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The Shamanism Magazine

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We hope you enjoy reading the article. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)

Unkindness of Ravens or a murder of crows

Ravens and crows have a special place in the ancient myths of many cultures, and even in modern times fascination with them has not waned: from Poe's classic, to the film of James O'Barr's cult graphic novel 'The Crow,' they still exert a powerful pull on our psyche.



Corvids, the family of birds to which both ravens and crows belong, are sociable birds. All the birds in the family tend to form social groups and some, such as rooks, live together in large social settlements. Ravens are the largest of the family, and grow as large as three feet from beak to tail. They form groups as juveniles, but adults pair off into lifelong monogamous and extremely territorial relationships at around the age of three.

Corvids can be found all over the world, and are the largest of the songbirds. Other birds in the family include magpies, jackdaws, choughs and jays. Many of these birds have unusual plural names; for instance a group of crows is called a *murder* of crows, a group of choughs is a *chattering*, a group of jays is a *party*, *scold* or *band*, a group of magpies is a *tiding*, a group of rooks is a *parliament*, or a *building*, and group of ravens is called an *unkindness*, a *constable* or a *conspiracy*.

MYTHS IN NORTH AMERICA

In European lore, ravens and crows are often interchangeable in myths, and the appearance of one or the other in a story depends often as much on the story teller as it does on the story itself. In Native American traditions, however, this interchange is not found, and

generally a tribe holds tales specific to the species of the bird involved.

Raven, in these traditions, particularly those of the Northwest coastal peoples

magic, an easy life and power.

The journeys of Raven form the basis of most of the myths in the Northwest Coast, and he travels around meeting animals of all descriptions and usually succeeds in contests of wit with them, either destroying and eating them or driving them off and securing their food. The Haida people make a distinction between the first part of the Raven story cycle, in which he is truly creative, and the latter part, which consists of stories of his more base behaviour.

Young men are not allowed to laugh during the early part of the cycle, which is referred to as 'The Old Man Stories'. The Old Man Stories include

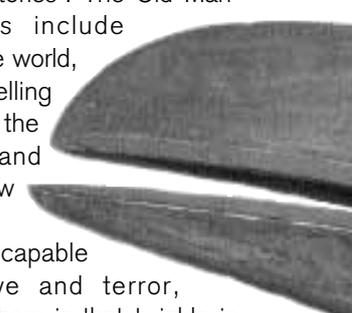
the creation of the world, and other tales telling how Raven stole the Sun, the Stars and the Moon, and how he stole Fire.

Raven is very capable of inspiring awe and terror, although always there is that twinkle in the eye and the knowledge that it can be only moments before he says something that will inspire laughter, albeit often irritated laughter as he hits the nail of truth well and truly, and sometimes uncomfortably, on the head. His creative nature usually shows itself through circumstance rather than intent, through the desire to satisfy his own needs,



such as the Tlingit and Haida, is both a creator spirit, trickster, hero or a villain, and often all of these at the same time. In nearly every single creation myth from the Northwest Coast region, Raven, in one of his guises, is either the actual creator of the world, or has a great part to play in its creation.

He is the greatest shapeshifter of them all, being able to change into anyone and anything to get what he wants. His character is very similar to that of Coyote, indeed, the two appear in stories carrying out very similar roles, the former in the North, the latter in the South. Both Coyote and Raven are driven by greed: Raven's for food, Coyote's for sex,



rather than any altruistic principles, but he seems genuinely fond of human beings. He is creative magic personified.

Some of the stories do have Crow as the main character, and the main difference appears to be that Crow stories explore the themes of justice rather than greed, even if justice is not always seen to be done.

MYTHS IN EUROPE

Ravens in European mythology are often

messengers,

or an alternate shape for gods and spirits, the most widely known being Bran and Odin.

Odin's two ravens, are *Huginn* and *Muninn* (Thought and Memory). Odin sends the birds off around the world at day break each day to bring him news. Odin also has

two wolves, *Geri* and

Freki, (The Ravener and The Glutton).

Both of these

names are

extremely

suited to

ravens as

well as

wolves and

perhaps

hint at the

nature of their

relationship. In

nature, wolves and ravens

have an old and close connection. In

countries where both animals live

together, a great deal of a raven's food

comes from scavenging

carcasses left



by wolves, especially during the hungry winter months.

Many of the old Celtic goddesses associated with war and battle, such as *Badb*,

Macha and *Nemain* are linked with the raven or crow, as is *Nantosuelta*, a Gaulish water and healing goddess. The wife of the Fomorian sea-god, *Tethra*, was said to be a crow goddess who hovered above battlefields, and Scottish myth has the *Cailleach Bheure*, who often appeared in crow form.

The association of the birds with death and war is an obvious reflection

of its tendency

to eat

carriage, plenty of

which is to be found in the aftermath

of battle. This tendency led,

eventually, to the persecution of the

raven, as a harbinger of doom and destruction, and also to a common

notion in modern European culture that crows and ravens are connected

with the

Otherworld. One old Scottish term

for someone recently deceased is to say 'they have gone up the crow

road'.

The other main characteristic of raven in Irish and Welsh myth is that of

prophecy, and as a messenger from the gods. Bran the Blessed (*Bendigeidfran*)

is perhaps the best known of the ancient Celtic gods associated with the

raven, not least because of his association with the

Tower of London, where ravens are of course still kept, (albeit with clipped wings), in order to assure the safety of the realm.

Bran's head, which he ordered to be cut off after being mortally wounded in the foot, is said to be buried in the White Tower. His head continued to talk after it was removed from his body and in this way he was able to give instructions about how to win the battle and where to take the head afterwards.

Ravens are also seemingly connected with the game of chess. In the

very early Welsh tales of Arthur, which the later mediaeval stories were based upon,

Owain ap Urien and Arthur were playing a game of chess. During the game, Arthur's

men attacked three hundred ravens, which Owain

had

earlier

been

given as a

gift. Eventually Owain told the birds to retaliate against their attackers, upon

which they tore into Arthur's men unmercifully. One of the pieces in chess

is of course the castle or rook, another member of the corvus family.

Arthur is also sometimes associated with the cult of Mithras, which was popular with the Roman legions. The cult

organisation was based upon seven ranks that a worshipper could pass through, and the first of these was Raven. In Cervantes' book *Don Quixote*, the hero states that

Arthur was not killed at all but was turned into a raven.

In nearly all cultures, the raven or crow

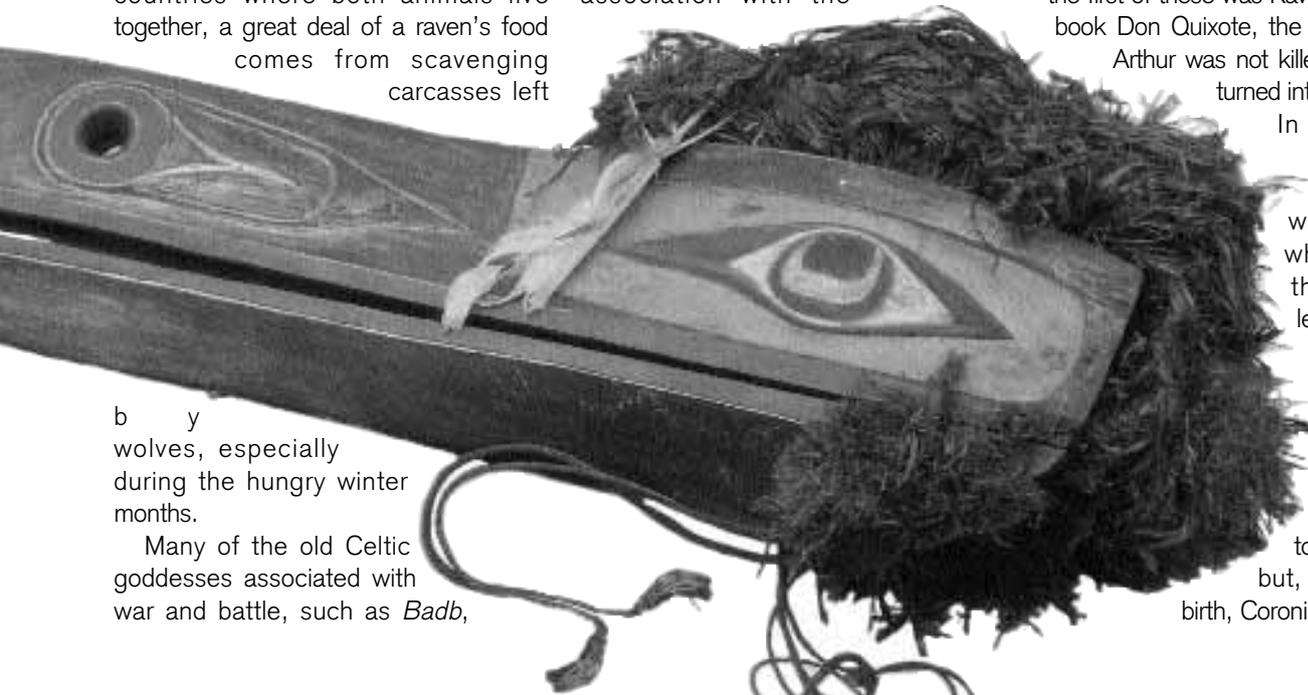
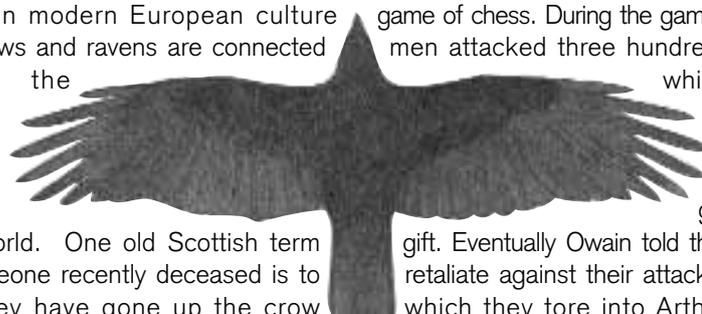
was originally white. In one of the Greek

legends, Coronis, the daughter of Phlegyes was

pregnant by Apollo. Apollo left a white crow (or raven)

to watch over her, but, just before the

birth, Coronis married Ischys.



The crow informed Apollo of this, and Apollo became furious, he killed Coronis and Ischys, and turned the crow black for being the bearer of such bad news.

RAVENS APPETITE

Raven is driven on his quest to fulfil his appetite, whether this be food, news, the slain on the battlefield, the spirits of the dead, healing or prophecies of the future.

He is a creature of need, want, greed and gluttony, and can demonstrate a possessive and jealous nature. But from that need and want, from the satisfaction of that appetite, great acts of creativity arise. Those acts of creativity, his greatest acts of magic, are not usually under his control, are not generally by his design, but arise through his attempts to satisfy the hunger he has. Raven can do almost anything, and will, but only if he gains by it. Above all he is a creature of paradox, and to take him at face value is to ignore his devious nature.

PHOTOS:

Page 32 - top: Tlingit raven knife handle.

Centre: dark crime fighter The Crow, still shows our fascination with the magical side of the corvid family. Page 33 - top: the outstretched shape of the raven with its round tail makes it easy to spot compared with (below) the crow's square-ended tail. Centre left: a Northwest Coast stylised image of Great Raven, the cultural hero and trickster bird.

Top right: a small copper alloy votive statue of Odin showing his blind eye and his good eye. Bottom: a Kwakiutl raven mask.

This page: Raven the Creator, Northwest Coast wood carving, showing the Haida tale of how Raven found the first people in a clam shell on the beach.

Sacred Hoop would like to thank Stephen Fountain for help with this article.

Raven and the First People

A Haida Creation Story

After the waters of the great flood had gone down and Raven had gorged himself on the delicacies left by the receding water, his curiosity and itch to meddle and play tricks remained. He gazed up and down the empty beach, there was no one to upset, or play tricks on. He crossed his wings behind him, strutted up and down and cawed loudly to the empty sky. But before the echoes of his cry faded, he heard a muffled squeak. Well, he looked up and down the beach but could see nothing. He strutted back and forth, once, twice, three times and still saw nothing. Then he spied a flash of white in the sand and there, half buried, was a giant clamshell. As his shadow fell upon it, he heard another muffled squeak, and peering down into the opening between the two halves of the shell, he saw it was full of tiny creatures, cowering in fear.

Raven was delighted, but how was he to get the creatures to come out of their shell and play with him? He knew they were not going to come out if they were afraid of him, so he leaned his head close to the shell, and with all the cunning and skill of his smooth trickster's tongue, coaxed, and coerced the little creatures to come out and play in his wonderful shiny new world.

Well, it wasn't long before first one and then another of the little shell-dwellers emerged from the shell. Some scurried back when they saw Raven, but eventually curiosity overcame their caution and all of them finally stood on the sand at Raven's feet. Very strange creatures they were too. They had no feathers or fur. They had no beak. Their skin was pale, and they were naked except for the dark hair upon round, flat-featured heads. Instead of strong wings like raven, they had thin stick-like arms that waved and fluttered constantly. They were the first humans.

For a long time Raven amused himself with these playthings, laughing as they explored their new world. He even taught them some tricks, but soon he became tired of all their activity. For one thing, they were so helpless in the world they needed shelter from the sun and the rain, they were so fearful and seemed so small. And there were no girls among them, only boys. Raven was about to shove these, demanding and annoying creatures back into their shell and forget them, when, he had an idea for more fun. He began to search for the girls, for he knew there are both males and females of every creature. Somewhere there must be girls. Raven searched and searched. Under logs and behind rocks, he looked. But he could not find the hiding place of the first girls.

But as he searched, the tide was going out, and as it reached its lowest, the Raven spotted some giant limpets clinging to the rocks. Raven pried one loose with his beak, and there inside was a girl. He pried off another, and another, and in each was a girl. The girls were frightened of Raven, but he gathered them onto his back and brought them to the boys he had found in the clamshell.

Raven expected the boys to be happy that he had found the girls, but to his surprise they were frightened and some even ran back into the giant clamshell to hide. The girls were just as shy and huddled together watching the boys with fearful and curious eyes. Both the boy and girl creatures seemed very modest and tried to cover their bodies with strips of kelp and woven seaweed from the shore.

The boys were astonished and embarrassed and confused by feelings they had never before had; they didn't know how to behave. But some of them overcame their fear and began to do things to attract the attention of the girls. Some of the girls overcame their shyness, first with quick glances, then finally allowing the boys to come near them. Gradually the two groups began to mingle into one and just as gradually the boy creatures and girl creatures overcame all their fears and paired off, walking hand in hand, their eyes absorbed in each other totally.

And since that day, Raven has never been bored. In fact, at times he has almost regretted bringing the first men and women together. Many generations of people have been born now, and many have blamed Raven for playing a terrible joke on humanity, for often men and women just barely get along, but Raven still feels protective of these strange people.

