

Valkyries Encyclopedia Article

Valkyries

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VALKYRIES, supernatural female figures of Norse myth and literature, share many features with the *dísir*, *fylgjur*, *hamingjur*, Norns, and *landvættir* in the extant texts, and there is little terminological consistency. A primary function of the valkyries is indicated by the etymology of the word *valkyrja*, a compound of *valr* (carrion) and a *nomen agentis* based on the verb *kyrja* (to choose). Regarded as the maidens of Óðinn, the valkyries chose who was to die in battle and brought the chosen ones to him in Valhøll, where they joined the *einherjar*, Óðinn's warriors. Valkyries rode through the air, bore weapons, and could be fierce in appearance, although they may have been shape-changers. Their personal names ordinarily make reference to battle. In Valhøll, valkyries served mead to the *einherjar*, a scene perhaps portrayed on the Ardre VIII picture stone (Gotland, Sweden; eighth century) and elsewhere. Sometimes, however, valkyries protected heroes in battle, a characteristic shared with the *fylgjur*. The valkyrie Sigrdrífa of the Eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál* may be associated with healing, which suggests the *matronae* of early Germanic religion. Like the Norns, valkyries weave fate in the poem *Darraarljóð*. There is also confusion with human or semidivine heroines, and in one heroic cycle a valkyrie is twice reborn in different identities.

Given the existence of the *matronae* in ancient Germanic times, the general prominence of male gods and the relative importance of the Æsir over the Vanir in Norse mythology, it seems apparent that female figures were of greater importance in Germanic religion than Norse mythology would indicate. Scholars have regarded the valkyries as derived from earlier goddesses of death or perhaps a fertility cult, but their association with Óðinn may be ancient and primary. If so, believers may once have attributed to valkyries shape-changing powers and the ecstatic "sending" of their spirits.

See Also

Eddas; Óðinn.

Bibliography

Nils Lid discusses the various female figures of Scandinavian religion in the section "Valkyrjer og diser" of his "Gudar og gudedyrking," in *Religionshistoria*, edited by Nils Lid (Oslo, 1954). Folke Ström's *Diser, norner, valkyrjor* (Stockholm, 1954) treats three of these groups and argues for association with a fertility cult and sacral kingship. Useful studies of the literary valkyrie are those of Lise Præstgaard Andersen, *Skjöldmøer—en kvindemyte* (Copenhagen, 1982) and Helen Damico, *Beowulf's Wealththeow and the Valkyrie Tradition* (Madison, Wis., 1984).