Pre-Modern Nordic Memories in their Literary Contexts

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Abstract: The study of memory has become a central field in saga scholarship in recent years. The present article deals with a number of remarkable mnemonic phenomena in Old Norse-Icelandic narratives. It contextualizes them in biblical, classical, and more modern examples of memory culture. These serve as texts of reference for the Norse narratives that are in the focus of this article. Some of the analyses are inspired by the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg's work on how myth has always already transgressed to memory (reception) and the art historian Aby Warburg's concept of pathos formulae that produce emotional impacts and mnemonic tropes.

Aspects that are treated are for instance acts of commemoration as social and cultural activities, eddic mytho-narratives as stories to remember, the importance of the body and the senses in terms of memory studies, the interrelationship of remembrance and oblivion, and finally pre-modern mediologies. Central texts discussed in the article are eddic poems such as *Völuspá* (The Seeress's Prophecy), skaldic poetry and its mnemonic pictorality, Icelandic sagas and historical writings (Icelandic Book of Settlement), examples of folklore. Some outstanding features are stellar memories, the question whether the place of memory is in the human breast or brain, or the importance of avian imagery in narratives about birds as preeminent media of remembering and forgetting.

The article has a comparative approach. It attempts to show how Old Norse-Icelandic literature is closely contextualized within a web of Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian narratives and thoroughly shaped by features of cultural memory, shifting constructions of and dealings with ever changing imaginations of pasts.

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Remembering – a social and cultural activity

in meam commemorationem
("in remembrance of me")

Christianity is one of the many cultures of the world that are deeply grounded in memory. Its central narratives connect fundamentally with commemoration. At the Last Supper, when Jesus prompts his apostles to continue to break the bread and drink the wine, he adds the words, "do this in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:25). This corresponds to *hoc facite in meam commemorationem* of the Vulgata text and the Greek *τούτο ποιείτε εις την εμήν ανάμνησιν* (*anámnesis* = "remembrance"). The Nordic Reformation bibles translated the phrase as *thet gøre i vti min hugkommelse* (in the Danish *Christiern II's Ny Testament*, 1524), *Thet görer til mijn åminnelse* (in the Swedish *Gustav Vasas bibel*, 1541), and *gjøret þetta i mina minning* (in the Icelandic *Guðbrandsbiblía*, 1584), while the German *Luther Bible* (1545) has *Das thut zu meinem Gedechtnis* and the somewhat later English *King James Bible* (1611) has *do this in remembrance of me*.[1] Whether *commemoratio, anámnesis, hukommelse, åminnelse, minning, Gedächtnis*, or *remembrance*, the memory figure of Eucharist consists of a collective mnemonic performance of believers, a ritual, repeated in every mass, a re-enactment that generates and enables dialogue with the past, in a word, memory. Remembrance would not exist without a collective activity in religious, cultural, or social constellations, a common performative action that among other things has the purpose of founding and re-assuring memories.[2]

But the importance of sharing memories or the fatal consequence of not sharing them are not restricted to religious communities. If memories are not shared with other people, memorable events of any kind fall into oblivion. An illustrious example of forgetting personal memories

1 From a memory studies' perspective, it is perhaps of interest to mention in the present context that the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) in his dispute with Martin Luther about the correct interpretation of Eucharist, the so-called *Abendmahlstreit*, insisted on the exclusively mnemonic nature of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper as it is described in the passages in Luke and 1 Corinthians quoted above. Accordingly, Zwingli took Jesus's instruction, *in meam commemorationem*, quite literally and did not add any theological speculations to it.

2 On Mark's Gospel as an arena for collective memory, see Huebenthal (2018; 2020); on memory theory and the *New Testament* in general, see the same author (2022).

from a quite different, modern media is the tragic incident towards the end of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941). In this film, by many considered to be one of the greatest films of all times, the main character, lying on his deathbed, utters the word "Rosebud." This word, written on the wooden sledge that Kane used to play with as a young boy, stood for the few moments of real happiness in his life. But since Kane never told anybody about this, "Rosebud" remains cryptic to his surroundings. The sledge that is found in Kane's estate Xanadu after his death is burned and with it, the memories go up in smoke. Ironically, it is a journalist and newspaper tycoon, a man of the word and communication, who fails to ensure the survival of Kane's dreams. Because he does not share them with others, his most precious adventures and memories are eradicated in the fire.

Christianity, a religion of the book, is to a high degree also a religion of *memoria*. Crucial elements of the biblical history and Christian rituals as well as church structure centre around acts of remembrance. There is no need here to highlight that no direct correspondences to the influential founding myth of the Lord's Supper existed in the pre-Christian North. Old Norse-Icelandic memory culture was much less characterised by generalising and theorising memory than was the case in the Christian material. But while, for example, the body of eddic poetry presented memories in the form of narratives and can be considered to constitute a kind of an implicit memory theory, the *Prose Edda* and connected texts such as the grammatical treatises actually do formulate a certain theory of memory in a handbook that had the preservation of old stories as one of its explicit aims. Thus, the large extant corpus of pre-modern Nordic literary and material culture presents an overwhelming number of varying and highly heterogeneous aspects of memory and oblivion, transmitted in both verbal forms and non-verbal objects. Very much like classic, especially Greek, and Christian mnemonic mythologies, Old Norse-Icelandic mythography is thoroughly shaped by features of cultural memory, shifting constructions of and dealings with ever changing imaginations of pasts. Also in the case of the eddas, the sagas, and skaldic poetry, memory is inextricably linked to collective social acts.[3] Mnemonic activities and rituals of remembering of every

3 Slavica Ranković has studied the collective nature of saga authorship using the concept of "distributed authorship" in several contributions (see most recently Ranković 2021). This attractive model can be expanded to include a collective "distributed readership" and thus a potential basis for common remembrance.

kind were omnipresent phenomena in the Old Norse-Icelandic and early modern textual cultures.

Myths – narratives to remember

En Æsir […] minnask á þessar frásagnir allar
("But the Aesir […] recalled all these stories")

Gylfaginning ("The Beguiling of Gylfi"), the second part of the *Prose Edda*, offers a range of outstanding examples of what the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996) considered to be essential transmission features of myths. According to Blumenberg (1971; 1979; 1985; 2005), there was no "original" myth nor had there ever been any. Myths never existed in primordial, unspoiled, unmediated forms. What was and may still be accessible were reworkings of earlier narratives, and these, as their earlier versions in previous times, had always already been mediated in the course of transmission, "Rezeption":

> Eine Betrachtungsweise wie die hier vorzuschlagende sucht nicht historisch oder philologisch zu klären, was "der Mythos" ursprünglich oder in einer bestimmten Phase unserer Geschichte bzw. Vorgeschichte gewesen sein mag; vielmehr wird er als immer schon in Rezeption übergegangen verstanden. (Blumenberg 1971, 28)

> An approach such as the present one does not intend to look for a historical or philological explanation of what "the myth" originally or in a specific period of our history or pre-history might have been; rather, myth is understood as something that has always already transgressed to reception. (Translation by J.G. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.)

"Reception" as it was defined by the exponents of the 1960s and 1970s reception theory, among them Blumenberg, is thus nothing else but literary, intertextual memory, the continuous re-shaping and actualisation of older stages of the narrations. As a consequence, memory must be seen as the result of a common activity of various narrators, and audiences and myths are the outcome of this collective, discursive authorship and reception produced as parts of long-term transmission. Logically, in the present case, *Gylfaginning* cannot be dealt with as mythology. It is

mythography and it would be a simplification to see original myths in its narratives. Rather, the stories assembled in the *Prose Edda* represent narratively shaped memorised memories.

The quotation above is taken from the Codex Regius-version of the *Prose Edda* (GKS 2367 4to, c. 1300–1350). It concludes *Gylfaginning* and is an enlightening contribution to how in the medieval North, the emergence of memories about "myths" and the mythical and narrative status of the stories were explicitly discussed and seen as the result of ongoing telling and remembering activities just mentioned. The passage tells: *En Æsir setjask þá á tal ok ráða ráðum sínum ok minnask á þessar frásagnir allar er honum [Gylfi / Gangleri] váru sagðar […]* (Snorri Sturluson 1988, 54) ("But the Æsir sit down to discuss and hold a conference and recall all these stories that had been told him [Gylfi / Gangleri] […]" [Snorri Sturluson 1995, 57; translation slightly adapted]). The two key concepts in this passage are "to sit down to discuss" (*setjask á tal*), "to deliberate" (*ráða ráðum sínum*), "stories" (*frásagnir*) on the one side and "to recall, to remember" (*minnask*) on the other side. Narrating and consulting are narrowly linked to the creation of memory. Memory does not exist as an isolated and stable fact, it is entirely dependent on dialogue. The modern Greek term for "fairy tale" – paramyth (*παραμύθία*) –, includes many of these discursive, playful, non-static, fluid, variant features of storytelling in oral and written transmission and could serve as an apt concept for describing the mnemonics of myths. Myths as well as memories cannot exist without narrative discourse of this kind.[4]

Some intriguing mytho-narratives of the eddic corpus are devoted to stellar memories (see, for example, Gísli Sigurðsson 2018). In these etiological narratives, stellar constellations are explained and memorised by narratives about interferences of gods and giants. Among the well-known examples from the *Prose Edda* are the tales about the giants Ymir, Þjazi, and Aurvandill. In all of them, the giants' body parts are thrown up into the sky and transformed into stars or planets.

Early in *Gylfaginning*, Borr's sons, Óðinn, Vili, and Vé, killed the primordial giant Ymir as part of the cosmogony and "took his skull and made out of it the sky […]. They also took his brains and threw them into the sky and made out of them the clouds" (Snorri Sturluson 1995, 12–13): *Synir*

4 I thank Alexia Panagiotidis, MA, University of Zurich, for drawing my attention to the concept of paramyth at the international conference "Paramyth. The mythological dimensions of Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales," organised by Klaus Müller-Wille at the University of Zurich, November 10th –12th 2022.

Bors drápu Ymi jǫtun […]. Tóku þeir ok haus hans ok gerðu þar af himin […]. Þeir tóku ok heila hans ok kǫstuðu í lopt ok gerðu af skýin […] (Snorri Sturluson 1988, 11–12). This is why in skaldic diction "the sky [shall] be referred to […] by calling Ymir's skull and hence giant's skull […]" (Snorri Sturluson 1995, 88): *Hvernig skal kenna himin? Svá at kalla hann Ymis haus ok þar af jǫtuns […]* (Snorri Sturluson 1995, 33). The *kenning* "Ymir's skull" or "giant's skull" transmits the narrative in the condensed form of a "mini-myth" and guarantees its survival in the literary transmission. Such metaphors are essential mnemonic agents in the Old Norse-Icelandic poetics.

Two similar eddic narratives are a little more specific than the general narration of the creation of the sky and the clouds connected with the slaughtering of Ymir. In the story-cluster about the giant Þjazi and his daughter Skaði that opens *Skáldskaparmál* ("The Language of Poetry"), the third part of the *Prose Edda*, the Æsir killed Þjazi but reached a settlement with Skaði in a complex, multistage sequence. Part of the settlement was "that Odin, as compensation for her, did this: he took Thiassi's eyes, and threw them up into the sky and out of them made two stars" (Snorri Sturluson 1995, 61): *[…] Óðinn gerði þat til yfirbóta við hana at hann tók augu Þjaza ok kastaði upp á himin ok gerði af stjǫrnur tvær* (Snorri Sturluson 1998a, 2). After this, the genealogy of Þjazi and the giants' enormous wealth in gold are recounted. The next sweeping section in the Regius-version is one of the most important mythological narratives in the entire extant Old Norse-Icelandic transmission. It tells about the origin of poetry and wisdom in the medium of the mead of poetry (*skáldskaparmjöðr*) and Óðinn's dealings with the giant-daughter Gunnlöð.

While the story of Þjazi's eyes provides little or no evidence to identify specific stars in the sky, the somewhat bizarre Aurvandill-/Gróa-episode, also this one integrated in a larger narrative plot, the Hrungnir-story, offers a more concrete possibility to speculate about the link between fictional story and stellar observation. In the story of *Aurvandilstá* ("The Toe of Aurvandill"), the audience is given a cute explanation of how the morning star, probably Venus, but possibly also Sirius, Mercury or some other Heliacal rising came into being: The giant Hrungnir had thrown a whetstone at Þórr, a piece of which fastened in the god's head and could not be removed.

> Þá kom til vǫlva sú er Gróa hét, kona Aurvandils hins frœkna. Hon gól galdra sína yfir Þór til þess er heinin losnaði. […] þá vildi hann [Þórr] launa Gró lækningina ok gera hana fegna, sagði henni þau tíðindi at hann hafði […] borit í meis á baki sér Aurvandil norðan

> ór Jǫtunheimum, ok þat til jartegna at ein tá hans hafði staðit ór meisinum ok var sú frerin svá at Þórr braut af ok kastaði upp á himin ok gerði af stjǫrnu þá er heitir Aurvandilstá. Þórr sagði at eigi mundi langt til at Aurvandill mundi heim, en Gróa varð svá fegin at hun munði ønga galdra […]. (Snorri Sturluson 1998a, 22)

> Then there arrived a sorceress called Groa, wife of Aurvandil the Bold. She chanted spells over Thor until the whetstone began to come loose. […] he wanted to repay Groa for her treatment and give her pleasure. He told her these tidings that he had waded […] carrying Aurvandil in a basket on his back south from Giantland, and that there was this proof, that one of his toes had been sticking out of the basket and had got frozen, so Thor broke it off and threw it up in the sky and made out of it the star called Aurvandil's toe. Thor said it would not be long before Aurvandil was home, and Groa was so pleased that she could remember none of her spells […]. (Snorri Sturluson 1995, 79–80)

The name of this star with its peculiar story has equivalences in the Old High German *Aurendil*, the Old English *Earendel*, "thought to have been the name of the morning star" and in the Latinised *Horwendillus* in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* (for quotation and notes, see Anthony Faulkes in Snorri Sturluson 1998b, 446). In this case, we seem for once to have an etymological basis for the aetiology of a specific celestial phenomenon, though fluid and with shifting appellations. The stellar paramyth about the giant Aurvandill's frozen toe that was turned into the morning star is a perfectly told mnemonic tale in this group of stories that recall giants and their destinies. The focus lies on the corporeality.[5] The connection between the female and memory is evident, as is the interdependence of memory and oblivion.

5 A special case of a body part transformed into a star from a much later period is the "Holy Prepuce." In an unpublished treatise, *De Praeputio Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Diatriba* ("Discourse on the Foreskin of Our Lord Jesus Christ"), the Greek scholar, theologian, and keeper of the Vatican library, Leone Allatius (c. 1586–1669), asserted that Jesus's foreskin ascended with the Lord and was transformed into the rings of Saturn (see Wikipedia 2023; Foster and Wheeler 1887). Even though this reasoning might be rather spurious and the sources are all but trustworthy, parallels with the basic narrative movements in the Icelandic stories are evident. For a full discussion of the sources, including several reliquiae, see especially Cordez 2015, 90–96: "Das *praeputium* Christi."

Apart from offering a fine example of a theoretical work on mythography, rhetoric, and poetics written in the vernacular, the *Prose Edda* is a splendid handbook of medieval mnemonics in many respects.

Memory – the body and the senses

Brjóst skal svá kenna at kalla hús […] minnis
("The breast shall be referred to by calling it house of […] memory")

In the literature transmitted in the Old Norse-Icelandic language, there is a wide variety of single terms and idioms for "memory," "remembrance," "to remember," "to forget" etc. Most prominently figure the nouns *minni* and *minning* ("memory," "memories") and the verbs *muna* ("to remember") and *minna* ("to remind somebody," "to remember"). A semantic proximity of "to think" and "to remember" and the lexeme *mynd* ("image") "lends support to the hypothesis that the mental activities involved in acts of remembering and imagining were understood as being closely connected in the Nordic languages" (Glauser, Hermann, and Mitchell 2018b, 16; on the mnemonic terminology in Old Norse and early modern Scandinavian in broader terms, see Glauser, Hermann, and Mitchell 2018b, 15–18). In general, it is possible to state that

> [t]he exceptionally broad and well-defined vocabulary of remembering and forgetting […] is testimony to a conscious, and often reflective, engagement with central questions of tradition, memory, and imagined pasts in the Nordic cultures, an engagement which goes back at least to the Viking Age and the Middle Ages. Of special interest both for its cultural value and for current memory studies is the fact that even early sources show a remarkable awareness of the multifaceted nature of remembering and forgetting. This pluralistic nature was subjected to remarkable attempts at grasping its essence, and to express this basic quality in verbal, visual or performative ways. (Glauser, Hermann, and Mitchell 2018b, 17–18)

Some interesting reflections on likely places of the memory in the body of humans and giants are made in more theoretical writings (see the recent discussions by Glauser 2018a, 45–47; Hermann 2022, 57–62; Novotná, forthcoming). Cogitations about where the memory actually

sits are not numerous but can be found in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of the *Prose Edda* where it says that the memory's place is the breast: *Brjóst skal svá kenna at kalla hús eða garð eða skip hjarta, anda eða lifrar, eljunar land, hugar ok minnis.* (Snorri Sturluson 1998a, 108) ("The breast shall be referred to by calling it house or enclosure or ship of heart, spirit or liver, land of energy, thought and memory." Snorri Sturluson 1995, 154) (see Glauser, Hermann, and Mitchell 2018b, 1). According to an anatomical digression in *Fóstbrœðra saga* ("The Saga of the Sworn Brothers"), however, memory is located "in the brains" (*í heila*). As Marie Novotná comments: "It is true that the cephalocentric medical tradition, based on Greek and Roman authors, circulated in Europe from the eleventh century, but its influence on Old Norse idea was apparently minimal" (Novotná, forthcoming). In fact, the short passage in *Fóstbrœðra saga* seems to be the only instance in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus in which it is the brains where *minni* is placed.

What and how does one remember then? The emergence of memories is closely connected to senses and accordingly to emotions. Senses are often aroused by synaesthetic impressions, and the medieval Nordic literature offers a spectrum of texts where several senses are appealed to and trigger remembering.

An example is the Old Norwegian tale *Geitarlauf* ("Honeysuckle") from the so called *Strengleikar*, a translation of twenty-one Old French *Lais* from the thirteenth century. This short narrative belongs to the Tristan matter. In it, Tristram, as he is called in the Norse texts, compares himself and his beloved Ísönd to the two plants, honeysuckle, and hazel tree. At this stage of the story, the illegal love of Ísönd and Tristram has been discovered, and he has to live alone in the woods. On a wooden stick, he writes to her:

> Sva ferr með ocr kvað hann sem viðuindil sa er binnz um hæslivið. Meðan þessir tveir viðir bua baðer saman. þa liva ok bera lauf sitt. En sa er þessa viðe skildi hvarn frá oðrum. þa déyr haslenn ok þui nest uiðvinndillenn ok berr hvarki lauf. nema þorna ok firir verðaz bæðe. […]. (*Strengleikar* 1979, 198)

> "It goes with us," he said, "as with the honeysuckle that fastens itself around the hazel tree. As long as these two trees are together they live and produce foliage, but if anyone should separate these trees from each other, the hazel will die and then the honeysuckle, and neither

> of them will produce foliage; instead, they will both dry up and perish. […]." (*Strengleikar* 1979, 199)

The two plants are of course not chosen randomly by the author of the Old French story. The honeysuckle (Old French *Chievrefoil*, Old Norse *Geitarlauf*), or *Lonicera caprifolium*, is known for its sweet and heavy scent that can have beguiling and seductive effects. In this little iconic scene, the imagined smell of an imagined plant has the function to recall their love in Ísönd. They reunite for a moment and Tristram makes a new lai (*strengleikr*) for the harp (see Glauser 2014, 6–7; on the interaction of narrative and music, see Heslop 2019).

Whether placed in the brains or the breast, memory, or more precisely the capacity to remember, in Old Norse-Icelandic literature also mainly depends on extraordinary effects that afflict the senses and trigger emotions. Bergsveinn Birgisson (2010, 2018) for example sees mnemotechnical tropes in the skaldic kennings. In his studies, he shows how the kenning employs surprising images and evokes emotions in the listeners during the performance. The kenning's potential to mix diverse images and produce a striking pictorality enables the Norse poet to achieve a kind of auditive intertextuality, very much like the Greek or Roman orators did when they worked on the basis of classical rhetoric. It is the manner in which the skaldic kenning alludes to legendary and mythical narratives which processes unexpected verbal images and stimulates a thinking in images that simultaneously intensifies emotions. The kenning achieves its effects by appealing to the inner eye as well as to the ear. Its associative richness creates mental images, metaphorical transference, and combinations of images that constitute chains in the inner eye of the recipient. Such emotional impacts released by verbal imagery have many similarities with basic features of remembering. As studied by Bergsveinn Birgisson and the present author, the activity of remembering is often set in motion by an awesome pictorality. In the same vein, the term pathos formula ("Pathosformel"), conceived by the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) to describe widely known and commonly accepted images of excitation ("Erregungsbilder"), could be applied to scrutinise the mnemonic trope created by the skaldic kennings. And as an exciting image arouses emotions through the media of a strong visual work of art, the verbal media of the kenning brings back or produces senses and feelings that make the narrative "stick in the memory" (*festa í minni*). There are numerous advantages in combining

approaches from memory studies and sensory studies in analyses of skaldic kennings (see Bergsveinn Birgisson 2010; 2018; Glauser 2018a, 43; 2018b, 243; 2019, 200–202).

Remembrance and oblivion – pre-modern mediologies

Óminnis hegri heitir
sá er yfir ǫlðrom þrumir
("The forgetfulness-heron it's called
who hovers over ale-drinking")

Memories need media and the chiastic formula "media of memory – memory of media" offers a suitable means to analyse modes of mediating pasts and creating and preserving memories. Mnemonic elements of a culture in the North can find expression in such material objects as bautastones, gravemounds, or ship settings without any verbal inscriptions. Memories are also mediated in the form of inscribed stone, skin, and paper.[6] Changing medial forms – the oral, the written, and the vocal – and the development of writing technologies – runes, handwritten manuscripts, printed matter – play decisive roles for both performance and memorialisation (see e.g. Driscoll 1997; Glauser 2000). Among the many medieval books expressively written to conserve memory are confraternity books or *libri memoriales* such as *Reichenauer Verbrüderungsbuch,* but handwritten manuscripts and printed books are on the whole prime media of memory (for early modern printed "books that remember," see Glauser 2021; 2022).

It is now generally accepted in the study of historical mediology that there are no phenomena whose essence can be defined as medial *per se*. Instead, certain phenomena can function as media in certain constellations (see Heslop and Glauser 2018; Heslop 2022). In a comparable way, there are no specific elements, objects or phenomena that are exclusive to mnemonics. Motifs, metaphors, subject matter, narratives, or whole literary genres can produce or be connected to memory under certain circumstances, and not under others. The following discussion of some examples will show that, for instance, a certain kind of animal used in Old Norse-Icelandic texts was easily associated with either memory or oblivion, but only so under certain circumstances.

6 See Kate Heslop's excellent study on the famous rune stone at Rök as a medium for Viking Age memorial culture (2022).

Birds are such preeminent media of remembering and forgetting. As avian imagery corresponds superbly with concepts of memory (*minni*) and forgetfulness (*óminni*) as fluid and moving, it is by implication nearly ubiquitous in literature and art: Platon's image of memory as a dovecote is a nice metaphor for the unreliability that is inherent in remembering (see Hermann 2022, 31–32). Biblical allusions to doves are important as well. The Pentecoast message represents the Holy Spirit by the medium of the white Pentecostal dove. *The Book of Genesis* 8:6–12, tells how Noe after the deluge sent first forth a raven out of the ark but it did not return. He then sent forth a dove which returned to him in the ark; the next time the dove returned to Noe with a green bough of an olive tree; and the third time it returned not any more to Noe. Or, in the words of the Old Norwegian translation of the Bible from the fourteenth century, *Stjórn*:

> Noe […] sendi ut einn rafn […] flaug hann i brott ok kom ecki sidan aptr til Noa. […] þi næst sendi hann ut eina dufu […] þa huarf hon aptr til arkarinnar. […] kom hon þa […] aptr til hans berandi i sinum munni einn blomgadan kuist af þi tre sem oliun heitir. […] kom hon þa ecki sidan aptr til hans. (*Stjórn* 1862, 60–61)

A version of Iceland's origin legend, dependent on ravens, is partially inspired by the narrative of Noe's birds. Among the first sailors to travel to Iceland was, according to "The Book of Settlements" (*Landnámabók*), the Norwegian Viking Flóki Vilgerðarson:

> Flóki hafði hrafna þrjá með sér í haf, ok er hann lét lausan enn fyrsta, fló sá aptr um stafn; annarr fló í lopt upp ok aptr til skips; enn þriði fló fram um stafn í þá átt, sem þeir fundu landit. (*Landnámabók* 1986, 36)

> Floki took three ravens with him on the voyage. When he set the first one free it flew back from the stern, but the second raven flew straight up into the air, and then back down to the ship, while the third flew straight ahead from the prow, and it was in that direction that they found land. (*The Book of Settlements* 1972, 17)

Wisdom, experience, capacity to remember and natural intuitiveness characterise doves and ravens in these texts. But it is of course the literary motif of Óðinn's ravens Huginn and Muninn that attracts

most scholarly attention and popular interest when it comes to ravens in the pre-modern Nordic material (see especially Mitchell 2018; 2022; Hermann 2022, passim). It is not altogether implausible that Muninn's name itself is etymologically based on the verb *muna* "to remember" which would mean that this bird was supposed to be one of the keepers of memory in the culture of the Æsir. In stanza 20 of the Eddic poem *Grímnismál* ("Grimnir's Sayings"), Óðinn utters his anxiety about his birds, when he says,

> Huginn ok Muninn
> fljúga hvern dag
> jǫrmungrand yfir;
> óumk ek of Hugin
> at hann aptr né komit,
> þó sjámk meirr um Munin.
> (*Eddukvæði* 2014, 1:372)

> Hugin and Munin fly every day
> over the vast-stretching world;
> I fear for Hugin that he will not come back,
> yet I tremble more for Munin.
> (*The Poetic Edda* 2014, 51)

In *Gylfaginning*, the stanza is furthermore introduced and contextualised by the following passage:

> Hrafnar tveir sitja á ǫxlum honum [Óðni] ok segja í eyru honum ǫll tíðindi þau er þeir sjá eða heyra. Þeir heita svá: Huginn ok Muninn. Þá sendir hann í dagan at fljúga um allan heim ok koma þeir aptr at dǫgurðarmáli. Þar af verðr hann margra tíðinda víss. Því kalla menn hann hrafna guð. Svá sem sagt er: Huginn ok Muninn […]. (Snorri Sturluson 1988, 32)

> Two ravens sit on his [Óðinn's] shoulders and speak into his ear all the news they see or hear. Their names are Hugin and Munin. He sends them out at dawn to fly over all the world and they return at dinner-time. As a result he gets to find out about many events. From this he gets the name raven-god. As it says: Hugin and Munin fly each day […]. (Snorri Sturluson 1995, 33)

The risks that birds don't return are always present and high. So the borderline between returning (*koma aptr*) / remembering and staying away forever (*koma ekki síðan aptr*) / forgetting is constantly narrow in classical and biblical, as well as eddic texts. And the reasons why something is secured in memory or falls into oblivion are manyfold and unpredictable.[7] But also the borderlines between mnemonic figures as in the case of Muninn on the one side and Flóki's ordinary ravens on the other side are open and permeable. It depends on the narrative surrounding whether a specific element triggers memory or oblivion.[8]

Besides ravens, eagles are evidently the most often mentioned birds in Old Norse-Icelandic texts. As a rule merely used in schematic skaldic kennings, some eagles are featured very prominently. One such case is the mytho-narrative of the mead of poetry in *Skáldskaparmál* (*Prose Edda*). After having stolen the precious drink from the giants and incorporated it, Óðinn transformed into an eagle and flew to Ásgarðr with the mead in his belly. The narrative tells about the theft respectively rescue of the means to compose poetry by the gods. In pre-modernity with its poetics of variation, literature was always also memory. As Renate Lachman has shown in a by now classic essay, the mnemonic features of literature are primarily an effect of intertextuality (see Lachmann 2008). Since also Old Norse-Icelandic poetry depends largely on memory, the story about Óðinn – the god of wisdom, poetry, and memory – and the *skáldskaparmjöðr* can be read as a perspicuous contribution to what Pernille Hermann called "mnemonic echoing" in her recent study (see Hermann 2022). In the person of the giantess Gunnlöð, guardian of the mead of poetry, we have one of Mnemosyne's several "Nordic sisters" (about Mnemosyne, see Glauser 2018a, 43–44; 2018b, 243).

7 A later flood legend with antique and medieval roots about Noe's raven ("Der Rabe Noahs") was written by the German author Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) in 1787 (see Herder 1807, 37). In this short text, the explanation is given why the raven did not return to the ark. In its desire for carrion, the greedy bird literally forgets his duty (*Vergessenheit*) and is punished with a darkened memory (*sein Gedächtniß düster*). It is challenging to see how the raven's staying away for which there is no comment in *The Book of Genesis* is related to thinking in terms of memory in this piece of enlightened literature (see also Herder's "Die Taube Noahs," Herder 1807, 38–39).

8 On the "dynamic relationship between remembering and forgetting" in Juri Lotman's model of semiotic theory of history and cultural memory, see Tamm (2019, 12). Specifically on metaphors for forgetting in the Old Norse-Icelandic poems, see Heslop (2021).

The aviary of Norse imagination is populated by other kinds of birds, some of them difficult to identify. *Igður*, "nuthatches" (alternatively "marsh tits" or even some kind of "finches"), appear in a prose passage in the eddic poem *Fáfnismál* between stanzas 31 and 32. Here the narrator tells how Sigurðr, after having killed the dragon Fáfnir,

> tók Fáfnis hjarta ok steikði á teini. […] Hann brann ok brá fingrinum í munn sér. En er hjartablóð Fáfnis kom á tungu honum, ok skilði hann fuglsrǫdd. Hann heyrði at igður klǫkuðu á hrísinum. Igðan kvað: (*Eddukvæði* 2014, 2:309)

> took Fafnir's heart and roasted it on a spit. […] He burnt himself and stuck his finger in his mouth. And when Fafnir's heart-blood came on his tongue, he understood the speech of birds. He heard that there were nuthatches twittering in the branches. The nuthatch said: (*The Poetic Edda* 2014, 159)

The cluster of stanzas (32–38) following this scene is called *Igðnaspá* ("Prophecy of the nuthatches") in scholarship. The birds are here crucial commentators and advisers to the hero and help him anticipate the treacherous smith Reginn's attack. The scene is beautifully visualised in a detail on the expressive rock carving at Ramsund (Middle Ages) (see Glauser, Hermann, and Mitchell 2018a, 2:1086) and it is transmitted in many Faroese folk ballads. While one variant of the ballad *Brynhildar táttur* (recorded in the nineteenth century) has a close linguistic correspondence to *Fáfnismál*: *Tàð sögdu honum igurnar, / uppi sitja í lund* ("The nuthatches told him that, they sit up in the trees") (*Færöiske Kvæder* 1851, stanza 52), other variants, typical for orally based texts with often repeated formulas of this genre, have different readings of the bird names, e.g.:

> *Tá svaraðu vípurnar, / uppi sótu í eik: / "Sjálvur skalt tú, Sjúrður, / eta tína steik."* ("Then the peewits answered, they sat up in an oak: / 'Sjúrður, you shall yourself, eat your roast.'") (*Regin smiður*, CCF 1Aa1, stanza 132)
>
> *Til tess svaraði víga / uppi situr í eik […]* ("The víga [common guillemot or black guillemot, weerit?] answered to this, it sits up in an oak") (*Regin smiður*, CCF 1D1, stanza 138)
>
> *Tað søgdu honum villir fuglar, / ið uppi sótu í eik / […] smakka tína steik* ("The wild birds told him that, which sat up in an oak […] taste your roast") (*Regin smiður*, CCF 1E1, stanza 94)

Til tess svaraðu vigurnar, / uppi sótu í eik […] ("The vigurnar [common guillemots or black guillemots, weerits?] told him that, they sat up in an oak") (*Regin smiður*, CCF 1F, stanza 80)

fuglar og svo villini djúr / øll spáaða honum yvir / […] Tað søgdu honum villini fuglar, / uppi sótu í eik / […] eta av tíni steik / […] Tað søgdu honum krákurnar, / uppi sótu í eik: / "Sjálvur mást tú, Sjúrður, / smakka somu steik." ("birds and wild animals all foretold him […] The wild birds told him that, they sat up in an oak […] eat from your roast […] The craws told him that, they sat up in an oak: Sjúrður, you must taste the same roast yourself […]") (*Regin smiður*, CCF 1G[I], stanzas 94–95, 98)

fuglar og so alskyns djór / vóru honum á máli kunn […] Tað søgdu honum villini fuglar, / uppi sita í eik: […] eta av tíni steik ("He knew the language of birds and all kinds of animals […] The wild birds told him that, they sit up in an oak: […] eat from your roast") (*Regin smiður*, CCF 1H[I], stanzas 120–121)[9]

Knowledge, experience, wisdom, the skill to predict future events are all elements at the limits of mnemonics proper. But there is an intimate relation between Sjúrður and the birds. He is told the way to Brynhild by an eagle (*ørn*). Regardless of whether eagles, nuthatches, marsh tits, finches, peewits, weerits, craws or simply unspecified wild birds are the actors, birds speak to him again and again in *Regin smiður* and *Brynhildar táttur*. So, repeatedly sung and listened to in the performative ring-dancing, the stanzas spoken by birds in these ballads obtain an intertextual mnemonic force and birds become efficient media for forgetting and remembering.

An additional remark about memory can be made here. The fatal constellation in the love triangle between Brynhild, Sjúrður, and Guðrun is at the core caused by the evil drink of forgetfulness that Guðrun's wicked mother Grimhild brews. This drink is the reason why Sjúrður forgets his love of Brynhild and marries Guðrun, which leads to his and Brynhild's deaths. There are several passages and expressions that refer to "oblivion" and "forgetting" in *Brynhildar táttur* (*óminni* "forgetfulness," *misti minni* "lost memory," *mintist ei* "did not remember"). The tragic story of Sjúrður, full of speaking birds and other speaking animals, is

9 *Regin smiður* and *Brynhildar táttur* are parts of the large Faroese ballad-cycle *Sjúrðarkvæði*, CCF 1. The type of the ballad is TSB E51.

throughout very much a narrative about the disastrous consequences of forgetting to remember.

A kind of counter figure to Muninn is also the heron of forgetfulness, even it connected to Ódinn. It is only once mentioned as *óminnishegri* in *Hávamál*, stanza 13, where Ódinn says

> Óminnis hegri heitir
> sá er yfir ǫlðrom þrumir,
> hann stelr geði guma;
> þess fugls fjǫðrum
> ek fjǫtraðr vark
> í garði Gunnlaðar.
> (*Eddukvæði* 2014, 1:324)

> The forgetfulness-heron it's called
> who hovers over ale-drinking;
> he steals a man's mind;
> with this bird's feathers I was fettered
> in the court of Gunnlod.
> (*The Poetic Edda* 2014, 15)

In contrast to the hapax legomenon *óminnishegri*, the expression *óminnisveig* "drink of oblivion," is not uncommon. It is remarkable that authors writing in Old Norse-Icelandic can use both a bird and a liquid as media of forgetting.[10]

In Friedrich Schiller's (1759–1805) well-known ballad, "Die Kraniche des Ibycus" (1797) ("The Cranes of Ibycus"), it is cranes that function as forceful mediators of emotions, affection, and memory. These birds are here the hero's allies, friends, and helpers beyond his death. The ballad tells the tragic destiny of the popular Greek singer Ibycus, a favourite of Apollon's, who walks alone to a contest in Corinth, accompanied only by flocks of cranes that fly by in greyish squadrons: "nur Schwärme / Von Kranichen begleiten ihn […] in graulichem Geschwader ziehn. […] Seid mir gegrüßt, befreundte Schaaren! / Die mir zur See Begleiter waren." (Schiller 1992, 91–92) But Ibycus is attacked by two murderers

10 For an image of the picture stone G 181 from Sanda church, Gotland, c. 1033–1066, see Glauser, Hermann, Mitchell 2018a, 2:1010; it has been suggested that the bird on top left of this picture might perhaps represent the heron of forgetfulness. On the particular features of the liquidity of knowledge and memory, see Quinn 2010.

and cries his last words to the cranes, begging them to make his gruesome death public: "'Von euch, ihr Kraniche dort oben! […] Sey meines Mordes Klag' erhoben!'" When the mourning audience of the contest is gathered at the theatre, one of the malefactors spontaneously bursts out: "See there! See there, Timotheus! / Behold the cranes of Ibycus!" The sky darkens and one sees how an army of cranes flies by in a blackish swarm. A scared voice asks: "What is it about this migration of cranes?":

> "Sieh da! Sieh da, Timotheus,
> Die Kraniche des Ibycus!" –
> Und finster plötzlich wird der Himmel.
> Und über dem Theater hin,
> Sieht man, in schwärzlichtem Gewimmel,
> Ein Kranichheer vorüberziehn.
> […] "Was ists mit diesem Kranichzug? "
> (Schiller 1992, 96)

At the end of his novel *Die unsichtbare Loge* ("The Invisible Loge"), 1793, the German author Jean Paul (1763–1825), in order to express the melancholy one feels when trying to recall fading memories, compared their sounds to that of swan-made tones of violins: "wo geliebte Menschen […] in ein weit entlegenes Leben wegziehen und dem jetzigen bloß das Nachtönen der Erinnerung hinterlassen, wie durch Islands schwarze Nächte Schwanen als Zugvögel mit den Tönen von Violinen fliegen" (Jean Paul 1960, 469) (where beloved people […] move away into a far country and leave to the present but the lingering of the remembrance, like swans that fly through Iceland's dark nights as migratory birds to the sounds of violins).

Given the widespread use of birds and other flying animals in Old Norse as well as other mnemonic literature, it is certainly everything but a coincidence that the last stanza of the visionary and mnemonic poem *Völuspá* (The Seeress's Prophecy) mentions a flying dragon. Níðhoggr has strong resemblances with a bird. With an atrocious image of a monster on her and the listeners' retina, the nameless seeress, the *völva*, concludes her poem, sinks down, and vanishes. What survives are primeval stories narrated by this unique mediator of slow memories:[11]

11 For aspects of gender and memory, see Larrington and Quinn 2021; for the concept of slow memory, see www.slowmemory.eu.

Þar kømr inn dimmi
dreki fljúgandi,
naðr fránn, neðan
frá Niðafjǫllum;
berr sér í fjǫðrum
– flýgr vǫll yfir –
Níðhǫggr nái.
Nú mun hon søkkvask.
(*Eddukvæði* 2014, 1:307)

There comes the shadow-dark dragon flying,
the gleaming serpent, up from Dark-of-moon Hills;
Nidhogg flies over the plain, in his pinions
he carries corpses; now she will sink down.
(*The Poetic Edda* 2014, 12)

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