinsella 1969: 67)

Again carrion birds (in this excerpt only crows) being fed refers to a battle in which a great deal of men will die. "Cruel milk" most likely stands for blood. Another possibility is that "cruel milk" is an expression that refers to the outcome of killing in a more general manner, that is, bodies of the warriors.

In the excerpt of Fergus warning Medb's armies of Cúchulainn it is ravens' turn to feed on carrion: "There'll be corpses under foot / and there'll be ravens at their meat" (Kinsella 1969: 161). In this verse the raven is portrayed merely as a carrion bird, scavenging on dead flesh. In a wider sense, Fergus' utterance portrays the cruel outcome of a battle or war in general.

Even though not represented in Kinsella's *The Táin*, a piece of Irish mythology that has a great significance to this thesis is the death of Cúchulainn. The great hero ends up being tricked to his death. He has killed an enormous number of enemies during his life, and what is rather common in the epics of this type, is that the relatives of the people slain yearn for revenge. Furthermore, Mórrigan, who was attracted to Cúchulainn but rejected by him, wants his death. Cúchulainn is fatally wounded at the standing Pillar of Stone by Lughaid, king of Munster and Erc, King of Leinster. The hero however exerts himself very hard and manages to stand up against the Pillar Stone. His aim is to die standing, so he ties himself to the Pillar Stone. Then Mórrigan, in the shape of a crow, appears and sits on Cúchulainn's shoulder. This shows Lughaid that Cúchulainn does not have strength to attack them anymore and he gives Cúchulainn the last fatal stroke, cutting his head off. (Fee 2004: 174-175)

In this tale, a crow has several functions. First of all, the goddesses' ability to transform into a form of a bird is once again manifested. Secondly, the crows' habit of scavenging on dead flesh is made use of to have the bird deliver a message. This way, the bird's somewhat less appreciated characteristic is combined with the ability that is admirable and useful to people: it delivering messages. This may also display crow as a wise bird, since it is the first to know about Cúchulainn being near to death. Furthermore, when looking the issue from Lughaid's point of view the crow is also seen as a helper. Yet this activity of the crow sitting on a dead or nearly dead man's shoulder can be thought of its stalking a future meal – an activity perhaps not that noble.

5 Ravens and Crows in Edda

In Eddic poetry, ravens are often present. They are usually not in the main role, but are referred to often with several purposes. The ways in which ravens are portrayed can be placed into seven different categories according to what the bird in each

instance symbolizes. By reason of their special nature, Odin's ravens Huginn and Muninn have a category of their own. The second category deals with ravens in metaphors of dying and the third one ravens in paying tribute to warriors. In Edda, ravens and crows are often utilized as messengers and furthermore, they are in some instances using these messages to serve their own interests, as indicated in the fourth category. The fifth category comprises of instances of raven as a helper and the sixth category studies the instances where ravens are utilized in threats and name-calling. Then, some ambiguous expressions are discussed and finally, the role of crows in Edda is studied.

Odin is one of the most well-known Norse gods. He was the father and leader of all the other gods and was referred to with several different names (Davidson 1993: 27). One of these names was *Hrafnagud*, “the Raven God”. This name is traced to Huginn and Muninn, Odin's two ravens that travelled long distances and brought him news from all over the world. (Davidson 1993: 27; Greenoak 1981: 198; Åhlmarks 1964: 55) An interesting fact related to the etymology of these names supports the idea of ravens (at least these two particular ravens) as wise messengers: the Old Norse word *hugr* stands for ‘a thought’ or ‘mind’ (Tynni 1980: 304) and the name Muninn for ‘memory’ (Davidson 1993: 232) or ‘mind’ (Lindow 2002: 186, 188). The ravens are sitting on Odin's shoulders, which suggests a rather high rank of these birds. They are, by no means, unimportant to Odin himself, either, as the following example shows.

In *Grímnismál* (or *The Lay of Grímnir*) which is Odin's monologue, Odin is worried about his ravens which each day take wing over the wide earth. Odin is afraid that Huginn and Muninn would not come back from their journeys. Odin is especially concerned with Muninn. (Hollander 1969: 57, Tynni 1982: 91; Åhlmarks 1964: 55) Whether there is a particular reason for Odin to be worried about the ravens at this specific time remains unclear. Furthermore, it is not explained why it is Muninn that causes Odin more concern. Lindow presents an interesting theory of Odin’s ability to send out his “thought” and “mind” possibly having to do with “the trance-state journey of shamans”. This could explain Odin’s concern about the return of his ravens, it being paralleled with the dangers a shaman faces when falling to state of

trance. (Lindow 2002: 188) Nonetheless, it is clear that the two ravens are dear to him. They are even mentioned separately when listing everyone taking part in Balder's funeral: it is Odin and his ravens that first arrive at the ceremony (Åhlmarks 1964: 71). Furthermore, even though they reside on shoulders of this powerful god, Odin's concern shows they are not themselves immortal.

However, the names of Odin's ravens are also used to refer to ravens in general. In *The First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbane* it is stated that, in a course of a battle between Helgi's men and Völsungr, valkyries descend from the sky, and a horse of a giantess eats Huginn's food. "A horse of a giantess" stands for a wolf (lady giants used wolves as their chargers). (Tynni 1980: 53, 272) "Huginn's food", corpses of the dead warriors, most likely are something not only reserved for Huginn to eat. This is rather a metaphor within a metaphor, Huginn representing its entire species. As a whole, the phrase implies that valkyries come to help Helgi to win the battle which results in Helgi's enemies lying dead on the battlefield.

In Eddic poetry it is often the case that someone's dying or death is not communicated directly, but through a metaphor. This is something that is very usual also today; we rather say someone has "passed away" than that the person has died. Death has probably always been a delicate issue to people. In Eddic poetry, where kinship has great significance to the characters, it can be observed that if the deceased person is on the same side in a battle or especially a relative or otherwise a close one, these metaphors are almost always used. This is the case also when Sigurdr, a great warrior has died.

In *The Second Lay of Guðrún*, Guðrún tells Thjodrekr how she found out about Sigurdr's, her husband's, death. She was told by Högni that Sigurdr was "to the ravens given" (Hollander 1969: 270) and that Guðrún could look for Sigurdr from the south where she could hear ravens and eagles beside him screaming, rejoicing of the carrion (Hollander 1969: 270; Tynni 1980: 189). This metaphor, even though perhaps not seen too beautiful by a modern-day person, envelops the death itself. The raven here is presented as a scavenger, but not directly as a bad omen. It is just a

sign, or proof or something: there is no carrion without ravens. Furthermore, Sigurdr being “given to the ravens” is a euphemism for him being killed. In the same poem, Guðrún tells Grimhildr that she will never rejoice again and cannot think of marrying anyone else after a wolf and a raven had drunk Sigurdr's heartblood (Hollander 1969: 274; Tynni 1980: 194). Again, ravens in this context serve as a proof of Sigurdr's death. It is worth noting that raven here “drank heartblood” and did not peck on the flesh of Sigurdr. This is probably aiming at a more “gentle” expression of someone dying, ravens pecking on Sigurdr's flesh would, in this context, be a very brutal expression since Guðrún is speaking about her loved one who has deceased.

In Edda, ravens are utilized in paying tribute to great warriors. Warrior culture is much prevalent in Eddic poetry. Ravens are also present in, what in warrior culture is deemed the more positive aspect of dying – that is, killing. “To feed ravens” (and several variations of the phrase) is a very common expression in Eddic poetry. It denotes killing enemies and is usually understood in a positive sense, meaning someone “actively” killing enemies, not in the sense that someone has died.

In *The Second Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer*, a valkyrie asks Helgi where he had fought and fed fowls of Gunnr's sisters (Tynni 1980: 74). Gunnr was one of the valkyries and her sister's fowls were ravens and eagles, “corpse-eaters”, although Holland refers to these birds as “birds of prey” (Hollander 1969: 192; Tynni 1980: 274). Hence Helgi feeding ravens and eagles in this context is a reference to a great fighter that kills his enemies and thereby provides foods for carrion birds. Another, similar type of example of using ravens to praise a brave warrior is found in *The Lay of Regin*. Hnikarr (this is one of Odin's several names) tells Reginn, who wants to know who he is, that he used to be called Hnikarr at the time young Völsungr fought in the battlefields and “fed a raven” (Tynni 1980: 116, 279). This statement, besides explaining Reginn who Hnikarr is, pays tribute to Völsungr whom Hnikarr obviously considers to be a great warrior. In the same poem Reginn celebrates Sigurdr's warrior skills in the battle against Lygvi Hundingr's son and his brother. He says that few were better than Sigurdr when he turned the battlefield red and “fed a raven” (Tynni 1980: 118), or, as Hollander (1969: 222) put it, “the ravens gladdened”. Here again feeding, or gladdening, ravens refers to someone being a skilled warrior.

In *The Lay of Sigrdrifa*, Sigurdr rescues a woman who has been cursed by Odin in such a way that she was doomed to sleep for ages imprisoned in her armour. Sigurdr cuts the armour open with his sword. When the woman asks who her rescuer is, Sigurdr replies that “Sigurdr's sword has a moment ago fed the greedy ravens.” (Tynni 1980: 131) In this context Sigurdr is likely to be referring to his killing of Fafnir before he found the woman. This context is not perfectly clear from Tynni's translation. However, Hollander's translation clearly states that “on Fáfñir's body ravens batten” (Hollander 1969: 233). Sigurdr would thus be pointing out to the woman that her rescuer is a great warrior.

In Eddic poetry ravens and crows are not merely referred to in people's speech; they also deliver messages themselves. Even though crows and especially ravens are often associated with bad news, not all the messages are lamentable to the receivers. However, in the following it can be seen that these messages often lead the receiver ending up in the battlefields.

In *The Lay of Ríg* a young prince is fowling when a crow caws sitting on a branch. It asks why the prince is going after birds when he could ride his horse killing valiant men with his sword. It tells the prince that Danr and Danpr have more resplendent houses and better lands than the prince, and that they are very skilful fighters. (Tynni 1982: 187; Hollander 1969: 127) Here the crow can be seen both as a messenger and a cunning creature. As a messenger it brings news regarding Danr and Danpr, their magnificent houses and fighting skills. However, the main purpose of the message is probably for the crow to protect itself and other birds from the prince's spells and make him divert his blood lust towards Danr and Danpr. When one wants to persuade a person to attack another, one of the most effective means to accomplish this is to rouse this person by praising the opponent's characteristics.

In *The First Lay of Helgi Hunding-Slayer*, a great concern is delivered to the son of Ylfingr and his mother. In the trees a raven is shouting (in Hollander's translation this raven was also gnawed by hunger) to another raven that it has the following hunch: Sigmundr's son stands in armour. He has a look in his eyes that resembles that

of a king, and he is a friend of wolf. The crow rejoices: “fain let us be!” (Hollander 1969: 181; Tynni 1980: 40) The protagonist in the poem is the above mentioned “Sigmundr's son”, that is, Helgi. The phrase “standing in an armour” means that it is Helgi's duty to perform a feud, a blood vengeance. Therefore, the ravens rejoice his birth. Because of him they won't have to worry about not getting enough to eat. (Tynni 1980: 269-270) There is some obscurity in this piece of text, though. One would think that since Helgi is a hero, he would feed the ravens by killing his enemies, not by dying himself. However, as it was stated earlier “a great concern is delivered to the son of the Ylfingr's and his mother”. This suggests, perhaps both of the following: Helgi will eventually die, but also that he is destined to fight (no matter what the result is). Here the ravens clearly foretell the future (like the Irish ravens) but also deliver a message to Helgi and his mother.

In *Fragment of a Sigurth Lay*, Gunnarr stays awake and recollects “what a raven and an eagle had been saying” (Hollander 1969: 245; Tynni 1980: 152). Neither this poem nor the other texts in Edda specify what it exactly was that the birds had said. Hollander suggests the sentence may refer to the phrase from one of the previous verses, where raven caws: “Atli's sword blade your blood will redden”. However, Hollander also points out that in that context, only the raven is mentioned, not the eagle. (Hollander 1969: 245) Therefore, this interpretation cannot be completely relied on. Either way, it is presumably safe to say that raven has the role of messenger also in this poem, even if it was the case that Gunnarr has only overheard the birds talking to each other.

A function for a raven not present in the Poetic Edda, is found in *The Volsunga Saga*, in *The Death of King Siggeir and of Stigny*: a raven is portrayed as a helper (or healer). Sinfjotli gets wounded very severely from a bite of a werewolf. Sigmund, then, learns about an herb which cures such bite wounds. He does not have to start looking for the herb since a helper appears from the sky:

Sigmund went out and saw a raven flying with a blade of that same herb to him; so he took it and drew it over Sinfjotli's hurt, and he

straightway sprang up as whole as though he had never been hurt.
(Morris 2001: 57)

This fraction of text also supports the idea of a raven as a wise bird as it knew of the healing herb, but there is more to it. The raven was also willing to bring the herb to Sigmund, so here there are no negative connotations to the bird whatsoever.

Among other things, Eddic poetry is very rich in words of abuse. Even though the most common word to insult someone with is “curled octopus”, raven is not forgotten, either. Ravens are utilized in threats and name-calling in two different ways: one could threaten the other with ravens and what they would do as well as call that person a carrion animal.

In *The Lay of Fjolsvith*, Menglöd tells Svipdagr, Menglöd's suitor, that should he lie, wise ravens would peck his eyes (Hollander 1969: 152, Tynni 1982: 217, 281). On the face of it, this is, of course, a threat. However, the phrase may also suggest that the ravens are wise enough to know whether Svipdagr tells the truth or not. What makes the phrase “pecking one's eyes” even more threatening is the fact that when the carrion birds find a dead body, they usually start consuming it from the soft tissues, like eyes. In *The First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbane* Gudmundr tells Sinfjotli that he will rather throw Sinfjotli's remains to ravens than feed the swine (Hollander 1969: 187; Tynni 1980: 50). This is an interesting expression, since it, besides communicating that a certain act would definitely not be performed, also poses a threat to the other party. A modern phrase used for expressing roundly that a person is not willing to do something would be “I would rather die than--”. Above, however, Gudmundr states that he would rather kill Sinfjotli than feed the swines. This is a clear threat. However, considering expressions such as “feeding the ravens” discussed above, which are used to praise a skilled warrior it can be argued that in addition to threatening Sinfjotli, Gudmundr also implies that he himself is a mighty warrior and thereby able to defeat Sinfjotli in a battle, after which Gudmundr would throw him to ravens.

A slightly different kind of situation with an outburst of feeling is present in *The Second Lay of Gudrun*, in which Högni brings Gudrun the sad news of her husband being dead. Gudrun asks Högni why he has brought such a great woe with him. She adds: “may ravens eat your heart..!” Högni replies that Gudrun would cry even more than now should ravens eat his heart. (Hollander 1969: 270-271; Tynni 1980: 189) Devastated, Gudrun curses the messenger who brought her such bad news. This phrase has a large amount of emotional charge. In this context it does not have to do with mighty warriors but is merely used as a strong display of emotion. The phrase, however, owes a great deal of its vigour to the fact that ravens are carrion birds. They only consume prey that has already been killed, so Gudrun’s cry actually implies death of Högni.

In *The Lay of Helgi Hjörvarthsson*, Atli asks Hrimgerdr: “Of what kin art thou, corpse-greedy ogress” (Hollander 1969: 174). Tynni’s has translated this slightly differently: her translation refers to corpse-eater (Tynni 1980: 61). This is a vilification indicating that Atli thinks ill of Hrimgerdr. The phrase cannot be connected to ravens without reserve. There are, indeed, also other “corpse-eaters” than ravens in Norse mythology. This insult should rather be studied from the point of view of the feeling of contempt that mentioning carrion animals in general evokes in people.

It is worth noting how the expressions in *Edda* having to do with ravens can imply both good and bad. This is already seen from the examples presented above. Furthermore, some expressions also extend the original meanings. In addition to the fact that the implications of the expressions vary from one expression to another, ambiguity can also be found within a single poem, or even within a single expression. These ambiguous expressions are studied in the following.

In *The Lay of Regin*, the raven is portrayed both as a scavenger and as a good omen for a warrior. The poem tells about a young warrior Völsungr who died in a battle and hence “fed a raven”. Only three verses onwards, the poet portrays a raven as a good omen for a warrior. Sigurdr asks Hnikarr what are the best omens when one is

heading for a battle. According to Hnikarr there are three good tokens, and the first one of these is a black raven which is “a splendid companion on Sigurdr's journey”, or, as expressed in Morris, “Fair fellow deem I The dark-winged raven, In war, to weapon-wielder”. (Tynni 1980: 116-117; Morris 2001: 89) Perhaps having a raven as a companion would give it a status of almost like a pet of a modern-day person: one feeds one's pet but the pet is not likely to eat its owner.

In *Fragment of a Sigurth Lay* Gunnarr with his men has attacked Sigurdr's band because Sigurdr had betrayed him. A raven is sitting in a tree and shouting that Atli would redden his weapons in them. The raven also accuses Sigurdr and his men of betrayal saying that they will be doomed due to their perjury. (Hollander 1969: 244, Tynni 1980: 150) There are at least three possible interpretations for the raven's words. The utterance can be understood as a threat. This being the case, the raven could be seen as having an opinion of the situation. However, this very rarely occurs in *Edda*. In most cases ravens merely deliver a message. This message, however, seems rather intense for a messenger that does not have an opinion of the state of affairs. The possibility of the raven behaving as its Celtic cousins do, delivering a prediction, cannot be ruled out either.

Crows in *Edda* have their own category since, even though the words and terms for ravens and crows in Celtic mythology are often used in a rather synonymous manner in the source texts, it seems that Eddic poetry rather clearly distinguishes crows from ravens. In *Sayings of Hár* (“Hár” is one of Odin's names), the verses which tell a story of Odin's and Billingr's daughter's affair have as an introduction forewords that warn of women being untrustworthy. These words don't appreciate either women or crows: No man should trust a croaking crow; as deceitful as this crow is, a woman is, too. (Hollander 1969: 26; Tynni 1982: 52-53) Even though ravens are very often associated with death and lamentable messages, the veracity of their messages does not seem to be questioned in *Edda*. Yet, a crow is referred to as a deceitful bird.

Another example of crows in *Edda* is found in the aforementioned *The Lay of Ríg* in which a crow aims to get the prince attack his human enemies instead of birds. As

discussed, the bird is praising prince's enemies in order to provoke the prince to attack them and thus leaving the birds alone. Perhaps the words of the crow have some truth in them. However, there is something malign in the fact that the crow is trying to make the prince attack Danr and Danpr and hereby putting his life to danger. When fowling, on the other hand, the prince would not be at risk from dying himself. A certain amount of self-interest is included in the words of the crow, which could explain its slightly colouring the matters.

6 Ravens and crows in *The Bible*

As in the sections dealing with *The Táin* and *Edda*, occurrences of ravens in *The Bible* are divided into seven different categories according to what the bird in each instance is seen to symbolize. The first category deals with raven as messenger, wise bird and foreteller. The second category is not found either in *The Táin* or *Edda*: ravens as unclean animals. The incidents in the third category can be found in *The Táin* as well, also *The Bible* utilises raven in the description of appearance. As was presented in the section studying *Edda*, ravens were used in threats and name-calling. In *The Bible*, the raven is used in threats only as will be described in the fourth category. The fifth category deals with the incidents where raven's nature as a scavenger is utilized. However, in *The Bible* the raven is deemed also as a survivor. The sixth category can be found in the section studying *Edda* as well, that is, raven as a helper. In the last category, the incidents in which a raven is representing animals in general are studied.

As in both *Edda* and *The Tain*, also in *The Bible* ravens' wisdom is recognized. They deliver messages and can even predict the future in some sense. Similarities to Odin's ravens can be noted, as in the next instance where a raven roams the earth to see whether the waters had dried after the flood.

A raven is first presented in *The Old Testament* as Noah's helper when the flood was ceasing:

And after that forty days were passed, Noe opening the window of the ark, which he had made, sent forth a raven: (Gen 8:6)

Which went forth and did not return, till the waters were dried up upon the earth (Gen 8:7).

Noah uses the raven as an enquirer, to see whether the flood had subsided. The raven does not return at once, but roams the world. After this, Noah sends forth a dove which eventually returns to the ark "carrying a bough of an olive tree" (Gen 8:11). This is a sign to Noah that it was soon going to be safe to let animals out of the ark and start settling the earth.

Is the raven here failing to find safe place for Noah? It is, indeed only the dove which finally comes to Noah with the good news. There could be an implication in this passage that a dove would somehow be superior to the raven. However, it is said in the text that the raven did not return till the waters were dried. This implies the raven did return. Why is it then the dove who gets to bring the good news? However, there seems to be more emphasis on the raven's role as a helper and messenger. Greenoak (1981: 198), too, mentions the raven flying to and fro and not returning until the flood had ceased. The raven keeping on flying until the waters had dried also implies to strength and stamina of the bird, that it is a tireless scout.

Forti agrees on the role of the raven as a messenger in this path: the bird is sent out to inquire, whether the waters had dried (2007: 79). Greenoak (1981:199) sees the raven also as a helper – which is no wonder since these two roles go hand in hand in this passage. Greenoak also states that the raven's role is a rather minor one. This is, of course, true if one looks at Genesis as a whole. However, it is a raven which is chosen from all the possible birds on the ark to help Noah. This gives the bird not such a minor status, after all. Similarly to Odin's ravens in *Edda*, Noah's enquirer flies "to and fro; sometimes going to the mountains, where it found carcasses to feed on: and other times returning, to rest upon the top of the ark" (Gen 8:7). It is, through Noah, being used by God.

It is not implied in *The Táin* or *Edda* that crows or ravens would be unclean in some manner. However, *The Bible* contains instances where it is directly communicated that ravens are not clean animals. This has to do with *The Bible* being a religious text. Many religions have their principles regarding what one can and cannot eat. *The Bible*, too, contains numerous rules that have to do with clean and unclean animals. Kimuhu (2008:333) discusses unclean objects, foods and animals in *Leviticus*. Kimuhu starts by stating how different kinds of dietary rules and regulations serve as a proof of food being very central in human life. Large number of such dietary rules and regulations, not to mention the instructions for what one can even be in contact with, are found not only in *Leviticus*, but in the *Book of Deuteronomy* as well.

Of birds these are they which you must not eat, and which are to be avoided by you: The eagle, and the griffon, and the osprey. (Lev 11:13)

.And the kite, and the vulture, according to their kind. (Lev 11:14)

And all that is of the raven kind, according to their likeness. (Lev 11:15)

God gives Moses and Aron strict instructions of what to eat and what not to eat. Raven is included in the list of the birds to be avoided together with, say, eagle and vulture. This has probably to do with these birds eating carrion, possibly also with their black colour.

In the *Book of Deuteronomy* the rules are alike:

All birds that are clean you shall eat. (Deut 14:11)

The unclean eat not: to wit, the eagle, and the grype, and the osprey, (Deut 14:12)

The ringtail, and the vulture, and the kite according to their kind: (Deut 14:13)

And all of the raven's kind: (Deut 14:14)

If the presumption is that uncleanness of an animal would be contagious, it is clear that since ravens and crows eat every kind of meat and do not themselves make a difference between clean or unclean animals, it can be assumed it would not be safe

to eat a raven since one cannot know which kind of meat it has been eating during its life. It seems the reason for the prohibiting of eating raven is not in that it is valued in any way, seen as some kind of majestic creature which should not be touched. It is rather its nature as scavenger which has it included in the category of unclean animals.

There is only one instance in *The Bible* where ravens are utilized to describe someone's appearance. This instance is, however, rather significant one. In the *Song of Solomon*, before the verse where a raven is present in a description of appearance, there is an explanatory comment:

My beloved, etc. . . In this and the following verses, the church mystically describes Christ to those who know him not, that is, to infidels in order to convert them to the true faith.

This commentary suggests that the following describes Jesus Christ himself:

His head is as the finest gold: his locks as branches of palm trees, black as a raven. (Song 5:11)

Here raven's black colour is utilized in describing one's appearance, to emphasize the black colour of hair. Bearing in mind how ravens are categorized as unclean animals, it may seem somewhat odd that it is exactly a raven which is paralleled with Jesus' characteristics. However, as explained earlier, the texts in *The Bible* are from different periods of time and by different authors, and this particular text does not deal with the unclean animals at all. If, however, looking at *The Bible* as a whole and ravens' role in it, it can be deemed rather a significant finding. To have an unclean animal used in description of Jesus Christ might indicate how all of God's creations are valuable as such, and as Jesus had the most wretched ones coming to him, so could also an unclean animal be used in description of him.

As in *Edda*, ravens are, even though not utilized in name-calling, however used in a threat.

The eye that mocketh at his father, and that despiseth the labour of his mother in bearing him, let the ravens of the brooks pick it out, and the young eagles eat it. (Prov 30:17)

Family and kinship is of great importance in the world which *The Bible* describes. Therefore one disrespecting one's parents deserves a horrifying punishment. Raven is utilized here because of its scavenger nature. The bird's tendency to go for the eyes of the prey or an enemy first is also recognized. The similar phrase is found in *Edda*, where Menglöd tells Svipdagr that if he lies, ravens would peck his eyes (Hollander 1969: 152, Tynni 1982: 217, 281).

In *The Bible*, the ravens' nature as scavenger is utilized in the similar manner as in *The Táin* and *Edda*. However, there is another aspect to this which is not present in the Celtic and Scandinavian epics. Ravens, among some other animals, are those who survive war and severe conditions.

The following description has to do with Edom being destroyed. All the people are gone, and only some animals have stayed:

The bittern and ericius shall possess it: and the ibis and the raven shall dwell in it: and a line shall be stretched out upon it, to bring it to nothing, and a plummet, unto desolation. (Isa 34:11)

These lines describe rather challenging conditions, in which only the animals with certain abilities can live. This implies raven being a strong bird. On the other hand, it is a scavenger, and probably after the destruction of Edom, there would be plenty for ravens to eat.

Forti (2007:80) names this path as an example of "prophetic scenes of desolation" in *The Bible* which make use of raven's negative connotations. In this description of Edom being abandoned, also other animals are used with the same purpose, which intensifies the sense of desolation. Even though not all these animals are scavengers or predators, there is the impression of a place people have totally abandoned.

Interesting aspect is, that both “the ibis and the raven shall dwell in it”. In *Edda*, raven is paralleled with an eagle, in a phrase in which the associations that are linked to these birds complement each other. Ibis was regarded by the Egyptians as a holy animal, so perhaps having it side by side with a raven in this piece of text, also gives raven some of that “holy spirit”. Given this, the raven would be something more than a scavenger even in the description of a desolate place.

A passage utilizing a raven in the same manner, in a description of desolation, can be found in *Zephaniah*:

And flocks shall lie down in the midst thereof, all the beasts of the nations: and the bittern and the urchin shall lodge in the threshold thereof: the voice of the singing bird in the window, the raven on the upper post, for I will consume her strength. (Zeph 2:14)

God will destroy Nubia and Assyria, so that they will remain only for animals to dwell in. Perhaps raven here represents also an example of animals in general.

Such descriptions of desolate places are not found in *The Táin* or *Edda*. In *The Táin*, ravens are present in the battlefields by dead or dying warriors and in *Edda* the warriors feed the ravens. There are numerous battles fought in *The Bible*, too, but ravens are not present in the battlefield.

As in *Edda*, ravens can – and have the will – of helping humans. This category could have included also the raven in the *Genesis*. However, there it was more its nature as a messenger that was emphasized there. The following extract from the *3 Kings*, however, presents the raven clearly as a helper, doing good deeds by order of God. Elia tells Ahab that the next few years there will be no rain. God then tells Elia to head to east, by the torrent Carith, where he could drink from the brook. God has also asked ravens to bring Elia food.

And there thou shalt drink of the torrent: and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there. (3 Kings 17:4.)

So he went, and did according to the word of the Lord: and going, he dwelt by the torrent Carith, which is over against the Jordan. (3 Kings 17:5.)

And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the torrent. (3 Kings 17:6.)

This suggests, in a wider sense that one must rely on God, for God to provide us whatever we need and not to worry about what is to come. Raven here is presented as a helper but at the same time as God's minion. There is a similarity to Odin's ravens in this passage again. It is worth noting, though, that the ravens did not help Elia from their own will but from God's command.

In *The Bible*, ravens are also used to also to represent animals in general. As instances of other animals are not studied in this thesis, it is not possible to say whether ravens are the only animals which are used in this purpose. However, as opposed to them being unclean animals as described earlier, they are chosen to represent the whole creation. This again speaks for the fact that ravens are not seen as having any less value than other animals when looking at *The Bible* as a whole.

Who provideth food for the raven, when her young ones cry to God, wandering about, because they have no meat? (Job 38:41)

God, when answering to Job, tells him that He is the creator of all in the world. God is asking whether Job could take care of God's responsibilities, whether he could command the wild animals and take care of them. God asks Job whether Job can provide food for raven, when its nestlings are hungry and ask for something to eat. Here raven is representing, among others, wildlife. This begs the question why is it a raven that is used in this context. At least it is clear that ravens are recognised as God's creations, as valuable entities.

However, there is also another aspect in this passage which deserves to be looked at. Forti (2007) discusses aggressive behaviour of ravens as a part of their scavenger-nature and states that this passage from Job serves as a good example

of how the people of the time regarded, though erroneously – ravens as cruel parents. Forti goes on referring to “ancient Greek accounts” describing the ravens’ actual behaviour in the nature, how they are devoted to their nestlings (2007, 80). Furthermore, only one page earlier Forti describes how ravens also protect their youth, as when “beating their wings over their nest while making sounds of rage when a stranger approaches” (2007, 79).

The idea of raven as a cruel parent is not only conflicting with what the scientists have observed to actually happen in the nature, but also with the text itself; at least the idea has some problems. It is not directly communicated in the passage that a raven would make a cruel parent. Instead, it is said that little ravens are crying to God and “wandering about” because they do not have meat to eat. Grown up birds rarely complain or howl if they are hungry, it is the little birds which also make sounds when they are hungry and thereby communicate for their parents to feed them. Therefore, if the writer wants to use the phrase “cry to God”, it would be more logical to have the little birds crying. Of course grown up ravens could also ‘cry’, but in this case the use of that particular verb would be more symbolical and have less to do with the nature as it really is. Of course crying is not what birds do in the first place, the actual sound would be something else, but cry in this case could also mean reaching out to God and making a noise of some kind that is, desperately asking for help.

Furthermore, at least in this translation what the text in specific talks about is providing food for the raven, so, not for the little ravens but the raven itself. Then it is communicated that this raven’s nestlings – which they most probably are if they are to be thought to be still dependent on their mother – cry for food. This does not suggest that the raven is a bad parent, rather than it does not have anything to give them, because there simply is no meat. It is not discussed whether, if there would be meat in the first place, the raven would give it to its nestlings or perhaps eat it all itself. So, the issue is rather where to get food for the adult raven, so it could feed its nestlings. This provides enough evidence to abandon the idea of ravens as cruel parents and pay more attention to the aspect

that ravens do represent a larger part of a whole in the text and that what is communicated is most likely that ravens can trust God even when they are in the biggest trouble and perhaps also that so should humans learn to trust God. This is also implied in the psalms, together with describing how God is taking care of His creations.

Who giveth to beasts their food: and to the young ravens that call upon him. (Ps 146:9)

With ravens concerned, they appear to be recognised as God's creations, and because of this, valuable.

Consider the ravens, for they sow not, neither do they reap, neither have they storehouse nor barn, and God feedeth them. How much are you more valuable than they? (Luke 12:24)

It is worth noting that this is the only instance in The New Testament where a raven is mentioned. In this passage, it is emphasized how God takes care of all His creations, and even though ravens do not store food they can rely on God to provide them what they need, in a similar manner also humans should trust God. Ravens are here representing animals in general. However, what is most striking about this passage is that it is stated that humans are more valuable than the ravens, that is to say, animals. Here is a difference with respect to *The Táin* and *Edda*, in these epics there is no mention that humans would be superior to animals.

7 Discussion

As the previous examples show, ravens and crows have a significant, if minor, role in both Celtic and Norse mythologies. In general, these birds seem to appear in similar kind of contexts. However, there are differences in how these birds are seen, what kind of functions they perform, as well as in whether the uses of these birds are interchangeable or not. *The Bible*, then, shows the ravens in a slightly different light.

Gods and goddesses are intrinsic to both Celtic and Norse mythology. Crows and ravens are, in one way or other, close to these deities. There is a significant difference, however, in the manner the deities make use of these birds. Whereas Odin has two ravens sitting on his shoulders, the Celtic goddesses possess the ability to transform to crows or ravens. This makes ravens and crows in Celtic mythology, in a way, divine themselves. Norsemen do recognize the special nature of these birds, as, for instance, Huginn and Muninn sitting on Odin's shoulders indicates. However, on god's shoulders is the closest they can get to deities in Norse mythology: no transformation in one direction or the other occurs. In *The Bible*, then, the raven is used, say, as a "tool" of God to find out whether the flood was over. This bears a similarity to Odin's ravens, but still, even though described in another passage as God's creations which are dear to Him, these birds do not get even as close to God than Odin's ravens. In *The Bible*, they in a way do not have a will of their own, but they act from God's command. The aspect of ravens as gods or goddesses being absent from *The Bible* is first of all, based on the fact that Christianity is monotheistic religion, even though the holy trinity aspect in it has created a good deal of discussion. Despite of God himself, there are no other gods. It is another thing whether holy trinity has anything to do with metamorphosis. Regardless, it may be possible that God is transformed to His son, and may even take a human form, but not a form of an animal. God may appear to humans in the form of, say, a burning bush, but not as an animal. Christianity respects nature as God's creation, and God's good will is visible in everything he has created. Thereby, God is, in a way present in all the nature.

Another difference –at least with respect to in comparing *Edda* and *The Táin* – is that Celts do not utilize crows or ravens in threats or name-calling. In *The Bible* the ravens are absent when studying name calling, but raven appears in threats both in *Edda* and *The Bible*. Furthermore, there is a similarity between two incidents where in both texts the utterer threatens that a raven will peck the wrongdoer's eyes off. It also seems that in *The Táin* consuming carrion is not treated as such despicable act as in *Edda*: no one is referred to as a corpse-eater or such. Perhaps in Celtic culture animals' eating carrion is seen in a slightly more neutral way than in Norse culture.

Perhaps the Celts were more “one with nature” and saw this as a natural action, even though taking place often in the battlefields. It may be argued that in a warrior culture a death in a battle is in a way “a natural death”. This view could also be linked to the Norse gods not transforming into crows or ravens: perhaps consuming dead flesh would not be appropriate for a Norse god but not problematic for a Celtic deity. In *The Bible* the raven is an unclean animal and must not be touched or eaten. This is most probably because of its nature as carrion eater. This kind of uncleanness is absent from *The Táin* or *Edda*. However, it is not mentioned in these two texts either that crows or ravens would be used as food.

In both *The Táin* and *Edda* there is an absence of any kind of dietary rules. Neither is it specified whether some animals, foods or things are clean or unclean. Judaism is a religion of strict rules in behaviour, and it is therefore understandable that *The Bible* contains a large number of this kind of rules. The lack of these in *The Táin* and in *Edda* can be explained also by the epic nature of these texts. *The Bible*, on the other hand, is a religious text. Especially Judaism contains a large number of rules, and naturally these rules are included in *The Bible*, too.

The Celts and the Norsemen do not even discuss eating ravens. It is as if it is so self-evident, that they are not eaten, that there are not even rules for it. It is not mentioned in these epics either that a raven or a crow should not be touched. Even though these birds have negative connotations in both *Edda* and *The Táin*, Norsemen – even though calling someone a “corpse-eater” insult that person – and Celts do not avoid contact with ravens or crows and if they do avoid eating them it is more likely to be because of respect for than contempt of these birds.

Ravens are used in expressions to praise a warrior both in *Edda* and in *The Táin*, although there is a difference in the relationship between the warriors and these birds. Celtic warriors are more likely described to resemble ravens, whereas Norse warriors feed ravens and crows: by killing enemies they provide food for the carrion birds. Comparing this with the raven’s relationship with the Norse and Celtic deities, there is some resemblance. Again, it seems that in Celtic mythology the characters

are in a sense “closer” to these birds: Celtic warriors are paralleled with ravens with respect to their fierce nature, Norse warriors on the other hand are merely “in contact” with the birds. However, it is not the intelligence of ravens that is used to parallel them with the Celtic warriors but their appetite: the more flesh-hungry the warrior, the more intimidating he is to the enemy. Therefore, it is possible to make a connection between the descriptions of Norse and Celtic warriors: with a raven used in the metaphors, both *Edda* and *The Táin* are utilizing the idea of ravens appearing in the battlefields hungry for dead flesh. It is worth noting that warriors are not paralleled with a crow in either of the epics. However, warriors may be feeding them. In *The Bible*, although it contains numerous descriptions of war, no warrior is praised by utilizing a raven in the description. Perhaps the aforementioned dietary rules, in which the raven is defined as an unclean animal are the reason for the absence of such appraisal. The thesis does not study other animals with this respect, so it cannot be discussed here whether there would be incidents in which a warrior is praised by utilizing another animal. However, one theory for the raven being absent in such descriptions could be that in *The Bible* no single warrior is portrayed; when the war is ongoing, the warriors are dealt as troops or masses. It can be stated that *The Bible* does not represent such warrior culture as *Edda* or *The Táin*.

Edda does not utilize ravens or crows in describing one’s appearance but *The Táin* and *The Bible* do. In *The Táin* there is a description of a lover in which Derdriu describes the man of her dreams to have “hair like the raven” (Kinsella 1969:11). In *The Bible* ravens’ black colour is likewise utilized in describing the colour of the hair of Jesus Christ. Both passages use ravens’ characteristics to describe a noble person. Thus, ravens’ characteristic as carrion eaters is, in a sense, “forgotten” and its majestic looks are emphasized. Even *The Bible* in which the raven is labelled as an unclean animal manages to turn this image around when using the bird in description of Jesus. Of course, it is worth remembering here that the texts in *The Bible* have not been composed by a single writer and these texts have been composed at different times. However, since Jesus called the most wretched people to come to him, this passage could also be seen as making the unclean animal so valuable that it can be used to describe even Jesus.

Both in *The Táin* and *Edda*, crows and ravens are utilized to predict war or battles. However, in *The Táin*, ravens and crows are used in descriptions of war, a feature which is absent from *Edda* and *The Bible*. *The Táin* contains descriptions of ravens and crows hovering over battlefields when the battle is ongoing. They thus herald the outcomes of the war: dead bodies lying in the battlefields. In *Edda*, then, these birds are used in metaphors of dying. Since death was, and still is, rather a delicate subject, it is more soothing to use different kinds of euphemisms for it. *The Bible* utilizes ravens when describing the life after the war: ravens among some other animals are the survivors in desolate cities. Hence it is possible to establish a continuum from *The Táin* which contains descriptions of the war ongoing to *Edda*, where ravens are utilized in euphemisms for death to *The Bible* in which there are descriptions of abandoned places after a war has been fought. It is worth noting how the descriptions in *The Táin* and *Edda* still involve people but in *The Bible*, they do not.

In Irish mythology, the words raven and crow are often used intermixed and their functions are very much alike. However, *The Táin* does not contain descriptions of a person's appearance that utilize crows in them. Raven is used only once, so this is not a sufficient sample to make generalizations but it may be thought that ravens perhaps look more impressive than crows and would therefore be used to describe one's handsome appearance. The same applies to the metaphors used in praising skilled warriors. In both Celtic and Norse mythology crows merely have the role of being fed by the warriors; warriors are not described to resemble crows. The Celtic goddesses can take the form of a crow as well as of a raven, and there seems to be no difference in the rank of these alter egos. For example, the Badb (battle-crow) also transforms to a raven. In *Edda*, on the other hand, there seems to be a rather clear difference between these two birds. Ravens are wise messengers, whereas crows are presented somewhat untrustworthy and opportunistic. Crows are totally absent in *The Bible*. This may have to do with geographical issues: the crows are not found in the Middle East, only ravens.

Even though granted a special status by being close to the deities in both Celtic and Norse mythologies, at times in these occasions ravens and crows are also recognized to be a part of a larger whole. Ravens and crows which have to do with deities often refer to their species in general, having names as Huginn, Muninn or the Badb. Hence “Huginn’s food” would mean corpses that ravens in general consume and the Badb hovering over the battlefield would stand for the outcomes of the war in general: ravens and crows seeking for food. In *The Bible*, there are two passages in which the ravens are used to describe animals in general. In both of them, it is emphasized how God provides food for his creation. Ravens represent the creation of God and are hence valuable.

It is worth pointing out how ravens in *Edda* are sometimes paralleled with wolves and eagles, in a sense that, for instance, ravens and eagles rejoice of the carrion, or that deceased is given to wolves and ravens. At least to a modern-time person, eagles and wolves are not so much stigmatised as carrion eaters, but they rather kill their prey themselves. In *The Bible*, then, a raven is paralleled with an ibis, a bird which Egyptians regarded holy. Perhaps presenting ravens in connection with these more sublime kind of species is an attempt to elevate the ravens above the level of merely being carrion birds. However, one must bear in mind that how a modern-day-person perceives these animals is not necessarily similar to the associations of the people who lived hundreds of years before. Still, it is worth considering why it is more noble to kill than make use of something that has been killed by someone else and furthermore, is useless to the killer. This may have a great deal to do with warrior culture.

It is worth looking into whether crows and ravens are themselves described as possessing certain qualities in the epics. In *The Táin*, these birds are made use of when praising skills of a warrior. Furthermore, the goddesses’ willingness to transform into these birds on certain occasions implies that goddesses at times want to utilize some qualities the birds have. However, neither crows nor ravens are themselves explicitly being admired. *The Táin* does not contain expressions such as “majestic raven” that would praise the characteristics of these birds in themselves.

There seems to be a tacit knowledge of a sort, granting these birds a special status. This special status, then, underlies all these metaphors. Yet in *Edda* the ravens are explicitly referred to as being greedy (flesh-hungry) as well as wise. Similar to *The Táin*, then, these birds being, in one way or other, close to the deities (in *Edda* Odin having two ravens on his shoulders) implies that these birds are very special. The reason behind the impression that in *The Táin* crows and ravens are described only implicitly, but in *Edda* also explicitly, may have something in common with the Norsemen and gods “keeping a slight distance” to these birds whereas the Celtic warriors and goddesses are more “one” with them. The issue is very similar in *The Bible*. Ravens are not explicitly described to possess qualities of any kind. However, Noah using the raven to see whether the flood was over implies that ravens are hardy fliers who can cover long distances without getting tired. However, it is worth noting that in *The Bible* God clearly keeps His distance to these birds and hence it cannot be argued that like in the case of *The Táin* there would be some kind of tacit knowledge granting ravens a special status other than that they are part of God’s creation and thus valuable.

In *The Bible*, the ravens and crows are not given human-like abilities, such as the ability to speak. This suggests also the greater difference made between humans and animals, as in *The Táin* or *Edda*. These birds are not portrayed as having human-like feelings, either. Neither are they presented as cunning, evil, untrustworthy or such. Actually the only passage in *The Bible* which refers to any human-kind of characteristic is the *Genesis*, in which the raven could be regarded as having courage when flying over the earth until the flood had ceased. This suggests that animals in *The Bible* are deemed as animals only and they are not even imagined to have any human characteristics, not even in a symbolical sense.

Crows and ravens possess qualities that in part could explain people’s interest in these birds, as well as both admiration and contempt these birds evoke in people. There is also biological evidence of these qualities. Marzluff refers to crows and ravens as “flying monkeys” meaning that these birds have proportionally the size of brain that is comparable to mammals rather than other birds. Therefore it is no

wonder they are able to solve some problems that require great deal of intelligence. Marzluff goes on stating that crows and ravens have inhabited our planet for much longer than humans. Therefore, they have had more time than humans to adjust and develop their skills. They had already learned to make use of the leftovers of meals of other mammals, and humans, who make the most of waste of all mammals by killing more than they eat are ideal “partners” for crows and ravens. This is why people saw these birds so often around them: they learned to live side by side with us. (Marzluff 2005: 40, 80, 83)

When looking at the difference *The Bible* brought to the ways of perceiving these birds there is one thing above others. Christianity is a strictly monotheistic religion, and the special characteristics of Christianity is that it “uniquely witnesses to and advocates belief in the human figure”, Jesus Christ (Marty 2007, xii). This is rather exceptional, compared to, say, Judaism or Islam. The claim that Jesus was both God and a human has been creating a great deal of discussion. (Marty 2007, Marty 2010, 12-13) This belief in the human figure may to large extent explain the human-centred view in *The Bible*. Perhaps animals and humans would be regarded to be more in the “same level”, should God not be directly linked to humans this way.

According to Hägglund (1985), Christian idea of man is based on certain fundamental characteristics of biblical statements. First of all, *The Bible* describes humans as part of the Creation. As such we are part of the diversity of the Creation, and subjected to its lifeline. This, inter alia, implies that humans fulfil their mission, live from the gifts of the Creation and do their work being connected to the nature. Humans being subjected to the Creation’s lifeline also denotes that biologically (e.g. with respect to their bodily functions, are similar to all other living being, and similarly to them dependent on several fundamental living conditions. As stated in *Ecclesiastes*:

Therefore the death of man, and of beasts is one, and the condition of them both is equal: as man dieth, so they also die: all things breathe alike, and man hath nothing more than beast: all things are subject to vanity. (Ecc 3:19)

This statement may cause some disapproval since in certain aspects, *The Bible* makes a clear distinction between a man and animals. The statement is, however, to be understood so that in *Ecclesiastes* humans are, on purpose, viewed as merely physical and biological entity. Later Luther, respectively, states that human life is like life of animals. By this he means nothing derogatory, but merely gives a statement regarding the bodily existence of humans. (Hägglund 1985, 69-70)

At the same time humans are granted a special position in the Creation. This is already disclosed in mentioning the creation of a man as a special deed of God, what he does on the sixth day. With regard to other living creatures it is only stated: “Let the earth bring forth the living creature in its kind” (Gen 1: 24). However, humans God had specifically decided to create (Hägglund 1985, 70), and furthermore, they were granted the control over all other creatures:

Let us make man to our image and likeness: and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth. (Gen 1: 26)

Hägglund (1985, 70) regards the special position of humans to be the most perceptible in the phrase “And God created man to his own image: to the image of God he created him” (Gen 1: 27). However, with regard to this thesis, equal emphasis can be placed on the human’s dominion over the other creatures. As stated by Hägglund as well, similarly to God having dominion over what He has created, the man has to govern the other living things that have been created (1985, 71).

In *Edda* and *The Táin* one can sense a deep respect for animals, respect in the sense that they can be also superior to humans. Humans having some kind of control over them, at least the wildlife, is not present in these epics. Warriors are praised, of course, but no human is put above the nature. The creatures may have a will of their own and even though Odin does have the two ravens which bring news to him from around the world, they are not governed by him.

With regard to these three texts, it seems in *The Táin*, crows and ravens have the most noble position. In *Edda*, they are messengers, gods or goddesses do not transform into these birds. In *The Bible*, animals are clearly inferior to humans and no other connection to God is established other than that of ravens being created by God and being thus valuable. In this light, a continuum can be established. In the one end there is *The Táin*, in which these birds are valued the most. It is followed by *Edda*, in which crows and ravens are recognised to possess qualities which grant them a place on Odin's shoulders. In the other end there is *The Bible*, in which ravens are inferior to God and humans.

Thus it appears that, if we only look at the texts and do not study the actual historical evidence on the subject matter, *The Bible* brings with it a different view on the nature. It is no longer seen as a magical entity but something God has created and has control over. Of course, governing nature includes the idea of respecting it, but still something, which is present in *The Táin* and *Edda* has been lost. Being one with nature, regarding it an equal partner is an aspect which is absent from *The Bible*. It brings humans in the centre.

7 Conclusion

In this thesis, three eras – that of the Celt and the Norse before Christianity gained ground in their countries and the period of Christianity have been looked into by studying *The Tain*, *Edda* and *The Bible*. Bearing in mind that these cultures have prevailed hundreds of years ago, it is challenging to try and reconstruct the thought of the people of that time. However, these texts do provide some insight to the matter.

There were five research questions the thesis concentrated on. First, are there any shared meanings in Celtic and Norse mythologies with regard to ravens and crows, and in what respect do these meanings differ in Celtic and Norse mythologies? The second research question was whether there are any possible reasons behind Celtic

and Norse mythologies using these birds in a (possibly) similar manner in some context, and in a (possibly) different manner in the other. The question as to whether the use of raven and crow in these epics is interchangeable was also looked into. Fourth, after looking into ravens and crows in the Celtic and Norse mythologies, their symbolical meanings in *The Bible* were studied. Finally, by comparing these meanings the aim of this thesis was to find out whether emerging of Christianity would have, based on these texts, changed the way people regard these birds.

As stated above, one aim of the thesis was to find both similarities and differences in the way these birds are portrayed in *The Tain* and *Edda*. Since the warrior culture is very much present in both of these texts, it is not surprising that similarities in how ravens and crows are portrayed are found especially in the descriptions of war and warriors. Gods and goddesses have also an important role in both of these epics and the birds are also closely linked to deities in both Celtic and Norse mythologies. However, one of the most significant differences in the use of ravens and crows in the epics becomes evident when studying descriptions of warriors and deities. Possibly the Celts having somewhat more “natural” way of seeing these birds and their actions may be underlying them being more “one” with them: goddesses are able to transform into ravens and crows and warriors are directly paralleled with ravens. Norsemen seem to have slightly more reserved relationship with these birds. They do recognize their intelligence, but do not take the shape of ravens or crows. Ravens and crows being carrion birds as well as the abomination of this habit of consuming carcasses hence seems to have more emphasis to the Norsemen.

With respect to the research question as of whether the use of ravens and crows these texts is interchangeable or not it seems these birds are often used, at least in *The Tain*, in interchangeable manner. As pointed out also by (Marzluff 2005: 110), ravens and crows were not always separated from each other in art. It seems that these birds have very similar functions in both *The Tain* and *Edda*, but the former seems to use these birds sometimes in an intermixed and intertwined manner. In *Edda*, on the other hand, a rather clear difference is made with regard to these two birds: crows are not presented as noble birds as ravens. In *The Bible*, crows are

absent. This is most probably because of their distribution: there are no crows in the Middle East.

These associations related to ravens and crows both in *The Táin* and *Edda* are highly likely to have their origins in the nature and the way people relate themselves to these birds, how they live side by side. What one sees is what one believes: ravens' scavenging on dead flesh has probably been a familiar sight to the people of ancient Ireland and Nordic countries. Therefore, these birds are likely to be referred to in the descriptions of war and warriors. Perhaps they have also displayed their intelligence in such a way that it has inspired associations of these birds as wise messengers and even helpers. In *The Bible*, then, because of its nature as a religious text, scavenging on dead flesh is not seen as natural. Ravens are seen as unclean animals which are not to be eaten or even touched. They are not used in descriptions of war or warriors but in those of desolation. In *The Bible* the raven is represented as helper and also as describing animals – and humans – in general.

A continuum can be established by these texts: from *The Táin* where the ravens and crows are closest to gods to *Edda* in which ravens and crows have a role in god's and people's life to *The Bible* in which ravens have some similar functions as in *The Táin* and in *Edda* but are clearly inferior to God and humans. In *The Bible* ravens are both referred to as unclean carrion animals and as God's creations and valuable as such. A raven is also a helper in the Genesis where Noah sends forth a raven to see whether the waters had already subsided.

With regard to the question about people's attitudes towards these birds and thus nature change when moving from the magical world of *The Táin* and *Edda* to the human-centred Bible it can be stated that *The Bible* brings with it a totally different world: God, of course has the control over the nature but so do the humans. Even though governing nature means also respecting it, in the era after Christianity has gained ground in Ireland and Nordic countries, the idea of being close to nature and regarding its phenomena as part of human life as well has been lost.

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