**Definition:** Valhalla from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

In Norse mythology, the Hall of the Slain, where chosen warriors enjoyed feasts with the god Odin. It is depicted as a glittering palace, with golden walls and a ceiling of shields.

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**Summary Article: Valhalla**

*From Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience*

*Valhalla* is the conventional English-language rendering of Old Icelandic *Valhöll* (The Hall of the Slain), which, according to Nordic mythology of the Viking Age, is a paradise reserved for warriors who died in battle, presided over by Odin, the god of war. There they feast every night, while by day they fight to the death, reviving at nightfall to feast together once more. These pleasures will continue until the end of the world, when they will join the final battle, fighting alongside the gods against giants and monsters. The evil forces will be destroyed, but so will the earth itself, most of the gods, and presumably the warriors from Valhalla. This cosmic catastrophe is *Ragnarök*, “The Doom of the Gods.”

The concept of Valhalla was essentially aristocratic and probably meant little to people of other classes. The basic image comes from the real-life situation of a war band gathered around the leader to whom they have given allegiance, living in his hall and feasting at his expense, and eventually risking their lives in his service. The earliest mentions of Valhalla are in poems honoring the deaths of two kings in battle—Eirík Blood-Axe, a Norwegian who ruled the Viking Kingdom of York (d. 954), and Hákon the Good of Norway (d. 961). They were composed by Icelanders in the service of these kings and are authentic heathen texts, for Iceland and Norway did not accept Christianity until the end of the 10th century.

The first poem, *Eiríksmál*, describes Odin telling the dead *eínherjar*, “chosen champions,” in Valhalla to prepare to welcome Eirík; they should spread rugs on the benches and bring drinking horns, and the *valkyries* must proffer wine. When one of the other gods asks why such a fine king was not granted victory, Odin replies that “the grey Wolf gazes upon the homes of the gods”— implying that Ragnarök is drawing near, and Eirík will be needed there.

*Hákonarmál* opens with a battle scene; at first King Hákon is winning, but then he is summoned by a valkyrie, who tells him it is time for him and his men to go to “the green world of the gods” to join Odin’s forces. The gods welcome King Hákon into Valhalla and assure him that although Odin decreed his death, this does not mean that the god has any ill will toward him.

More details about Valhalla itself can be found in *Grímnismál* and *Hávamál*, poems that cannot be precisely dated but are entirely related to topics from heathen mythology. Valhalla is a huge building, gleaming with gold, with 540 doors, and at Ragnarök 800 warriors will go out from each door to face the Wolf (stanza 23 from *Grímnismál*). Other early sources say it is roofed with shields or thatched with spears, and that armor and weapons are piled on its benches.

Over two centuries later, when Iceland had long been Christian, the scholar Snorri Sturluson (1178- 1241) wrote a treatise on myths (the *Prose Edda*, ca. 1220) in order to explain the heathen allusions in Iceland’s older poetry. Quoting various references to Valhalla, he described its size, the unending
supplies of boar meat and mead produced by a supernatural goat, and the pleasure its warriors took in perpetual fighting and feasting. He also regarded it as the place where the gods assemble, led by Odin.

Snorri also wrote a history of the kings of Norway (Heimskringla), in which the first section (Ynglingasaga) presents various mythical figures that were human beings whose power and prestige caused their followers to think they were gods. Yet even this rationalized interpretation includes a mention of Valhalla. Snorri says that Odin, who was a wise ruler, made it a law that dead men must be burned, and their possessions laid with the corpse on the pyre—“thus every one will enter Valhalla with whatever riches he had with him on the pyre.”

An important feature of Valhalla, both in Snorri's work and in the old poems, is the presence of valkyries, supernatural female beings whose name means “Choosers of the Slain.” In Eiríksmál, Odin bids them to prepare to welcome Eirík, while Grímnismál (stanza 36) lists 13 of them who serve drink at the everlasting feast. The scene in Hákonarmál where an armed valkyrie appears on the battlefield to lead the king to the world of the dead expresses what was probably the original concept—fierce war goddesses whose primary task is to decide which warrior shall die. Their individual names reflect their war-like functions, not their role at the Valhalla banquet, for most are combined out of words meaning spear, battle, victory, mail coat, and the like. An alternative name for the whole group is skjöldmeyjar (shieldmaidens). However, there is evidence from other poems that valkyries also acted as guardian spirits to living warriors, bringing them luck and protection in battle and becoming their lovers.

Archaeological evidence confirms the descriptions from the surviving texts. The island of Gotland, in the Baltic, had a long tradition of erecting carved memorial stones. Some, dating from the 8th and 9th centuries, show an armed man on horseback arriving at a large building with several doors, met by a female figure holding out a drinking horn. The rider might be Odin because the horse has eight legs, as his was said to have; on the other hand, the rider is probably a dead warrior, not Odin the god of war that presided over Valhalla. On the memorial stones below this scene there are others, usually showing a warship or a battlefield, sometimes men feasting, and occasionally a flying figure that could be a valkyrie. The Gotland stones predate the Valhalla poems by several generations and come from a different region, yet they give visual expression to the same nexus of ideas about the warriors' paradise.

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