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 blår is something of an enigma. About a century ago, Walm (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, blår may have denoted this color and not blue.

Yet, it is the apparent overlap between blår and svart that has received most commentary, for although blår is usually rendered as ‘blue’, compounds and phrases like blår sem hel, hrafnbår, 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. Valthr Guðmundsson (1893, 189) argued that blår 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 bláfellr, claiming that blår 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 blår 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 raven.’ 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 blår 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 blår 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 blår and svart 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 blår and svart 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 Íslandinga 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 blår. 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), feðdr 4 (1 poetry), flækolpa 1, hóllur 5, hótrr 1, kápa 27, kaprin 1, klæði 9, kufl 3, kyrull 11, mark 1, mötull 2, refill 1, segl 3 (1 poetry), serkr 1, hekla 6, sk琪kja 1, skraufeldr 1, stakr 2, tjald 1 (poetry), tyglamötull 1, veðarmötull 1, vegr 1 (poetry).

Three times a person is described as being bláklaeddr. Mention should also be made of inar bláhvitu beðr referred to in Guðrúnartale (st. 4) and Hamðismál (st. 7); of bláserkr, which occurs in kennings in Bragi Boddason’s Ragnarsdrápa (st. 6, Skjaldeidning 1, 2) and in a lausavisa by Gissli Súrsson (st. 12; Skjaldeidning 1, 98); and of the byname bláhatt, which is applied to Snorri Þórarinnson in Sturlunga saga. Note also the phrase falda bláu in a lausavisa by Þórbjörn Brúnason (st. 1; Skjaldeidning 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 refsum þar til er altjóðduð var hollin fjörir þvi górdi
hon svá at þat var hygginna manna ráð í þann tína þar er harmsúgr
komu at eyrum mynnum at segja eigi með órúm (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), bükkr 3 (1 poetry), fótr 3, handlegr 1, hold 1,

hóund 2, leggr 1, likami 1.

In most instances, altogether 24, no body part is specified, as in, for example, Flóamanna saga, where it is said about Þorgils Órrabinsstjúpr Þórðarson that he was vida 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 Ægrinsson’s Lilja (st. 77; Skjaldeidning 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; Skjaldeidning 1,1), Erpr’s brothers are said to be hrafnblár. 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: Glámðr in Grettis saga and Þórobóðr bægifr 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, þvat 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), brodœr 1 (poetry), brynja 3, Dragvendill 1 (name of a sword [poetry]), egg 2 (poetry), hjær 2 (poetry), hringr 1 (coat of mail rings [poetry]), Naðr 1 (name of a sword [poetry]), skjóldr 2, spjótr 1 (poetry), sverð 1 (poetry), tennr 1 (poetry).

Note also blár randar, a kenning for a shield, in Egill Skalla-Grimsson’s Hœfuðlausn (st. 7; Skjaldeidgtn 1, 31), blár meginnæss punns, a kenning for a spear in Liddmannaflokkr (st. 3; Skjaldeidgtn 1, 392), the compound bláferill, which is used in the kenning bláferill odds (for a shield) in Snorri’s Edda (Háttatal st. 31; Skjaldeidgtn 2, 69), and the fact that in one of the Pulur fagblainn is listed as a heiti for a shield (IV r st. 3; Skjaldeidgtn 1, 665). On the whole, though, blár is rarely used about material things. The only exceptions are the pilarr in Dínu saga drámbláta (92.20) and Kirjolax saga (65.20), the skraelingar’s missile (knætr miðill) in Eiríks saga rauða (429.15), and the impure silver (bláslífr) 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 Bóðarson’s Nesjavísur (st. 1; Skjaldeidgtn 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), dáfá 1 (poetry), brekafl 1 (poetry), hrœnn 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), gambr 1 (poetry), góðr 1 (poetry), hrafn 2 (poetry), Muninn 1 (name of a raven [poetry]), skári 1 (poetry), svartr 1 (poetry).

In connection with birds, it should be noted that hrafn seems implied in Af Ragnarssaga lóðbrókar (st. 2; Skjaldeidgtn, 254), where blár is used as a noun. With regard to water, mention should be made of the compound bládýnp (Guðmundar saga biskups 179.24, 181.1) and the heiti or kenningar for the sea that involve use of blár: bláaland, bláfóld, blámaer, blárost bekkjar, and blár baldrek. With regard to air, it is noteworthy that, according to Vélsbá (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, viðblainn and vindblainn are listed as heiti for the sky (IV mm. st. 1; Skjaldeidgtn, 674).

III

The examples of svartr that have been culled from the materials examined reveal that in contrast to blár, svartr is very commonly used as a byname; examples include Án svarți (Laxdaela saga), Bárð svarți (Njáls saga), Illugi svarți (Egils saga), and Þórarinn svarți (Eyrrbyggja 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 svartr is most frequently used:
andlit 1, auga/augu 10 (3 poetry), bringa 1 (poetry), bruń/brýn 5 (2 poetry), flóki 1, hár 20, hold 1, hróund 1, likami 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, Fræll, who in Rigspúla is described as hørví svarðan (st. 7), or King Eysteinn, who in Heimskringla is described as svartr maðr ok dekkillaðr (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 Pórhallr veðimaðr in Eiríks saga rauða that he was svartr ok þurslígr (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 Grímur, who in Egils saga is described as svartr maðr ok ljóðr (368.29); Nollar, who in Fljótståla saga is described as svartr maðr, manna mestr, illorðr ok óvinsæll (248.18-19). The men who tormented Christ are in Eysteinn Ægiránsson’s Lilja referred to as svartr seggir (st. 58, Skjaldedigting 2, 405).

On a few occasions, svartr is used to describe visible signs of emotion. Examples include: Sveinungr var þustinn mjökk ok litverpr. Stundum var hann bleikr sem bast en stundum svartr sem þróð (Fljótståla saga 279.7-9) and hví eru svá bleikr, en stundum svartr sem þróð; er eigi þat, at þá vilir svíkja 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: hrið 1, skýflóki 1, söl 4 (1 poetry), sólskin 1 (poetry), véd 1, poka 3; Water: sjór 4 (1 poetry), vatn 2; Plants: bjórk 1, viola 1; Mammals: bjørn 1, gangart 1, gðtrr 1 (poetry), hestr 7, hundr 1, hross 1 (poetry), jór 3 (poetry), ketta 3, kýr 1, merr 1, merrhross 1, stáðhross 1, uxi 1 (poetry), xxn 1 (poetry); Reptiles: hóggormr 1, ormr 1, vatnormr 1; Birds: fugl 1 (poetry), kjaldrgagl 1 (poetry), hraf 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 sægor 1, 445.9, 2, 642.33]). The color adjective is three times used to describe the darkness of the night (nótt). In connection with animals, it should be mentioned that Svarfsvið and Alsvatr appear as names of horses in Harðar saga and in one of the Pø³ur (IV r st.4; Skjaldedigting 1, 676).

The ketta listed among mammals above is the kolsvørt ketta in Orms þáttar Stóraflensonar. 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 Keldugnisþjóls are said to be mjökk svartr (358.20); the ghost that appears in the dreams of Pórðr and Guðmundr in Sturlunga saga is said to be svartr ok illitiligr (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

1. Cf. svar fr sjóum (Qvar-Odds saga st. 2, Skjaldedigting 2, 313; and Ketils saga hængs st. 5, Skjaldedigting 2, 302), a phrase about a dying person.
example, is said to be svört ok døkk, sem hon átti sett til (Snorri’s Edda 17.10), and the Dókkalfar (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 djöfull, less commonly as fjandi or andi) is regularly described as being svartr. In one instance, the devil is said to be svartr sem kol (Heilagagr manna søger 1, 349.7); in another, the devil appears in the shape of a black fly (svört fluga [Heilagagr manna søger 1, 160.12]). The same color adjective is used to describe the devil’s abode (helviti) in a lausavísa by Sighvatr Pörðarson (st. 16; Skjaldedigtning 1, 250). The association of svartr with the supernatural may lie behind the descriptions of the blood of Öspakr in Bandamanna saga as svartr sem tjara (36.21) and the bones of Pordis kerling in Eyrbyggja saga as svört sem svíðin væri (184.5).

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

- brækkr 1, ermakápa 1, feldr 2, kápa 2, kúfl 4 (1 poetry), kyrtil 2,
- lambskin-skofri 1, landjald 1, segl 1, silki 1, silkitjald 1, skikka 1,
- skínsstakkr 1, fjald 4, treyja 1, váð 1 (poetry), vesti 2.

Once, a person is described as being svartklaedr, and in five instances, clothing (klæði/klaednaði) is referred to with the color adjective svartr. In one of these, in Málkuß saga, reference is made to the practice of wearing black clothes to the funerals of deceased people: þat var stór þorðum, at dauða menn ok aðrar skaprunin skyldi gráta í svörtum klæðnaði (Heilagagr manna søger 1, 448.34). Svartklaedr also appears as a kenning for a raven in Snurla Pörðarson’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 reyki (both in poetry), one example of skýdr, and one example of sverð (in poetry). Once, the handle of an axe (skapt) is referred to as being svartr af reyki (Egils saga 413.30). A flame (logi) 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)svartr vídir, 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 Jórunn skáldmaðar’s Sendibitr, svartr appears to mean unclear or dense:

- Haralds frá Halfdan spyrja
- herðibrøgð, en loðdis
- synsk svartleitr reyni
- sjá bragr, ens hárfragra (st. 2; Skjaldedigtning 1, 53).

In Málsháttakvoði, the term (svartflakkótr) seems to mean uneven:
- kunna vildak sjá við snærum,
- sjálðan kygg at gyggvi vörum,
- vel hefr hinn, er sitr af sitt,
- svartflakkótr er kvæði mitt (st. 2; Skjaldedigtning 2, 143).

In Jómsvikinga saga, it seems to mean devastation:
- þat svartr ódran mun koma ok náð yfir landit at traútt munu dæmi til
- finnax (5.25-26).
And in *Legendae crucis*, the context suggests that the meaning of *svartr* is 'sinful':

"På er Seth var til þessar ferðar búnin, sagði Adam, at hann skyldi ganga í austr, ok 'munu hitta einn dal fyrir þér, ok man þar upp hefðav veg grænn, ok at þú kennir þann veg gjör, þá muntu hitta fótspor min ok möður þinnar svarðlaus ok svört, þau er við gengum þá er við vorum rekin òr paradisu ok hingat í þenna sonardáðar (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 many 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 *Lárentius saga biskups*:

"Ber þessi klæði [brún klæði] háttásdagana, en tak ... peninga til at kaupa yðr með blá klæði at bera dagliga (16.22-24)."

The data suggest that both *blár* and *svartr* can be applied to *brók*, *feldr*, *kápa*, *kvafl*, *kynnil*, *skikka*, all items of clothing, as well as to *segli* and *tjald*. Only *blár* is used about *faldr*, *flakaolpa*, *hótt*, *kaprún*, *mætrull*, *serkr*, *skaukkel*, and *stakkr*, all items of clothing, as well as about church accessories (*altarisklaefa*, *altarisdukr*, *dukr*, *hókull*), *mark* (of embroidery), *refill*, and *vegr*). And only *svartr* is used about silk or items made of silk, *váð*, and the following items of clothing: *lambkinskofri*, *skinntakki*, *treýja*, 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, it seems reasonable to propose that *blár* was restricted, at 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*:

"Pá var búnings hans [Ljóts] hversdagsliga, at hann hafði svartan kyrtill ok refóti í hendi, en ef hann bjósk til viga, þá hafði hann blán kyrtill ok æxi snaghyrnda (245.5-7).

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

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2 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.).'

3 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. 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 Öðinn, whose complex personality is in stark contrast to his simple, distinctive physiognomy: Sá var í feldi blám ok nefnjó Grímur (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 Þiðrís saga af Bern; in the account of Þiðrís’s warriors, several colors are mentioned, including blár, about which it is said: merkir blár liter kalt brjóst ok grim hjarta (2, 328.5–6). He also draws attention to the phrase blár ok illilligr (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 Þiðrís 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. The data are in line with the statement by Jacobs and Jacobs (1958, 46) that “[i]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, svartr (and not blár) is used to describe helviti, 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 seem 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 blámmenn can be svartr if they are evil or possess devilish traits. Telling examples are found in Barthólómeus saga and Tveggja postola saga Simons ok Júdass. Both legends relate the destruction of an idol. In the former, a blámadr bið si svarthari comes out of the idol; in the latter two blámmenn hrafni svarthari come out of the idol (Postola sogur, 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 reflex the manuscript has sýrtum t:jóðum ok grám vefnum (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

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4 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.

5 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 skinnslitir ok bláeminn meðr litum bláma synir hrygga menn ok í lundreni þanga.

6 Jacobs and Jacobs (1958, 46) argue that ‘[i]t is natural to associate blue with death—`er ist mir na geslichen, der mich kann machen blea’ (Grimm IV, 1555). See also Pastoureau (2001, 27), who claims that ‘blue was often associated with death and the underworld.’
color of bruised flesh. 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 bláskegra, 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.

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.8 Muninn, the better-known of Óðinn’s two ravens is said to be blásvatr in a poem by Einarr Skúlason (st. 7; Skjaldeidning 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 (bík), earth (jórd), tar (gjar), and flax (grí).9

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.10 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–

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7 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’.’
8 See Hansen (1979, 24).
9 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.
10 She argues that ‘Continental Germans pressed into service a dark term to develop into a blue BCT [basic color term]’ (303).
40). 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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Ekberg (1981, 17) believes that the local product was juice extracted from blueberries.


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