HRAFN GIN

THOUGHT & MEMORY

Ravens have an important place in Norse mythology. To the Vikings, the image of ***Odin***, the "All-Father", seated on his throne with ravens upon his shoulder, symbolised his power to see into the future with his mind and thoughts. Additionally, as symbols of the battlefield, ravens represent ***Odin's*** welcoming to ***Valhalla***, in which the warriors fallen in battle can enjoy an honourable and happy afterlife.

The connection between ***Odin*** and ravens is very old and very deep. By the sixth and seventh centuries AD – well before the beginning of the Viking Age – visual depictions of ***Odin*** on helmets and jewellery frequently picture him accompanied by two ravens.

According to the medieval Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson:

*"Two ravens sit on his (**Odin's**) shoulders and whisper all the news which they see and hear into his ear; they are called **Huginn** and **Muninn**. He sends them out in the morning to fly around the whole world, and by breakfast they are back again. Thus, he finds out many new things and this is why he is called 'raven-god'* (hrafnaguð)*."*

Snorri's main source for the passage above seems to be an evocative stanza in the Poetic Edda, Grímnismál, a 13th century compilation based on traditional folklore (B. Thorpe translation) where ***Odin*** says:

*"**Hugin** and **Munin** fly each day over the spacious earth. I fear for **Hugin**, that he come not back, yet more anxious am I for **Munin**."*

[This stanza features on the neck of the "RAVEN GIN – Thought and Memory" bottle to acknowledge the Ravens' importance to Odin.]

Some scholars interpret ***Huginn*** and ***Muninn*** (old Norse meaning Thought and Memory) as projections of ***Odin*** himself, rather than common ravens whom he has blessed with special powers. They can fly swiftly over the Nine Worlds of the Viking Realm to report their observations to ***Odin***. They are amazingly far sighted and can understand and speak human language.

In Norse culture, it was common for shamans to enter a trance-like state, during which they sent their consciousness to probe the world and bring back their learnings. ***Odin's*** ravens' names support the idea that they are projections of his consciousness journeying outward in the form of fittingly intelligent and curious birds to gather additional wisdom and knowledge. This may explain why ***Odin*** fears that ***Huginn*** and ***Muninn*** might not return to him.

That ***Huginn*** and ***Muninn*** were hatched from Norse culture is no coincidence. Not only are ravens powerful and common symbols in Norse folklore, they played an important role in the everyday life of the Norse people, too.

Perhaps the first link between the Norse people and ravens was their survival traits. Early Norse people were hunter/gatherers, while ravens were carrion feeders. A clever raven might trail a hunter, and when the hunt was successful, invite itself to the feast. Likewise, a hungry hunter might notice a raven circling in the sky and follow it to a ready meal. In this way, a primitive bond formed between the Norse people and ravens.

As time went by and Norse civilization advanced, people began embarking on their epic sea voyages that would establish Norse culture's glorious place in history — and they took their winged allies with them. Just as ravens once guided the Norse people to food, they were now relied upon to guide their boats to land. The mighty birds were carried in cages on Viking ships. At regular intervals, they were taken from their cages and released into the breeze to scout out the boat's surroundings. If the bird sensed land, it would head toward it, giving the crew the direction landward. If it didn't sense or find land, it would return to the ship.

Because they played such an important role in the everyday lives of Norse people, ravens became highly revered. In guiding their human friends to food and safety, it's little wonder that these great black birds found their way onto ***Odin's*** shoulders!