

## The Color Blue in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature

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### I

It has long been recognized that in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, the semantic area of the basic color term *blár* is something of an enigma. About a century ago, Waller (1910, 121) expressed uncertainly about its specific meaning in his study of the liturgical colors in medieval Iceland, noting that since violet does not appear, *blár* may have denoted this color and not blue.

Yet, it is the apparent overlap between *blár* and *svartr* that has received most commentary, for although *blár* is usually rendered as 'blue', compounds and phrases like *blár sem hel*, *hrafnblár*, and *blámaðr* seem puzzling, and in the Arnamagnæan Commission's *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, the term is translated as 'blue, blue-black, black' with the comment that 'a distinction between the two can often not be drawn.' The semantic overlap between the two colors has over the years prompted comments from several scholars. Valtýr Guðmundsson (1893, 189) argued that *blár* is an 'artificial' color and means either dark blue or raven-black. His argument was contested by Falk (1919, 40), who drew attention to the noun *bláfeldr*, claiming that *blár litr* is used not only about a dye, but also to denote a natural black color. The most recent comment is by the editors of *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (1997, 5,406), in which it is stated that '[t]he closest translation for *blár* as it was used at the time of the sagas is 'black', as can be seen from the fact that the word was used to describe, amongst other things, the colour of ravens.' It is argued that 'at this time it was impossible to create a dye that was jet-black,' and that '[t]he nearest thing was a very dark blue-black colour'; it is maintained that 'it is clearly this colour that *blár* refers to.' It is further argued that 'the Icelandic word *svartur* which nowadays means 'black' seems at this period to have referred mainly to a brown-black colour, as when it is used to describe horses.'

Common to all of the discussions of the usage of *blár* is that they have focused on textiles and clothing, and the color term has not yet been the object of comprehensive analysis. It is the aim of this paper to demonstrate through linguistic categorization the objects about which the hue adjectives *blár* and *svartr* are used, partly to show when there is a semantic area of overlap between them, and partly to determine if either or both should be assigned to sub-sets for certain objects and seen as restricted terms. The data for the usage of *blár* and *svartr* are drawn from the slips of the Arnamagnæan Commission's *Dictionary*, as well as from the following texts, which have all been excerpted: the *Poetic Edda*, the corpus of skaldic poetry, Snorri's *Edda*, saints' lives, the Sagas of Icelanders, the *Íslendinga þættir*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Morkinskinna*.

### II

The slips of the Arnamagnæan Commission's *Dictionary* and the examples from the above-mentioned texts have yielded well over 200 occurrences of *blár*. A number of

these are from eddic and skaldic poems. In the analysis below, it is specified how many of the examples of *blár* are from poetic texts, since often the color adjective is dictated by alliterative or metrical purposes. Compounds, such as *blárendr* or *kolblár*, are included in the examples.

The occurrences show that *blár* most frequently describes the color of fabrics and clothing:

*altarisblæja* 1, *altarisdúkr* 1, *brækr* 1, *dúkr* 1, *faldr* 4 (1 poetry), *feldr* 4 (1 poetry), *flakaolpa* 1, *hökull* 5, *hætr* 1, *kápa* 27, *kaprún* 1, *klæði* 9, *kufl* 3, *kyrtill* 11, *mark* 1, *mottull* 2, *refill* 1, *segl* 3 (1 poetry), *serkr* 1, *hekla* 6, *skikkja* 1, *skraufeldr* 1, *stakkr* 2, *tjald* 1 (poetry), *tyglamottull* 1, *veffarmottull* 1, *vegg* 1 (poetry).

Three times a person is described as being *bláklæddr*. Mention should also be made of *inar bláhvítu bækr* referred to in *Guðrúnarhvæt* (st. 4) and *Hamðismál* (st. 7); of *bláserkr*, which occurs in kennings in Bragi Boddason's *Ragnarsdrápa* (st. 6, *Skjaldedigting* 1, 2) and in a *lausavisa* by Gísli Súrsson (st. 12; *Skjaldedigting* 1, 98); and of the byname *bláhattr*, which is applied to Snorri Þórarinnsson in *Sturlunga saga*. Note also the phrase *falda bláu* in a *lausavisa* by Þorbjörn Brúnason (st. 1; *Skjaldedigting* 1, 198), where putting on a *blár* headdress is an expression of grief. A similar symbolic use of *blár* is found in *Jómsvíkinga saga*:

*lét hon tjalda ... blám reflum þar til er altjölduð var höllin fyrir því gerði hon svá at þat var hygginna manna ráð í þann tíma þá er harmsögur komu at eyrum mǫnnum at segja eigi með orðum* (14).

*Blár* is also commonly used to describe the color of bruised flesh. When a specific body part is mentioned, the distribution is as follows:

*armr* 1, *bolr* 1 (poetry), *búkr* 3 (1 poetry), *fótr* 3, *handlegg* 1, *hold* 1, *hgrund* 2, *legg* 1, *líkami* 1.

In most instances, altogether 24, no body part is specified, as in, for example, *Flóamanna saga*, where it is said about Þorgils Örrabeinsstjúpr Þórðarson that he was *víða blár* (275.5), or *Eyrbyggja saga*, where it is said about the shepherd that he was *allr kolblár* (93.12). In 15 of these instances, the wounded person is described as being *blár ok blóðugr*. Mention should also be made of the phrase *blár ok ljótr* (with which the poet refers to himself) in Eysteinn Ásgrímsson's *Lilja* (st. 77; *Skjaldedigting* 2, 410), where *blár* is clearly used in an abstract sense to denote sinful.

In some instances, *blár* describes complexion. On three occasions, a person is said to be *bláleitr*, and in Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa* (st. 3; *Skjaldedigting* 1,1), Erpr's brothers are said to be *hrafnbblár*. The compound *blámaðr* is commonly used about a person from *Bláland*, a term used for various parts of Africa. *Blár* is also used to describe the appearance of supernatural beings. On four occasions, it is used about a *berserkr* and once it is used about a troll. Twice it is said about a ghost that he is *blár sem hel*: Glámr in *Grettis saga* and Þorólfr bægifótr in *Eyrbyggja saga*. The same color adjective is also used about the bones of the dead seeress in *Laxdæla saga*.

*Blár* is three times used about facial color to describe emotion, and on two occasions the person is said to be *blár sem hel*. From *Fóstbræðra saga*, it appears that turning *blár* is a sign of anger: *Eigi blánaði hann, þvíat honum rann eigi í bein reiði* (128.1-2). Otherwise, *blár* is used more specifically about the color of a person's eyes (9 examples) and lips (1 example).

*Blár* is also used about the color of a flame (5 examples) and metallic objects, that is, armor and weapons:

*bengrefill* 1 (poetry), *broddr* 1 (poetry), *brynja* 3, *Dragvendill* 1 (name of a sword [poetry]), *egg* 2 (poetry), *hjör* 2 (poetry), *hringr* 1 (coat of mail rings [poetry]), *Naðr* 1 (name of a sword [poetry]), *skjöldr* 2, *spjót* 1 (poetry), *sverð* 1 (poetry), *tennr* 1 (poetry).

Note also *bláar randar*, a kenning for a shield, in Egill Skalla-Grímsson's *Höfuðlausn* (st. 7; *Skjaldedigtning* 1, 31), *blár megináss Þunns*, a kenning for a spear in *Liðsmannaflokkur* (st. 3; *Skjaldedigtning* 1, 392), the compound *bláferill*, which is used in the kenning *bláferill odds* (for a shield) in Snorri's *Edda* (*Háttatal* st. 31; *Skjaldedigtning* 2, 69), and the fact that in one of the *Pulur fagrbláinn* is listed as a *heiti* for a shield (IV r st. 3; *Skjaldedigtning* 1, 665). On the whole, though, *blár* is rarely used about material things. The only exceptions are the *pilarr* in *Dínus saga drambláta* (92.20) and *Kirjalax saga* (65.20), the *skrælingar*'s missile (*knöttur mikill*) in *Eiríks saga rauða* (429.15), and the impure silver (*blásilfr*) in AM 736 III 4to (ed. Kaalund 1884-1891, 200.21). On several occasions, however, *blár* is used in kennings for ships or boats, as in, for example, *blá borð* in Sighvatr Þórðarson's *Nesjavísur* (st. 1; *Skjaldedigtning* 1, 217).

*Blár* is not particularly common in nature, but occurs in descriptions of the color of water, air, stones, plants, and birds:

Water: *bára* 1 (poetry), *dúfa* 1 (poetry), *brekafal* 1 (poetry), *hrönn* 1 (poetry), *sjór* 2, *unnr* 2 (poetry), *ægir* 1 (poetry); Air: *himinn* 1 (poetry), *reykr* 2; Stones: *marmari* 1, *steinn* 3; Plants: *iris* 1; Birds: *gagl* 1 (poetry), *gammr* 1 (poetry), *gjóðr* 1 (poetry), *hrafn* 2 (poetry), *Muninn* 1 (name of a raven [poetry]), *skári* 1 (poetry), *svanr* 1 (poetry).

In connection with birds, it should be noted that *hrafn* seems implied in *Af Ragnarssaga loðbrókar* (st. 2; *Skjaldedigtning*, 254), where *blár* is used as a noun. With regard to water, mention should be made of the compound *bládjúp* (*Guðmundar saga biskups* 179.24, 181.1) and the *heiti* or kennings for the sea that involve use of *blár*: *bláland*, *bláföld*, *blámærr*, *blárçst bekkjar*, and *blár baldrekr*. With regard to air, it is noteworthy that, according to *Völuspá* (st. 9), *Bláinn* is the name of the giant Ymir; the name is thought to be an allusion to the fact that in Norse mythology the sky was believed to be fashioned from his skull. Moreover, in one of the *Pulur*, *viðbláinn* and *vindbláinn* are listed as *heiti* for the sky (IV mm. st. 1; *Skjaldedigtning*, 674).

### III

The examples of *svart* that have been culled from the materials examined reveal that in contrast to *blár*, *svart* is very commonly used as a byname; examples include *Án svart* (*Laxdæla saga*), *Bárðr svart* (*Njáls saga*), *Illugi svart* (*Egils saga*), and *Þórarinn svart* (*Eyrbyggja saga*). Presumably, these bynames describe in some way aspects of the physical appearance of the person in question, most likely the color of the person's facial hair or eyes; as evident from the following, these are the two features about which *svart* is most frequently used:

*andlit* 1, *auga/augu* 10 (3 poetry), *bringa* 1 (poetry), *brún/brýn* 5 (2 poetry), *flóki* 1, *hár* 20, *hold* 1, *hørund* 1, *llkami* 2, *skegg* 4, *skopt* 1 (poetry), *skor* 1 (poetry).

Often it is not entirely clear if the color adjective refers to hair color or complexion, as in the case of, for example, Bræll, who in *Rigspula* is described as *hørví svartan* (st. 7), or King Eysteinn, who in *Heimskringla* is described as *svartr maðr ok dækkliðaðr* (3, 379.12). About Björn blásiða in *Harðar saga*, for example, it is merely said that he was *mikill ok svartr* (1271.40), and about Þórhallr veiðimaðr in *Eiríks saga rauða* that he was *svartr ok þursligr* (423.3). Interestingly, a person who is described as being *svartr* in appearance is also often said to be ugly, disagreeable, or unpleasant (Gummere 1889, 28). Examples include Grímr, who in *Egils saga* is described as *svartr maðr ok ljótr* (368.29); Nollar, who in *Fljótsdæla saga* is described as *svartr maðr, manna mestr, illorðr ok óvinsæll* (248.18-19). The men who tormented Christ are in Eysteinn Ásgrímsson's *Lilja* referred to as *svartir seggir* (st. 58, *Skjaldedigtning* 2, 405).

On a few occasions, *svartr* is used to describe visible signs of emotion. Examples include: *Sveinungr var þústinn mjök ok litverpr. Stundum var hann bleikr sem bast en stundum svartr sem jörð* (*Fljótsdæla saga* 279.7-9) and *hvi ertu svá bleikr, en stundum svartr sem jörð; er eigi þat, at þú vilir svikja mik* (*Heimskringla* 1, 353.16-17).

*Svartr* is more common than *blár* in nature and occurs regularly to describe the color of domestic animals:

Weather: *hríð* 1, *skýflóki* 1, *sól* 4 (1 poetry), *sólskin* 1 (poetry), *veðr* 1, *þoka* 3; Water: *sjór* 4 (1 poetry), *vatn* 2; Plants: *björk* 1, *viola* 1; Mammals: *björn* 1, *gangari* 1, *gøltr* 1 (poetry), *hestr* 7, *hundr* 1, *hross* 1 (poetry), *jór* 3 (poetry), *ketta* 3, *kýr* 1, *merr* 1, *merrhross* 1, *stóðhross* 1, *uxi* (1 poetry), *æxn* 1 (poetry); Reptiles: *høggormr* 1, *ormr* 1, *vatnormr* 1; Birds: *fugl* 1 (poetry), *hjaldragai* 1 (poetry), *hrafn* 4 (2 poetry); Fish: *fiskr* 1.

In connection with weather, it should be noted that the verb *sortna* occurs twice with *sól* as its subject and twice without a subject (*sortnaði fyrir augum, sortnaði um hana* [*Heilagra manna sögur* 1, 445.9, 2, 642.33]).<sup>1</sup> The color adjective is three times used to describe the darkness of the night (*nótt*). In connection with animals, it should be mentioned that *Svarfaxi* and *Alsvartr* appear as names of horses in *Harðar saga* and in one of the *Þulur* (IV π st.4; *Skjaldedigtning* 1, 676).

The *ketta* listed among mammals above is the *kolsvört ketta* in *Orms þátr Stórolfssonar*. This is not ordinary cat, but the mother of a troll, and, indeed, *svartr* is commonly used to describe the physical appearance of supernatural beings. The troll-women in *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* are said to be *mjök svartar* (358.20); the ghost that appears in the dreams of Þórðr and Guðmundr in *Sturlunga saga* is said to be *svartr ok illiligr* (1, 217.19, 28); and the apparition (witchride) seen by Hildiglúmr in *Njáls saga* is said to be *svartr sem bik* (321.2). The color adjective is also used about a number of mythological creatures: *Nótt*, the wife of the giant Narfi, for

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *svart fyr sjónum* (*Orvar-Odds saga* st. 2, *Skjaldedigtning* 2, 313; and *Ketils saga hængs* st. 5, *Skjaldedigtning* 2, 302), a phrase about a dying person.

example, is said to be *svört ok dökk, sem hon átti ætt til* (Snorri's *Edda* 17.10), and the *Døkkalfar* (also called *Svartalfar*; Snorri's *Edda* 36.6, etc.) are said to be *svartari en bik* (Snorri's *Edda* 25.15). The devil (usually referred to as *djǫfull*, less commonly as *fiandi* or *andi*) is regularly described as being *svartr*. In one instance, the devil is said to be *svartr sem kol* (*Heilagra manna sögur* 1, 349.7); in another, the devil appears in the shape of a black fly (*svört fluga* [*Heilagra manna sögur* 1, 160.12]). The same color adjective is used to describe the devil's abode (*helvíti*) in a *lausavísa* by Sighvatr Þórðarson (st. 16; *Skjaldedigtning* 1, 250). The association of *svartr* with the supernatural may lie behind the descriptions of the blood of Óspakr in *Bandamanna saga* as *svart sem tjara* (36.21) and the bones of Þordís kerling in *Eyrbyggja saga* as *svört sem sviðin væri* (184.5).

*Svartr* is less common than *blár* in descriptions of the color of fabrics and clothing:

*bræk* 1, *ermakápa* 1, *feldr* 2, *kápa* 2, *kufi* 4 (1 poetry), *kyrtill* 2, *lambskinskofri* 1, *landtjald* 1, *segl* 1, *silki* 1, *silkitjald* 1, *skikkja* 1, *skinnstakkr* 1, *tjald* 4, *treyya* 1, *váð* 1 (poetry), *vesti* 2.

Once, a person is described as being *svarthlæddr*, and in five instances, clothing (*hlæði/klæðnaði*) is referred to with the color adjective *svartr*. In one of these, in *Malkúss saga*, reference is made to the practice of wearing black clothes to the funerals of deceased people: *þat var siðr forðum, at dauða menn ok aðrar skapraunir skyldi gráta í svörtum klæðnaði* (*Heilagra manna sögur* 1, 448.34). *Svarthlæddr* also appears as a kenning for a raven in Sturla Þórðarson's *Hrafnsmál* (st. 9; *Skjaldedigtning* 1, 129).

*Svartr* is also considerably less common than *blár* when it comes to describing metallic objects. There are two examples of *rönd* (both in poetry), one example of *skjöldr*, and one example of *sverð* (in poetry). Once, the handle of an axe (*skapt*) is referred to as being *svart af reyf* (*Egils saga* 413.30). A flame (*logr*) is once said to be *svartr*.

On a few occasions, *svartr* occurs in poetry in kennings or *heiti* for ships or parts of ships. (*Kol*)*svartir víðir*, for example, occurs four times. Otherwise, *svartr* is rarely used about material things. The only examples are *pilarr*, which occurs twice, and *púss*, which occurs once (in poetry).

Some examples are difficult to classify, because *svartr* is used in an abstract sense. In Jörunn skáldmæri's *Sendibitr*, *svartr* appears to mean unclear or dense:

*Haralds frá Halfdan spyrja*  
*herðibrögð, en lögðis*  
*sýnisk svartleitr reyni*  
*sjá bragr, ens hárfagra* (st. 2; *Skjaldedigtning* 1, 53).

In *Málsháttakvæði*, the term (*svartflekkótt*) seems to mean uneven:

*kunna vildak sjá við snörum,*  
*sjaldan kygg at gyggvi vörum,*  
*vel hefr hinn, er sitr of sitt,*  
*svartflekkótt er kvæði mitt* (st. 2; *Skjaldedigtning* 2, 143).

In *Jómsvíkinga saga*, it seems to mean devastation:

*þat svarta óáran mun koma ok nauð yfir landit at trautt munu dæmi til finnaz* (5.25-26).

And in *Legendae crucis*, the context suggests that the meaning of *svartr* is 'sinful':  
*Þá er Seth var til þessar ferðar búinn, sagði Adam, at hann skyldi ganga í austr, ok 'mantu hitta einn dal fyrir þér, ok man þar upp hefjaz vegr grænn, ok at þú kennir þann veg gjörr, þá mantu hitta fótspor mín ok móður þinnar svarðlaus ok svört, þau er við gengum þá er við vorum rekin ór paradisu ok hingat í þenna sonardardal (Heilagra manna sögur 1, 298.26-299.4).*

## IV

In his study of color, Birren (1963, 9) argues that '[t]o explore the mysteries of color, one may follow many intriguing pathways through many fields of learning ... All yield up information concerning color -- baffling, contradictory, challenging, illuminating.' The results of this exploration of the mystery of *blár* through the pathway of Old Norse-Icelandic literature are no exception; they are all of these four things.

The data show that *blár* plays a considerable role in the description of clothing and fabrics. Evidently, clothing in this color was very common. Its common use in textile may lie behind the comment in *Lárentíuss saga biskups*:

*Ber þessi klæði [brún klæði] hátíðisdaga, en tak ... peninga til at kaupa yðr með blá klæði at bera dagliga (16.22-24).<sup>2</sup>*

The data suggest that both *blár* and *svartr* can be applied to *brók, feldr, kápa, kufl, kyrtil, skikkja*, all items of clothing, as well as to *segl* and *tjald*. Only *blár* is used about *faldr, flakaolpa, hōtr, kaprún, mottull, serkr, skauthekla*, and *stakkr*, all items of clothing, as well as about church accessories (*altarisblæja, altarisdukr, dúkr, hōkull*), *mark* (of embroidery), *refill*, and *veggr*. And only *svartr* is used about silk or items made of silk, *váð*, and the following items of clothing: *lambskinskofri, skinnstakki, treyja*, and *vesti*. Since *blár* is not used to describe the color of clothing that is not specifically said to be made of skin, and since it is never used about the coat or fur of mammals,<sup>2</sup> it seems reasonable to propose that *blár* was restricted, as least originally and as far as textiles is concerned, to a dye. It is difficult to know the exact hue of this dye, but that *blár* and *svartr* were differentiated is clear from, for example, *Laxdæla saga*:

*Þat var búningr hans [Ljós] hversdagsliga, at hann hafði svartan kyrtil ok refði í hendi, en ef hann bjósk til viga, þá hafði hann blán kyrtil ok éxi snaghyrnda (245.5-7).*

The quote from *Laxdæla saga* is one of several examples in the sagas and *þættir* of Icelanders of men said to be wearing *blár* clothing (usually a *kápa*) when they are

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the comment by Pastoureau (2001, 32): 'As in Roman antiquity, blue had little symbolic or aesthetic value in European culture of the high Middle Ages ... Blue was valued even less than green, the color of vegetation and death, which was sometimes intermediary between the three principal colors. Blue was nothing, or very little; it was even absent from the sky, which most authors and artists portrayed as white, red, or gold. None of this prevented blue from having a place in daily life, especially in fabrics and clothing of the Merovingian period (sixth-eighth century A.D.).'

<sup>3</sup> Cf., however, the comment by Falk (1919, 40).

off to kill. The examples have been analyzed by Hansen (1979), who argues that in such instances the color term is used connotatively and symbolically.<sup>4</sup> He draws attention to the fact that the color itself contains a mythological allusion to *hel* (*blár sem hel*), and that when used to describe, for example, a *kápa*, it may refer to Óðinn, whose complex personality is in stark contrast to his simple, distinctive physiognomy: *Sá var í feildi blám ok nefndiz Grímnir (Grímnismál; Edda, 57.4)*. He is reluctant to suggest what exactly *blár* symbolizes in this context but believes that a hint may be given in *Þiðriks saga af Bern*; in the account of Þiðrikr's warriors, several colors are mentioned, including *blár*, about which it is said: *merkir blár litr kalt brjóst ok grímt hjarta* (2, 328.5-6). He also draws attention to the phrase *blár ok illiligr* (used about the bones of the dead seeress in *Laxdæla saga*), arguing that it underscores the symbolic use of *blár* to express the negative personal traits alluded to in *Þiðriks saga af Bern*. His argument is, however, contradicted by the above data, which show that *svartr* is the color term typically used in descriptions of people with unpleasant personal characteristics.<sup>5</sup> The data are in line with the statement by Jacobs and Jacobs (1958, 46) that '[t]o most peoples, darkness and blackness are linked with gloom and melancholy and, inevitably, with moral darkness.'

While *blár* (and not *svartr*) alludes to *hel* and to death,<sup>6</sup> *svartr* (and not *blár*) is used to describe *helvíti*, the Christian version of the underworld, and its ruler, the devil. *Svartr* is also generally the term used about the appearance of supernatural and mythological beings, although *blár* does occur. It seems probable that also here real color constitutes a secondary consideration and that *svartr* is used in a symbolic sense to convey negative associations. It is worth noting, for instance, that *blár* (and not *svartr*) is used to refer to black people, although *blámenn* can be *svartir* if they are evil or possess devilish traits. Telling examples are found in *Barthólómeuss saga* and *Tveggja postola saga Símons ok Júdass*. Both legends relate the destruction of an idol. In the former, a *blámaðr biki svartari* comes out of the idol; in the latter two *blámenn hrafni svartari* come out of the idol (*Postola sögur, 763.28, 791.9-10*).

Interestingly, while only *blár* is associated with death, both *blár* and *svartr* are used as signs of mourning. A case in point is the example quoted above from *Jómsvíkinga saga*. The text quoted is that of AM 291 4to, which makes symbolic use of *blár*. The *Flateyjarbók* text, on the other hand, makes symbolic use of *svartr*, and for *blám reflum* the manuscript has *svörtum tjöldum ok grám vefjum* (1, 105.37).

The data further reveal that *blár* is the term preferred to describe the color of metallic objects and the color of a flame. *Blár* is also the term used to describe the

<sup>4</sup> Attention should, perhaps, be drawn to the fact that, according to both Caesar and Tacitus, the Celts and Germans dyed their bodies blue in order to scare their enemies (Pastoureau 2001, 26). The possibility cannot be excluded that there may be a connection between this ancient custom and the fact that the Sagas and *þættir* of Icelanders often have men who are off to kill wear *blár* clothing.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the tract on 'the nature of man' in AM 435 12mo (ed. Kaalund 1917-1918, 97), where an explanation of the relationship between human physiognomy and character is given: *Svartr skinnslitr ok blandinn meðr lüfum bláma synir hrygga menn ok i lunderni þunga*.

<sup>6</sup> Jacobs and Jacobs (1958, 46) argue that '[i]t is natural to associate blue with death--'er ist mir na'gestlichen, der mich kann machen bla' (Grimm IV, 1555). See also Pastoureau (2001, 27), who claims that '[b]lue was often associated with death and the underworld.'

color of bruised flesh.<sup>7</sup> Otherwise, *blár* is rarely used to describe aspects of a person's physical appearance, although its frequency is comparable with that of *svartr* in descriptions of the color of a person's eyes. Aside from the byname *bláskeggr*, there is nothing to suggest that *blár* is used about human facial hair. Indeed, *svartr* is considerably more common in nature than *blár*, which does not appear at all in descriptions of the color of mammals, reptiles, and fish. Concerning the color of water and the sea, *blár* is limited to poetry with the exception of two occurrences in *Njáls saga*, where the term *kolblár* is used. Both *blár* and *svartr* are used to describe the color of birds (and even the same bird, the raven). It is interesting that *blár* is not commonly used to describe the sky (*himinn*), now one of its major referents.

## V

The analysis has, by necessity, been concerned primarily with color as it was named and not with color as it was perceived or objectively seen. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine if people in medieval Iceland 'saw' the color blue as we see it today. Color is above all a social phenomenon, and there is no transcultural truth to color perception.

The examples show that *blár* was equated with the color of the place of the dead (*hel*), the raven (*hrafn*), and coal (*kol*). As mentioned above, the association of *blár* with *hel* is almost certainly a symbolic one, and most likely this association extends also, at least in certain contexts, to the raven, which, too, has connections with Óðinn and with death (on the battlefield), but which in other contexts is said to be *svartr*.<sup>8</sup> Muninn, the better-known of Óðinn's two ravens is said to be *blásvartr* in a poem by Einarr Skúlason (st. 7; *Skjaldedigtning* 1, 452). The equation of *blár* with the color of coal suggests a dark color, for *svartr*, too, was equated with the color of coal and was further identified with the color of pitch (*bik*), earth (*jǫrð*), tar (*tjara*), and flax (*hǫrr*).<sup>9</sup>

It is probable that in origin *blár* simply meant a dark color, and that in response to a need to express the hue of a dye, the term gradually evolved into a basic color term. As demonstrated above, *blár* plays a significant role in the description of clothing and fabrics, and this area most likely indicates the source of the need for the color term, which, as Biggam (1997, 302) points out, did not exist in Primitive Germanic.<sup>10</sup> The dye would have been either a local product or woad, which, beginning in the 1230s, was produced on an industrial scale in Germany, England, France, and Spain, and which could produce shades from black to blue to green, depending on the quality and quantity of woad and the frequency with which the cloth to be dyed was immersed in the dye bath (Pastoureau 2001, 63-64; Leggett 1944, 37-

<sup>7</sup> Cf the comment by Birren (1963, 114): 'One untenable guess is that *blue* descended from a Gothic word meaning to beat, 'the color caused by a blow'.'

<sup>8</sup> See Hansen (1979, 24).

<sup>9</sup> *Svartr* is the conventional color for symbolizing earth (Blanch 1967, 70). The identification of *svartr* with the color of tar and flax occurs only once in the texts examined.

<sup>10</sup> She argues that 'Continental Germanics pressed into service a dark term to develop into a blue BCT [basic color term]' (303).



40).<sup>11</sup> The black color that could be produced with the help of woad was not a deep black color, however, for it was not until the late fourteenth century that dyers discovered a method for dyeing textiles in solid, saturated, deep black tones that had never been achieved before (Pastoureau 2001, 86). Most likely, this discovery caused the dark color lexicon to stabilize and made *blár* attach firmly to the blue spectrum. Based on the equation of *blár* with coal and the shades that could be obtained from the dyes, it seems that prior to this discovery *blár* denoted also shades of black.

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<sup>11</sup> Ekberg (1981, 17) believes that the local product was juice extracted from blueberries.

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