

= Raven banner =

The raven banner (Old Norse : hrafnsmerki ; Middle English : hravenlandeye) was a flag , possibly totemic in nature , flown by various Viking chieftains and other Scandinavian rulers during the 9th , 10th and 11th centuries . The flag , as depicted in Norse artwork , was roughly triangular , with a rounded outside edge on which there hung a series of tabs or tassels . It bore a resemblance to ornately carved " weather @-@ vanes " used aboard Viking longships .

Scholars conjecture that the raven flag was a symbol of Odin , who was often depicted accompanied by two ravens named Huginn and Muninn . Its intent may have been to strike fear in one 's enemies by invoking the power of Odin . As one scholar notes regarding encounters between the Christian Anglo @-@ Saxons and the invading pagan Scandinavians :

The Anglo @-@ Saxons probably thought that the banners were imbued with the evil powers of pagan idols , since the Anglo @-@ Saxons were aware of the significance of Óðinn and his ravens in Norse mythology .

= = Raven symbolism in Norse culture = =

The raven is a common iconic figure in Norse mythology . The highest god Odin had two ravens named Huginn and Muninn (" thought " and " memory " respectively) who flew around the world bringing back tidings to their master . Therefore , one of Odin 's many names was the " raven god " (Hrafnaguð) . In Gylfaginning (c . 1220) , the medieval Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson explains :

Odin was also closely linked to ravens because in Norse myths he received the fallen warriors at Valhalla , and ravens were linked with death and war due to their predilection for carrion . It is consequently likely that they were regarded as manifestations of the Valkyries , goddesses who chose the valiant dead for military service in Valhalla . A further connection between ravens and Valkyries was indicated in the shapeshifting abilities of goddesses and Valkyries , who could appear in the form of birds .

The raven appears in almost every skaldic poem describing warfare . To make war was to feed and please the raven (hrafna seðja , hrafna gleðja) . An example of this is found in Norna @-@ Gestis þáttur , where Regin recites the following poem after Sigurd kills the sons of Hunding :

Above all , kennings used in Norse poetry identify the raven as the bird of blood , corpses and battle ; he is the gull of the wave of the heap of corpses , who screams dashed with hail and craves morning steak as he arrives at the sea of corpses (Hlakkar hagli stokkin már valkastar báru , krefr morginbráðar er kemr at hræs sævi) .

In black flocks , the ravens hover over the corpses and the skald asks where they are heading (Hvert stefni þér hrafnar hart með flokk hinn svarta) . The raven goes forth in the blood of those fallen in battle (Ód hrafn í valblóði) . He flies from the field of battle with blood on his beak , human flesh in his talons and the reek of corpses from his mouth (Með dreyrgu nefi , hold loðir í klóum en hræs þefr ór munni) . The ravens who were the messengers of the highest god , Huginn and Muninn , increasingly had hellish connotations , and as early as in the Christian Sólurljóð , stanza 67 , the ravens of Hel (l) (heljar hrafnar) who tear the eyes off backtalkers are mentioned . Two curses in the Poetic Edda say " may ravens tear your heart asunder " (Þit skyli hjarta rafnar slíta) . and " the ravens shall tear out your eyes in the high gallows " (Hrafnar skulu þér á hám galga slíta sjónir ór) . Ravens are thus seen as instruments of divine (if harsh and unpleasant) justice .

Despite the violent imagery associated with them , early Scandinavians regarded the raven as a largely positive figure ; battle and harsh justice were viewed favorably in Norse culture . Many Old Norse personal names referred to the raven , such as Hrafn , Hrafnkel and Hrafnhild .

= = Usage = =

= = = Late 9th century = = =

The raven banner was used by a number of Viking warlords regarded in Norse tradition as the sons of the Danish Ragnar Lodbrok . The first mention of a Viking force carrying a raven banner is in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle . For the year 878 , the Chronicle relates :

And in the winter of this same year the brother of Ivar and Halfdan landed in Wessex , in Devonshire , with 23 ships , and there was he slain , and 800 men with him , and 40 of his army . There also was taken the war flag (guðfani) , which they called " Raven " .

The 12th century Annals of St Neots claims that a raven banner was present with the Great Heathen Army and adds insight into its seiðr- (witchcraft-) influenced creation and totemic and oracular nature :

Geffrei Gaimar 's Estorie des Engles (written around 1140) mentions the Hrafnsmarki being borne by the army of Ubbe at the Battle of Cynwit (878) : " [t] he Raven was Ubbe 's banner (gumfanun) . He was the brother of Iware ; he was buried by the vikings in a very big mound in Devonshire , called Ubbelawe . "

== 10th century ==

In the 10th century , the raven banner seems to have been adopted by Norse Gaelic kings of Dublin and Northumbria . Many of the Norse Gaelic dynasts in Britain and Ireland were of the Uí Ímair clan , which claimed descent from Ragnar Lodbrok through his son Ivar . A triangular banner appearing to depict a bird (possibly a raven) appears on a penny minted by Olaf Cuaran around 940 . The coin features a roughly right isosceles triangular standard , with the two equilateral sides situated at the top and staff , respectively . Along the hypotenuse are a series of five tabs or tassels . The staff is topped by what appears to be a cross ; this may indicate a fusion of pagan and Christian symbolism .

The raven banner was also a standard used by the Norse Jarls of Orkney . According to the Orkneyinga Saga , it was made for Sigurd the Stout by his mother , a völva or shamanic seeress . She told him that the banner would " bring victory to the man it 's carried before , but death to the one who carries it . " The saga describes the flag as " a finely made banner , very cleverly embroidered with the figure of a raven , and when the banner fluttered in the breeze , the raven seemed to be flying ahead . " Sigurd 's mother 's prediction came true when , according to the sagas , all of the bearers of the standard met untimely ends . The " curse " of the banner ultimately fell on Jarl Sigurd himself at the Battle of Clontarf :

Earl Sigurd had a hard battle against Kerthialfad , and Kerthialfad came on so fast that he laid low all who were in the front rank , and he broke the array of Earl Sigurd right up to his banner , and slew the banner bearer . Then he got another man to bear the banner , and there was again a hard fight . Kerthialfad smote this man too his death blow at once , and so on one after the other all who stood near him . Then Earl Sigurd called on Thorstein the son of Hall of Sida , to bear the banner , and Thorstein was just about to lift the banner , but then Asmund the White said , " Don 't bear the banner ! For all they who bear it get their death . " " Hrafn the Red ! " called out Earl Sigurd , " bear thou the banner . " " Bear thine own devil thyself , " answered Hrafn . Then the earl said , " `Tis fittest that the beggar should bear the bag ; ' " and with that he took the banner from the staff and put it under his cloak . A little after Asmund the White was slain , and then the earl was pierced through with a spear .

== Early 11th century ==

The army of King Cnut the Great of England , Norway and Denmark bore a raven banner made from white silk at the Battle of Ashingdon in 1016 . The Encomium Emmae reports that Cnut had a banner which gave a wonderful omen . I am well aware that this may seem incredible to the reader , but nevertheless I insert it in my veracious work because it is true : This banner was woven of the cleanest and whitest silk and no picture of any figures was found on it . In case of war , however , a raven was always to be seen , as if it were woven into it . If the Danes were going to win

the battle , the raven appeared , beak wide open , flapping its wings and restless on its feet . If they were going to be defeated , the raven did not stir at all , and its limbs hung motionless .

The Lives of Waltheof and his Father Sivard Digri (The Stout) , the Earl of Northumberland , written by a monk of Crowland Abbey (possibly the English historian William of Ramsey) , reports that the Danish jarl of Northumbria , Sigurd , was given a banner by an unidentified old sage . The banner was called Ravenlandeye .

According to the Heimskringla , Harald Hardrada flew a raven banner called Landøyðan or " Land @-@ waster " ; whether this was the same banner as that flown by Sigurd of Northumbria is unclear . In a conversation between Harald and King Sweyn II of Denmark ,

Sveinn asked Haraldr which of his possessions of his he valued most highly . He answered that it was his banner (merki) , Landøyðan . Thereupon Sveinn asked what virtue it had to be accounted so valuable . Haraldr replied that it was prophesied that victory would be his before whom this banner was borne ; and added that this had been the case ever since he had obtained it . Thereupon Sveinn said , " I shall believe that your flag has this virtue if you fight three battles with King Magnús , your kinsman , and are victorious in all . "

Years later , during Harald 's invasion of England , Harald fought a pitched battle against two English earls outside York . Harald 's Saga relates that

when King Haraldr saw that the battle array of the English had come down along the ditch right opposite them , he had the trumpets blown and sharply urged his men to the attack , raising his banner called Landøyðan . And there so strong an attack was made by him that nothing held against it .

Harald 's army flew the banner at the Battle of Stamford Bridge , where it was carried by a warrior named Frírek . After Harald was struck by an arrow and killed , his army fought fiercely for possession of the banner , and some of them went berserk in their frenzy to secure the flag . In the end the " magic " of the banner failed , and the bulk of the Norwegian army was slaughtered , with only a few escaping to their ships .

Other than the dragon banner of Olaf II of Norway , the Landøyðan of Harald Hardrada is the only early Norwegian royal standard described by Snorri Sturluson in the Heimskringla .

In two panels of the famous Bayeux tapestry , standards are shown which appear to be raven banners . The Bayeux tapestry was commissioned by Bishop Odo , the half @-@ brother of William the Conqueror ; as one of the combatants at the Battle of Hastings , Odo would have been familiar with the standards carried into the fight . In one of the panels , depicting a Norman cavalry charge against an English shield @-@ wall , a charging Norman knight is depicted with a semicircular banner emblazoned with a standing black bird . In a second , depicting the deaths of Harold Godwinson 's brothers , a triangular banner closely resembling that shown on Olaf Cuaran 's coin lies broken on the ground . Scholars are divided as to whether these are simply relics of the Normans ' Scandinavian heritage (or for that matter , the Scandinavian influence in Anglo @-@ Saxon England) or whether they reflect an undocumented Norse presence in either the Norman or English army .

= = Modern reception = =

Despite claims that the Hrafnsmarki was " the first European flag in the New World " , there is no indication that it was ever carried as a universal flag of Scandinavians , and no source assigns it to the Vinland settlers (or any other Icelandic or Greenlandic group) .

It is still used by some Danish army regiments , such as the shoulder sleeve insignia on the Guard Hussars regiment 's 1st Battalion 1st Tank Squadron .

In Shetland an alternate form of the banner (black raven on a rectangular , red field) is used as the symbol of Up @-@ Helly @-@ Aa , a festival that celebrates the Islands ' Norse heritage .