Valkyries, meaning "Choosers of the Slain," were beautiful young women—sometimes immortal, depending on the Norse myth—who scouted battlefields looking for the bravest of slain warriors. Once they found the chosen warriors, they would escort them to Valhalla, hall of the chief god, Odin. There the Valkyries waited on the warriors, who prepared themselves for Ragnarok.

In ancient Norse mythology, before they were linked to Odin and Ragnarok, the Valkyries were thought of as corpse goddesses and were sometimes represented in carvings as carrion-eating ravens. The original Valkyries, appearing on battlefields as soon as the fighting was over, would weave tapestries from the intestines of slain warriors and feed corpses to their pet wolves.

Between the 3rd and 11th centuries, the perception of the Valkyries changed and they became associated with Odin, ruler of the gods. Mortal maidens or princesses could become Valkyries, and they were described as beautiful young women armed with helmets and spears who rode winged horses onto battlefields. Freya, Norse goddess of love and beauty, was often depicted as a Valkyrie, armed with a corselet (armor covering one's trunk), helmet, shield, and spear. The Valkyries were sometimes called swan maidens, and in some myths they were clothed in swan feathers that enabled them to fly.

On the battlefield the Valkyries chose the souls of the bravest slain warriors to become Einherjar, soldiers to fight for Odin at Ragnarok, the final battle between the gods and the giants. The Valkyries escorted the new Einherjar across Bifrost, the rainbow bridge that linked Midgard (world of mortals) to Asgard (world of the gods), and on into Valhalla. Once inside Valhalla, the Valkyries changed clothes. Wearing simple white robes, they served the Einherjar fine foods, such as wild boar, and sacred wine made from honey. They would remain the Einherjar's servants until Ragnarok.

**Messengers of Odin**

The Valkyries were also Odin's bodyguards and messengers. Whenever the chief god sent them out, mortals saw their flickering armor and light streaming from their spears. In the Middle Ages (c. 500–c. 1500 CE), Scandinavians believed the northern lights (aurora borealis) were the Valkyries flying across the night sky. They also believed that life-giving dew fell from the manes of the Valkyries' horses.

Although the Valkyries were most often depicted as battle maidens, they were not warriors. The medieval perception of the battle-dressed Valkyries may have come from the contemporary discovery...
of prehistoric burial sites of ancient female warriors interred with their weapons.

In Danish folklore it was said that the Valkyries were able to predict the outcome of a battle by unfurling a flag called the Raven Banner. The banner was woven by the Valkyries from pure white silk and normally had no image or design. When it was unveiled during a battle, however, a raven would magically appear in the center, prophesying the battle's outcome. If the raven's beak was wide open and its wings flapped, then the Danes would be victorious. If the raven remained motionless, the Danes would lose.

Valkyries usually appeared in groups of nine. Grouping varied depending on the version or source, but common groups included Brynhild, Goll, Gondul, Herfjotur, Hlokk, Hrist, Mist, Reginleif, Sigdrifa, Sigrun, Skeggjold, Skogul, and Svava. Many were named in the Icelandic Prose Edda and Poetic Edda. They were also either featured or mentioned in the German Nibelungenlied ("Song of the Nibelungs"), the Norse Völsunga Saga, and the Norwegian Thiorekssaga ("Deeds of Thioreks").

The Völsunga Saga gives perhaps the most famous story of a Valkyrie, Brynhild, of her love for the hero Sigurd, and of the conniving interference of Gudrún, a princess. The long and complicated myth is an example of what happens, in Brynhild's case, when Odin is disobeyed and, for Sigurd, when a Valkyrie is spurned.

Brynhild defied Odin when she let the wrong king die in a battle. As punishment, Odin condemned her to marry a mortal, but she swore she would marry only the bravest. From then on Brynhild slept within a ring of fire on the mountaintop called Hindafjall, where she waited for the bravest hero to ride through the flames to be at her side. Sigurd was the only warrior courageous and skilled enough to breach the flames. The pair quickly fell in love. In time, however, Sigurd had to leave, vowing to return. As he departed, he gave Brynhild a magic ring as a token of his love. The ring was part of the bounty he had captured from a dragon's lair before he had met Brynhild. When Sigurd left, Brynhild slept again within the ring of fire and waited for her lover to return.

Morrigan: A Celtic Valkyrie

In Celtic mythology there was a battle goddess named Morrigan who shared many characteristics with the Valkyries. For example, both Morrigan and the Valkyries were believed to be able to predict a warrior's death in battle, and they were closely associated with ravens. Morrigan was one of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, meaning "people of the goddess Danu." The Tuatha Dé Danaan were, according to legend, one of the five mythic races who invaded and inhabited ancient Ireland. At the First Battle of Mag Tuireadh, Morrigan was instrumental in defeating the Firbolg, the mythic peoples who preceded the Tuatha Dé Danaan. At the Second Battle of Mag Tuireadh, she helped the Tuatha Dé Danaan to victory over the Fomorians, a race of giants.

Morrigan also appeared to the hero Cú Chulainn. She offered him her love, but he rejected her. Later, she warned him that she would hinder him in battle by settling on his shoulder disguised as a raven. Then, when he was marching to his final battle, he again met the battle goddess, who had transformed herself into a washerwoman. She told him that she was washing the clothes and armor of the dead hero, Cú Chulainn.
Gudrún tricks Sigurd

When Sigurd reached the kingdom of Gjúkung (known as Nibelung in German mythology), he swore a brotherhood oath with its ruler, King Gjúki. Gudrún, the beautiful daughter of Gjúki, and sister of Gunnar, fell in love with Sigurd as soon as she saw him, but Sigurd refused her advances because of his devotion to Brynhild. Gudrún, however, had dreamed that she was destined to be Sigurd's lover and that after Sigurd's death she would marry Brynhild's brother, Atli. Her dream also prophesied that Atli would kill her own brothers. To make Sigurd forget Brynhild, Gudrún's mother, the witch Grímhild, secretly slipped a magic potion into his drink. Soon after drinking it, Sigurd fell in love with Gudrún.

Meanwhile, Gunnar decided to marry the abandoned Brynhild, but he could not ride through the ring of fire to reach her. Grímhild concocted another magic potion, this time to make Sigurd look like Gunnar. Once the potion took effect, Sigurd, in the guise of Gunnar, rode through the flames and convinced Brynhild to accept that her lover was not going to return and that she should marry him (Gunnar). Saddened but not wanting to be alone, Brynhild agreed. Before they left Hindafjall, Brynhild gave her new fiancé Sigurd's magic ring in exchange for one of Gunnar's.

Three days later the pair reached Gjúkung. Without Brynhild knowing, Sigurd turned back into his true self, and the real Gunnar married Brynhild. Soon afterward, the magic of the first potion, which had made Sigurd forget his love for Brynhild, wore off. It was too late, however; Brynhild was married to Gunnar and he to Gudrún.

Brynhild's revenge

Several years later Gudrún and Brynhild argued over whose husband was better. Brynhild said that Gunnar was the best because he had ridden through the flames for her. Gudrún revealed how it had been not Gunnar but Sigurd disguised as Gunnar. She then showed Brynhild Sigurd's magic ring to prove her story. Brynhild had never stopped loving Sigurd, but she was blind with rage.

To have her revenge, Brynhild falsely accused Sigurd of raping her when they had traveled from Hindafjall, thus dishonoring his oath of brotherhood with Gunnar. She threatened to leave Gunnar if he did not kill Sigurd. Because of the oath, however, Gunnar could not kill Sigurd himself. Instead he got his brother Gutthorm to do it.

When eventually the two warriors faced each other, Gutthorm fatally stabbed Sigurd, but Sigurd was able to kill Gutthorm by spearing him in the back. As he lay dying, Sigurd was held by Gudrún, while Brynhild laughed insanely with both grief and rage. At Sigurd's funeral, Brynhild gleefully told Gunnar that Sigurd had not raped her, and that as a Valkyrie she predicted the violent deaths of all Gudrún's children, even the ones not yet born. Brynhild then threw herself onto Sigurd's funeral pyre and perished.

Years later, Atli, Brynhild's brother, and Gudrún married and had two sons, Erpr and Eitill. Realizing that Atli had married her only to gain the treasure that Sigurd had taken from the dragon's lair and to avenge Brynhild's death, Gudrún sent the magic ring to her brothers as a warning to guard the treasure and that their lives were in danger. The brothers hid Sigurd's treasure in the Rhine, but could not avoid Atli. He killed them all. When she learned of her brothers' deaths, Gudrún, like Medea of Greek mythology, killed her sons Erpr and Eitill, roasted their hearts, and served them to Atli when he was drunk. Then she killed him too.

Gudrún later married King Jónakr, and they had three sons: Hamdir, Sorli, and Erp. Yet as Brynhild had
predicted, each of Gudrún’s children were to die tragically. First, King Jormunrek killed Svanhild, Gudrún and Sigurd’s daughter. In revenge, Gudrún sent her three sons to avenge Svanhild’s death, but all were killed, and Brynhild was finally avenged.

One Norse belief was that the armor worn by the Valkyries on their divine errands caused the flickering northern lights, aurora borealis.

The Prose and Poetic Eddas

Two written collections, the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda, are among the most important sources of Scandinavian myth. Scholars believe that the Poetic Edda (also known as the Elder Edda) was composed between 800 and 1100 CE; it was preserved in the medieval manuscript known as the Codex Regius (c. 1270). The Poetic Edda is divided into a mythological section describing the Aesir (one major group of gods), and a heroic section, which included the legend of Sigurd and the destruction of the royal family of Gjúkung.

Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) wrote the Prose Edda. It was divided into three sections: “Gylfaginning” (“Beguiling of Gylfi”), “Skáldskaparmál” (“Language of Poetry”), and “Hattatal” (“Catalog of Meters”). “Gylfaginning” and “Skáldskaparmál” contained myths about creation, gods, giants, dwarfs, and Ragnarok. Brynhild is one of the Valkyries named in the two Eddas.

The Valkyries in Opera

Most Valkyrie myths involved prophecy, battles, death, betrayal, jealousy, rage, and tragedy, so they lend themselves well to theatrical interpretations. In the late 19th century the major Norse myths, including the Völsunga Saga, were adapted by German composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883) for use in his cycle of four operas, collectively titled Der Ring des Nibelungen (“The Ring of the Nibelungs”). The second opera in the cycle is Die Walküre (“The Valkyries”) and features Brunhild (Brynhild), who is a central character in the rest of the cycle.

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See also: APOCALYPSE MYTHS; CELTS; DEMIGODS AND HEROES; DRAGONS; FREYA; MEDEA; NIBELUNGS; ODIN; SCANDINAVIA; SIGURD.

Further reading

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