

Explaining Hrafnagaldr Odins (Song of Odin's Ravens)
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Abstract:

All stanzas of the poem *Hrafnagaldr Odins* (Song of Odin's Ravens) are explained and its meaning revealed. In summary, a foreboding dream leads to some consternation and the gods seek a sign as to whether Ragnarok approaches. Idunn drops into Niflheim and Odin sends the gods Heimdall, Loki, and Bragi down to inquire of her what she knows, to see if she can reveal their fate. Going to her there she is so stricken with sadness that she reveals nothing to them; they return to a feast Odin has prepared only to tell him as much. They adjourn and all go off to bed. Heimdall rises on the next day. From its content there is no reason to presume the poem is fragmentary, but presages Ragnarok, the details of which might have come from a separate poem. The details of Ragnarok are well represented within Eddic sources.

Introduction (www.northvegr.org)

This very obscure poem has been regarded as a fragment only of a poem, of which the beginning and end are wanting. With regard to the beginning, the want may possibly be more apparent than real; the strophes 2-5 being in fact a sort of introduction, although they do not at first strike us as such, in consequence of the obscurity of the 1st strophe, which seems very slightly connected with the following ones, in which the gods and dwarfs are described as in council, on account of certain warnings and forebodings of their approaching downfall, or Ragnarök. Another point of difficulty is its title, there being nothing in the whole poem to connect it with Odin's ravens, except the mention of Hugn (Hugin) in the 3rd strophe. Erik Halson, a learned Icelander, after having spent or wasted ten years in an attempt to explain this poem, confessed that he understood little or nothing of it. In its mythology, too, we find parts assigned to some of the personages, of which no traces occur in either Sæmunds' or Snorri's Edda; though we are hardly justified in pronouncing it, with more than one scholar of eminence, a fabrication of later times.

Interpretation

Let us examine this poem stanza by stanza.

Poem Stanza (www.northvegr.org)	Explanation
<i>Alfather works, the Alfar discern, the Vanir know, the Nornir indicate, the Ividia brings forth, men endure, the Thursar await, the Valkyriur long.</i>	All are in expectation.
<i>The forebodings the Æsir suspected to be evil; treacherous Vættar had the runes confounded. Urd was enjoined to guard Odhrerir, powerfully to protect it against the increasing multitude.</i>	The gods had sensed something was ominous. The portents spoken of by the readers of the runes look bad, the <i>Vaettar</i> (spirits, apparently dwarves) had made the runes of divination unclear. Urd (one of the Norns) is asked to guard Odhrerir from all the number that have come to seek prophecy. ¹
<i>Hug then goes forth, explores the heavens, the powers fear disaster from delay. 'Twas Thrain's belief that the dream was ominous; Dain's thought that the dream was dark.</i>	Fearing the worst, Odin sends forth his raven Hugin. The dwarfs Thrain and Dain predict that the dream (that must have triggered these events) presages doom.
<i>Among the dwarfs virtue decays; worlds sink down to Ginnung's abyss. Oft will Asvid strike them down, oft the fallen again collect.</i>	This appears to imply that the integrity of the world has been lost, portending that it will begin to fragment. The worlds sinking down into Ginnungagap, the yawning abyss from which the earth formed. The role of the giant Asvid is not as clear, perhaps it implies earthquakes.
<i>Stand no longer shall earth or sun. The stream of air with corruption laden shall not cease. Hidden is in Mim's limpid well men's certain knowledge. Understand ye yet, or what?</i>	The earth and Sun will no longer exist, the rising smoke is not merely from a fleeting conflagration. In essence that this is the coming of Ragnarok, not a transient disaster. That the answer lies in Mimir's well (essentially the same as Urd's well), the fate of both gods and men is certain.
<i>In the dales dwells the prescient Dis, from Yggdrasil's ash sunk down, of alfen race, Idun by name, the youngest of Ivaldi's elder children.</i>	In the dales dwells the prescient goddess, from Odin's horse's ash (i.e. Yggdrasil) fell down Idunn of the elfin race, the youngest of Ivaldi's elder children (i.e. the gods).
<i>She ill brooked her descent, under the hoar tree's trunk confined. She wuld [would] not happy be with Nörvi's daughter, accustomed to a pleasanter abode at home.</i>	She disliked her descent into the underworld, would not be happy with Norvi's daughter (night, i.e. darkness), accustomed to a pleasanter abode at home.
<i>The triumphant gods saw Nanna sorrowing in earth's deep sanctuaries; a wolf's skin they gave her, in which herself she clad, changed her feelings, practised guile, alter'd her aspect.</i>	The Aesir saw the goddess sorrowing in Niflheim, so they gave her a wolf-skin in which to cover herself and thus she recovered her senses.

¹ In this sense *Odhrerir*, known for holding the mead of poetry, is actually sought here as a source of prophecy.

<i>Vidrir selected Bifröst's gaurdian [guardian], of the Giöll-sun's keeper to inquire all that she knew of every world; Bragi and Lopt should witness bear.</i>	Odin selected Heimdall to inquire all that she knew of every world, Bragi and Loki should bear witness to what she would say.
<i>Magic songs they sung, rode on wolves the god and gods. At the heavenly house, Odin listened, in Hlidskjalf; let them go forth on their long way.</i>	The three As sang magic songs and rode on wolves. Odin listened in his hall Hlidskjalf, let them go forth on their long way.
<i>The wise god asked the cupbearer of the gods' progeny and their associates, whether of heaven, or Hel, or earth, she knew the origin, duration, or dissolution?</i>	Odin asked the cupbearer of mankind (i.e. Bragi) whether of heaven or Hel or earth she knew the origin, duration, or dissolution.
<i>She spoke not, she could no words to the anxious gods bring forth, nor a sound uttered; tears flowed from the head's orbs; with pain repressed they flow anew.</i>	She did not speak, could not satisfy their enquiries, and spoke not a sound. Tears flowed from her eyes at their questions.
<i>As from the east, from Elivagar, the thorn is impelled by the ice-cold Thurs, wherewith Dain all people strikes over the fair mid-earth;</i> <i>when every faculty is lulled, the hands sink, totters with drowsiness the bright, sword-girt As; drives away the current, the giantess's blandishment of the mind's agitations of all people,</i>	In other words, one struck with sickness. ²
<i>so to the gods appeared Jorun to be affected, with sorrows swollen, when they no answer got; they strove the more the greater the repulse; still less than they had hoped did their words prevail.</i>	So it appeared to the gods Idunn was thus affected (with sickness) when they received no answers from her. The more they strove the greater she resisted them. They were unable to gain any ground regarding their questions.
<i>When the leader of the inquiring travellers, the gaurdian of Herian's loud-sounding horn took the son of Nal for his companion, Grinnir's skald at the place kept watch.</i>	When Heimdall took Loki for his companion, Odin's skald (i.e. Bragi) at the place kept watch.
<i>Vingolf reached Vidur's ministers, both borne by Forniots kin. They entered, and the Æsir forthwith saluted, at Ygg's convivial meeting.</i>	Odin's ministers (Heimdall, Loki and Bragi) reached Vingolf (Odin's Hall) upon their wolves. They entered and forthwith saluted at Odin's peaceful assembly.
<i>Hangatyr they hailed, of Æsir the most blissful; potent drink in the high seat they wished him to enjoy, and the gods to sit happy at the feast, ever with Yggiung pleasure to share.</i>	They hailed Odin, mead in the high seat they wished him to enjoy, and the gods to sit, happy at the feast, ever with Yggiung (Ygg's house) pleasure to share
<i>On benches seated, at Bölverk's bidding, the company of gods were with Sæhrimnir sated. Skögun at the tables, from Hnikar's vessel,</i>	On the benches seated at Odin's bidding, the company of gods ate their fill of the boar Saerhimmir. Skogul (a Valkyrie) at the tables,

² "In the concept of *Thurs* as being evil giants there are possibly also characteristics of a demon of disease which derives from Medieval Scandinavian folklore in which a *Thurs* can particularly damage women in body and spirit." (Simek 1993: 333)

<i>measured out mead, in Mimir's horns.</i>	from Odin's vessel measured out mead into their drinking horns.
<i>Of many things inquired, when the meal was over, the high gods of Heimdall, the goddesses of Loki, - whether the maid had uttered divinations or wise words?- From noon until twilight's advent.</i>	Of many things inquired, when the meal was over the Aesir and Asyniur whether Idunn had uttered divinations or wise words from noon until the coming of twilight.
<i>Ill they showed it had fallen out, their errand bootless, little to glory in. A lack of counsel seemed likely, how from the maiden they might an answer get.</i>	It had not boded well for them, their wild goose chase brought no fame. That they did not receive any answers from Idunn to their questions.
<i>Omi answered; "Night is the time for new counsels; till the morrow let reflect each one competent to give advice helpful to the Aesir."</i>	Odin suggested that they should take the night to think it over, then tomorrow the Aesir would present their best advice.
<i>Ran along the ways of mother Rind, the desired repast of Fenrisulf. Went from the guild, bade the gods farewell Hropt and Frigg, as, before Hrimfaxi, the son of Delling urged on his horse adorned with precious jewels. Over Mannheim shines the horse's mane, the steed Dvalin's deluder drew in his chariot. In the north boundary of the spacious earth, under the outmost root of the noble tree, went to their couches Gygiar and Thursar, spectres, dwarfs, and Murk Alfs.</i>	The Sun set, the gods bid farewell to Odin and Frigg. Darkness and stars move across the sky over the earth, as the horse pulled the chariot of Night. The spirits then retreat back to the north into Niflheim as dawn approaches. In other words, night passed
<i>The powers rose, the Alfs' illuminator northwards towards Niflheim chased the night. Up Argjöll ran, Ulfrun's son, the mighty hornblower, of heaven's heights.</i>	The gods awoke, the Sun chases away the last traces of night towards the north (i.e. where darkness is last dispelled). Up Heimdall ran, the mighty horn-blower. In other words, Heimdall rises in the morning only to herald the coming of Ragnarok.

To summarize the essential features: a foreboding dream leads to some consternation and the gods seek a sign as to whether Ragnarok approaches. Idunn drops into Niflheim and Odin sends the gods Heimdall, Loki, and Bragi down to inquire of her what she knows, to see if she can reveal their fate. Going to her there she is so stricken with sadness that she reveals nothing to them; they return to a feast Odin has prepared only to tell him as much. They adjourn and all go off to bed. Heimdall rises on the next day.

Continuation

The poem here ends, yet there can be no question as to what follows given the mention of Heimdall who ran up, recognizing that on the morn that it was Ragnarok. The events that follow thus would continue in the same manner as they do in *Voluspa*:

Loud blows Heimdall, his horn is aloft. Odin speaks with Mim's head. The ash Yggdrasil shakes as it stands, the ancient tree groans, and the giant gets free.

What is it with the Æsir? What is it with the elves? All Giantland resounds. Æsir are in council. Dwarfs groan before rock doorways, frequenters of rock-walls. Know you yet, or what?

Hrym drives from the east holding his shield before him, Iormungand writhes in a giant rage. The serpent churns the waves, the eagle will screech with joy, darkly pale it tears corpses, Naglfar is loosed.

A bark sails from the east, across the sea will come Muspell's troops with Loki at the helm. All that monstrous brood are there with the wolf. In company with them is Byleist's brother.

Surt travels from the south with the stick-destroyer [fire]. Shines from his sword the sun of the gods of the slain. Rock cliffs crash and troll-wives are abroad, heroes tread the road of Hel and heaven splits.

Then Hlin's second sorrow comes to pass as Odin goes to fight the wolf, and Beli's bright slayer against Surt. There shall fall Frigg's delight.

Odin's son goes to fight the wolf, Vidaron his way against the slaughterous beast. With his hand he lets his blade pierce Hvedrung's son's heart. So is his father avenged.

Goes the great son of Hlodyn, dying, to the serpent who shrinks from no shame. All heroes shall leave the world when Midgard's protector strikes in wrath.

The sun will go dark, earth sink in the sea. From heaven vanish bright stars. Steam surges and life's warmer [fire], high flame flickers against the very sky. (Sturluson 1987: 54-55)

There is thus no reason to believe that "The Song of Odin's Ravens" is fragmentary. The implication would have been clear from the final stanza that Ragnarok follows. It perhaps presaged a poem specifically detailing the events of Ragnarok, which between the Eddas are well known.

Sources

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