

Changing Perspectives: Valkyries in Text and Image

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When the word 'valkyrie' is heard, a particular motif emerges: A woman with long, blonde hair and blue eyes stands confidently wearing plated armour, carrying a spear or sword, and accompanied with a winged helmet or a winged horse (Figure 1). While this combination of attributes has come to constitute a valkyrie, its manifestation took several centuries, multiple authors from various nations, and artists of theatre, sculpture, and illustration to popularise the motif to its current scale. This article seeks to briefly explore the development of the valkyrie from its earliest depictions in Viking Age through to the twenty-first century. This exploration will utilise various depictions and social contexts for the valkyrie in effort to discern how the above image is now considered standard in western popular thought.

To gain an adequate scope of the character's development through history, brief case studies will include a combination of both text and imagery. These sources will be analysed to illuminate the character's attributes described by the authors and artists through the signs and symbols they chose. Secondly, questions from reception theory will be used to hypothesize how the communities encountering the valkyrie in their cultural narratives understood and were impacted by this character. These brief case studies include texts and imagery from the following periods: 1) Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia and British Isles; 2) the Pan-Scandinavian movement and Romantic era in northern Europe; and 3) the popular culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the United States of America.² It is only for the sake

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² For this article, the Viking Age is considered to be from +/- 750 CE to 1066 CE and the medieval period, overlapping slightly, is considered as 1000 CE to +/-1400 CE. These rough categories of

of brevity and clarity that this article uses these specific periods. The case studies are not meant to be an exhaustive list nor highlight an exclusive trajectory of development, but seek to exhibit the changes in cultural perception over time.

While much has been written on the topic of valkyries, including their depictions, there is still ample room to explore the depth of their use throughout history in both texts and imagery. Linguists and literary historians, such as Kathleen Self, John Lindow, and Philip Purser have approached the character through the sagas and skaldic poetry, translating from Old Norse and comparing the descriptive language with other cultural elements. Archaeologists, such as Neil Price and Anders Andrén have both looked at artefactual evidence concerning the character as part of a greater body of material and information. Typically the character is considered within the context of the literature or the material culture of a specific moment in time. Looking at the development of the character past the earliest extant iterations of it is somewhat lacking in current scholarship. The only exception to this rule is in the comparisons of Richard Wagner's operatic epic, *The Ring of Nibelungen*, with the narratives of the *Völsungs*. This has been heavily studied and, as such, is an integral element of this article.

Horns, Horses, and Death: Valkyries of the Viking Age and Medieval Period

The valkyrie is known from Scandinavian mythology as an immortal messenger of Oðinn [the patriarch of the *Æsir*], conveyer of dead warriors to Valhöll [Hall of the Slain], and guardian spirit of heroic men.³ Similar folkloric characters existed in the cultures of the ancient Germanic tribes and the Anglo-Saxons of the British Isles.⁴ *Valkyrja* (Old Norse) or *wælcyrrie* (Old English), translate to 'chooser of the slain'.⁵ The prefix *valr* meaning 'those slain in battle' or 'carnage'

time are based on notable events in Europe and Scandinavia, specifically the start of the Viking Expansion to various European regions in the 8th century, the start of William of Normandy's rule over England (1066), the year Iceland was converted to Christianity (1000), and start of the Kalmar Union (1397).

³ Hilda E Davidson, 'Valkyries,' in *Medieval Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*, ed. by Carl Lindahl (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000), p. 1015.

⁴ Philip A. Purser, 'Her Syndan Wælcyrrian: Illuminated the form and function of the Valkyrie-figure in the literary, mythological, and social consciousness of Anglo-Saxon England' (published doctoral thesis, Georgia State University, 2013), p. 2.

⁵ Davidson, 'Valkyries,' p. 1014.

and *kyrja* meaning a female entity who acts ‘to choose’ something or someone.⁶ While no written records from the Viking Age fully describes the nature of these beings, later medieval Icelandic texts provide a mixture of different characteristics and roles for valkyries. However, these descriptions are far from comprehensive or consistent, which in turn allowed them to be easily adaptable in both narratives and imagery.⁷ To further complicate matters, each community’s spiritual ideologies could differ on various levels due to the lack of overall socio-political unification, regardless of their cultural similarities. This makes it difficult, but not impossible, to assess what the greater Viking age community believed about the valkyrie.

Text: Blood and Mead

Many sagas and historic poems either directly describe or allude to valkyries. Most of these narratives are considered to date to the ninth through the eleventh centuries, but extant texts survive mainly from the fourteenth century. As these are oral narratives recorded at later dates, they must be scrutinised for applicable context. Specifically, this article will look at the *Grimnismal*, *Sigrdrífumál*, *Helgakvída Hundingbana I* from the Codex Regius; *Gylfaginning* from the Codex Upsaliensis, and a poem called *Darraðarljóð* from *Brennu-Njál’s saga*. These texts showcase the valkyries roles and relationships in different contexts.

In the fourteenth-century poem of *Grimnismal* (The Sayings of Grimnir), Óðinn names some valkyries and their actions in Valhøll, namely with serving ale to the dead.

*Hrist ok Mist
vil ek at mér horn beri,
sceigiöld ok skögul,
hildi ok Þrvði,
hlökk ok herfjötur,
göll ok geirölul,
randgríþ ok ráþgríþ
ok reginleif;
þær bera Einherjum öl.*

⁶ William O. Cord, *The Teutonic Mythology of Richard Wagner’s The Ring of Nibelung* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), p. 511.

⁷ Some scholars consider the designation of ‘shield maiden’ to be synonymous with valkyrie. While this is substantially debated, it will not be the focus of this essay.

[‘Hrist and Mist, I wish, would bear a horn to me, Skeggiold and Skogul, Hild and Thrud, Hlokk and Herfiotur, Goll and Geirolul, Randgrið and Radgrið, and Reginleif; they bear ale to the Einheriar.]⁸

Gylfaginning, from Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, expands on the information from the older text of *Grimnismal*, incorporating more information about the valkyries’ direct relationship to Óðinn and their role on the battle field.

Sól ok Bil eru með ásum, ok eru þær aðrar er þjóna í Valhøllu, bera drykk ok gæta borðbúnaðar ok ǫlgagna...þessar heita valkyrjur. Þær sendir Óðinn til orrostu. Þær kjósa feiga menn ok ráða sigri. Guðr ok Rósta ok norn en yngsta, er Skuld heitir, ríða jafnan at kjósa val ok ráða vígum.

[Sól and Bil are with the Æsir, and there are these others that serve in Valhøll, serve drink and look after the tableware and drinking vessels...These are called valkyries. Óðinn sends them to battle. They choose men to be doomed and determine the victory. Guðr and Rósta and the youngest norn, who is called Skuld, always ride to choose the slain and determine the slayings.]⁹

These texts are very similar and primarily illustrate the various names of the valkyries. Names in Viking Age Scandinavia had many functions: describing heritage or familial connections, attributing the person to events which shaped their social standing, or their position in society. With this in mind, the naming patterns for the valkyries are significant for the context they provide concerning the nature of the character. Names such as Hildir, Skǫlgul, and Hlokk all denote battle, while others are more metaphorical, like Randgrið meaning ‘shield-destroyer’.¹⁰ In the *Völsunga saga*, the valkyrie that meets the hero Sigurd the Volsung is given two names: Brynhildir (‘brynja’ meaning mail-coat and ‘hildir’ meaning battle) and Sigdrifa (inciter to victory)¹¹ The character of this valkyrie is illuminated through the interactions of her and Sigurd, specifically the section titled *Sigrdrífumál*. While this section is brief compared to the other parts of the saga, it does describe visual elements of the valkyrie. After Sigurd rides up a

⁸ *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 57.

⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (Exeter: Short Run Press Ltd, 2005) <<http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Edda-1.pdf>> [accessed July 1, 2019], p. 30.

¹⁰ Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. by Angela Hall (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), pp. 127, 261 and 292.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

mountain, he finds a shield wall encased with flames containing a human form. The valkyrie, renounced by Óðinn, was left in trance-like sleep framed by the flames, only to be awoken by Sigurd removing her helmet and cutting away her armour.¹² The poem continues with the valkyrie and Sigurd conversing, where she gives the young man a drink of ale ‘mixed with magical power and mighty glory’, bestowing upon him the knowledge of runes, and prophesying his fate.¹³ This valkyrie becomes a crucial model for later interpretations, as will be discussed in the next sections.

Narratives concerning the Volsung family continue in the first poem of *Helgakviða Hundingbana* from the *Poetic Edda*. The poem describes the life of the ill-fated hero, Helgi and as the son of previously mentioned Sigurd, Helgi is destined both for battle and encounters with a valkyrie. When Helgi successfully kills King Hunding (hence his name Helgi the bane of Hunding), the following stanza describes the end of the battle:

*Pá brá ljóma af Logafjöllum,
en af þeim ljómum leiftrir kómu,
[— -- --]
hávar und hjalmum á Himinvanga,
brynjur váru þeira blóði stokknar,
en af geirum geislar stóðu.*

[Then a light shone from Logafell, and from that radiance there came bolts of lightning; wearing helmets at Himinvangi [came the valkyries] Their byrnies were drenched in blood; and rays shone from their spears.¹⁴]

Carol Larrington and other scholars have translated the gap in text as identifying the valkyries, who the action in the stanza describes. Here the valkyries are portrayed as active post-battle, and it is surmised that their appearance is due to their role of collecting the dead to transport to Valhöll. With their arrival, more context is given about the nature of the valkyries: their armour and weapons and the dramatic nature of their entrance.

¹² *The Poetic Edda*, p. 166.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Further context about the battle-role of the valkyrie is expressed in a number of stanzas from the poem called *Darraðarljóð* from *Brennu-Njál's saga*.

<i>‘Vitt er orpit</i>	<i>fyri valfalli</i>
<i>rifs reiðiský</i>	<i>rignir blóði;</i>
<i>nú er fyri geirrum</i>	<i>grár upp kominn</i>
<i>vefr verþjóðar</i>	<i>er þær vinur fylla</i>
<i>rauðum vepti</i>	<i>Randvés bana. ...</i>

<i>Gengr hildr vefa</i>	<i>ok hjörprimul</i>
<i>sangríðr svipul</i>	<i>sverðum svipul</i>
<i>skapt mun gnesta</i>	<i>skjöldr mun bresta</i>
<i>mun hjálmgagarr</i>	<i>í hlíf koma. ...</i>

<i>Vindum vindum</i>	<i>vef Darraðar</i>
<i>þar er vé vaða</i>	<i>vígra manna</i>
<i>látum eigi</i>	<i>líf hans faraz</i>
<i>eigu valkyrjur</i>	<i>vals um kosti. ...</i>

<i>Nú er ógurligt um</i>	<i>at litaz</i>
<i>er deyrug ský</i>	<i>dregr með himni</i>
<i>mun lopt litat</i>	<i>lýða blóði</i>
<i>er sóknvarðar</i>	<i>syngja kunnu.</i>

<i>Vel keðu vér</i>	<i>um konung ungan</i>
<i>sigrhljóða fjöld</i>	<i>syngjum heilar</i>
<i>enn inn nemi</i>	<i>er heyrir á</i>
<i>geirfljóða hljóð</i>	<i>ok gumum segi.</i>

<i>Ríðum hestum</i>	<i>hart út berum</i>
<i>bregðum sverðum</i>	<i>á braut héðan.’</i>

[Blood rains	from the cloudy web
On the broad loom	of slaughter.
The web of man	grey as armor
Is now being woven;	the Valkyries
Will cross it	with a crimson weft....

The Valkyries go weaving	with drawn swords,
Hild and Hjorthrimul,	Sanngrid and Svipul.

Image: Cups and Shields

Viking Age depictions of valkyries have been found on material culture originating from what is now Scandinavia. An iconographic analysis of these artefacts establishes a set of baseline criteria for understanding how the characteristics of valkyries were portrayed in the Viking Age. Scholar Anders Andrén suggests that ‘the active role of materiality in all oral culture means that artefacts can be a truly primary source for narratives, conceptions, and patterns of action in the Norse world.’¹⁶ Due to their usage by people in time, artefactual material exhibits patterns of actions and ideologies, which must be connected with other relevant evidence (oral, literary or material) to be concretely understood.

As was previously mentioned, there are no written records from the Viking Age to confirm that specific depictions are valkyries, so the iconographic analysis relies on themes from the previously described narratives and related archaeological evidence to confirm their potential identities and relationships.

Since the majority of the extant folkloric narratives from this period stemmed from oral traditions, which over time exhibit variation and adaptation, the iconographic attributes in the material or archaeological record likely reflect *similar* cultural ideas, but are not direct interpretations of the previously discussed narratives. A critique of the archaeological context, from which these ideological patterns can be found, is necessary to avoid mis-identifying generalised motifs. While some artefactual evidence from the Viking age will be used to suggest characteristics of the valkyrie character, it should not be assumed that these are the only visual interpretations of the valkyrie from this period due to the lack of evidence to suggest otherwise.

One of the oldest known artefacts depicting a valkyrie is the picture stone, Alskog Tjängvide I, from the island of Götland in the Baltic Sea. It showcases a rider on a horseback opposite a

¹⁶ Anders Andrén, 'Old Norse religion,' in *Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives: Origins, changes, and interactions*, ed. by Anders Andren, Kristina Jennbert, & Catharina Raudvere, (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), p. 13.

figure holding a vessel (Figure 1).¹⁷ This figure appears to be female based on the long dress and wildly-knotted hair.¹⁸ Other eighth and ninth-century picture stones from the same region portray these horn-bearing characters consistently accompanying figures on horseback (Figure 2). This has been interpreted to be one of a number of narratives, including a dead warrior being received in Valhöll, Oðinn on Sleipnir [his eight-legged horse], or Sigurd, on his horse Grani meeting the valkyrie Brynhildr from *Völsunga saga*.¹⁹ For any of these potential readings, the connotation suggests that the figure on the left of the horse is a valkyrie (named or otherwise) who bears a drinking horn for the horseback rider.

¹⁷ Jorn Staecker, 'Heroes, kings and gods' in *Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives: Origins, changes, and interactions*, ed. by Anders Andren, Kristina Jennbert, & Catharina Raudvere, (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), p. 365.

¹⁸ Erik Nylén and Jan Peder Lamm, *Stones, Ships, and Symbols*, (Stockholm: Gidlunds Bokförlag, 1988), p. 103.

¹⁹ Staecker, 'Heroes, kings and gods,' p. 365.

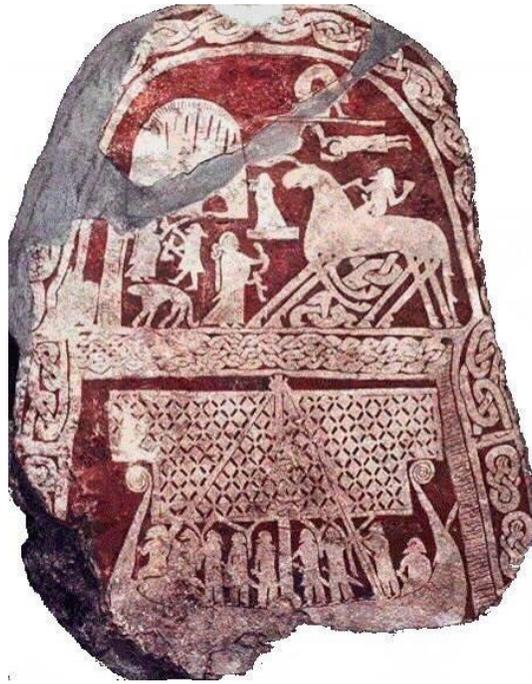


Figure 1. Alskog Tjängvide 1 from Gotland Sweden.
Picture Stone. Historika Museet i Stockholm.

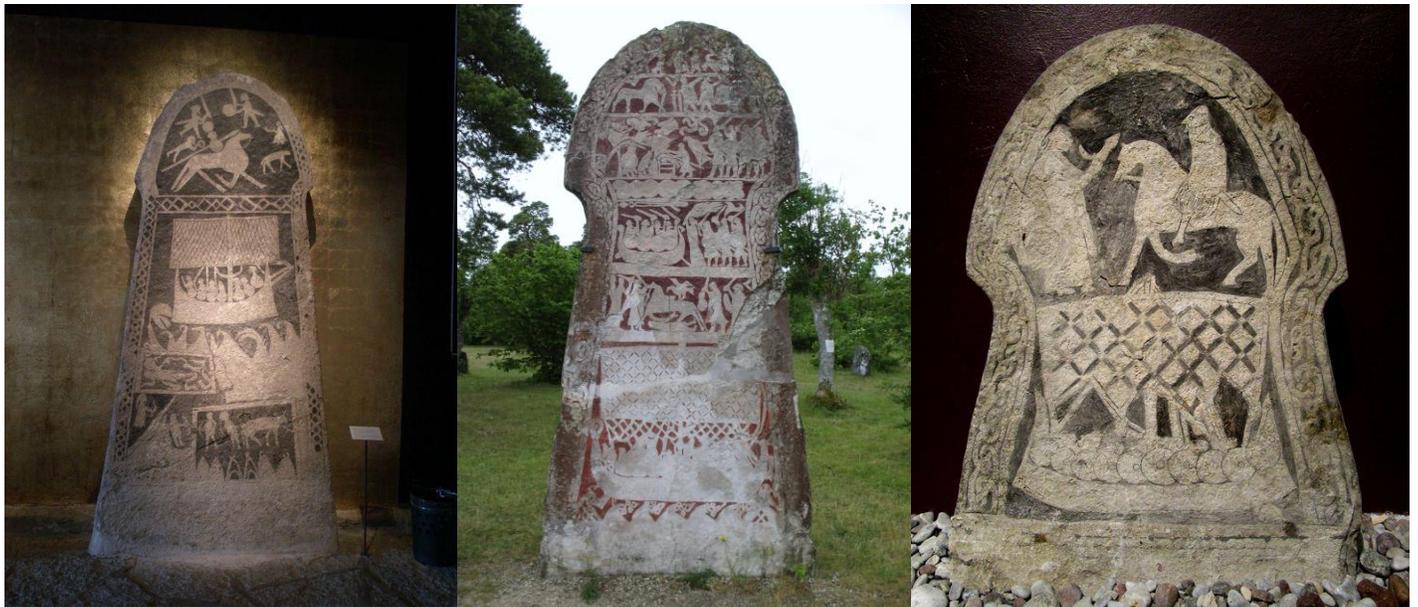


Figure 2. Hunninge, Stora Hammars 1 and Broa Helle stones from
Gotland Sweden. Picture Stones. Gotland Museum, Visby.

Burying horses within the context of human graves in Viking Age and early medieval Scandinavia is supported in both archaeological and literary evidence.²⁰ This indicates that the horse had a significance in the communities' perspectives of death and spiritual afterlife. Scholars have suggested that the function of the horse in Scandinavian burials was one of many: sacrifice, sustenance, or prestige.²¹ The most confidently argued function is that of a prestige possession with which the deceased can enter Valhöll with pride and respect. Combining this evidence with the imagery of both the horse and the valkyrie on these stones has led scholars to believe that the stones references the Götlandic community's beliefs concerning the afterlife.²²

Continuing with the conceptions of death and the afterlife, the valkyrie also has appeared in grave goods from Scandinavia. Small silver amulets excavated from Öland, Sweden have been argued to depict valkyries.²³ The two of these date from the 950-1000 AD (Figure 3).²⁴ The figures are clad in long, patterned clothing, with plaited hair, each carrying an object most commonly considered to be a drinking horn.

The characterisation of the figures from both the amulets and the stones are similar in their profile orientation, emphasis on pattern, and their associated objects of horns, horses, etc. This has led to the idea of identifying the image of the valkyrie from the stones with the amulets, regardless of the fact that the amulets lack other defining attributes or a clear narrative.

Impact: Death and Destiny

While a direct connection between these narratives and the material culture has not been established, there are related characteristics based on context: battle, death, and prophecy. If the amulets found in burials and the figures on the stones are assumed to be valkyries, they arguably play a role in the communities' conceptualisation of death. This correlates with the

²⁰ Peter Shenk, 'To Vahalla on Horseback?: Horse burial in Scandinavia during the Viking Age' (unpublished masters thesis, University of Oslo, 2002), pp. 5-6.

²¹ Ibid., p. 13.

²² Nylén, *Stones, Ships, and Symbols*, p. 70.

²³ 'Valkyrie Pendant 266707', Historiska museet, 2011, <<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=266707&page=2&in=1>> [accessed July 1, 2019]

²⁴ 'Valkyrie Pendant 108864', Historiska museet, 2011, <<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=108864>> [accessed July 1, 2019]



Figure 3. SHM 108864:6485 and SHM 266707:128 from Öland, Sweden. Silver Amulets. Historika Museet i Stockholm.

tone of the narratives, where the valkyries are connected to battles, the afterlife, and influencing individual destiny.

The existence of the imagery and the oral narratives in the cultural consciousness of the Viking Age demonstrates the importance of these ideas for the communities. The amulets, found in graves, have a context of personal use but show very little connection to specific narratives. This is juxtaposed against the images on the stones which have a community-based context with a poignant relationship to narratives, even if those narratives are not yet explicit to scholars. Grave goods would have been some of the decedent's most important possessions and to have token objects shaped in likeness of the being that symbolised transcendence indicates specific intention. The visualisation of these ideas through the narratives and imagery, especially in the concept of personifying the transportation of the dead, implies that it played a significant part in their cultural ideology. While the artists and the original owners of these artefacts are unable to comment on their specific intentions, it can be surmised that the characters had both a personal and communal presence, but the degree of which is still undetermined.

The medieval narratives portray how the character of the valkyrie varied in their relationships with people: some were directly involved in the events of death, others prophesied without

being the active force itself, while others appeared to be the symbolic embodiment of battle itself. *Grimnismal*, *Gylfinning*, and *Sigrdrífumál* all explicitly expressed the horn-bearing role for the valkyries, while the poems of *Helgakviða Hundingbana* and *Darraðarljóð* vividly described the shield-bearing role from battle. From the imagery considered to be reflective of valkyrie characters, their association with death support the concepts in the narratives even though the particulars had mostly like changed by the time the oral narratives were written down centuries later.

Victory and Heritage: Valkyries of the 18th and 19th Centuries

In the nineteenth century, national and political events, as well as discoveries in philology and archaeology, spurred a Pan-Scandinavian movement in northwestern Europe. The nations of Scandinavia were in consistent political upheaval for the majority of these two centuries, between their involvement in the Napoleonic wars in the early 1800s, Denmark's territorial expansion endeavours into Poland and Germany in the mid 1800s, and the struggle for a truly independent Norway from 1814 through the early 1900s. The concepts of nationalism, partially spurred by the political atmosphere, fueled a resurgence of public and academic interest in historic Scandinavia, and subsequently, its folkloric narratives and material culture.²⁵

The valkyrie remained the personification of cultural ideologies in Scandinavia, but these ideologies shifted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Battle, death, and prophecy were no longer synonymous with this valkyrie. Instead, there was a transition to concepts of heritage, cultural unification, and nationalism. With renewed interest in the narratives of the past, the valkyrie became a viable character to adopt for this new set of ideologies and cultural principles. It fit the standard motif used in national personification found in other cultures: the character was female, a positive and triumphant figure associated with victory (even in death), and negligible enough in the historic narratives that it would not suggest idolatry to the gods of the old tradition.

²⁵ Barbara G. Scott, 'Archaeology and National Identity: The Norwegian Example,' *Scandinavian Studies*, 68 (1996), p.321.



Figure 4. Postcard of Moder Svea c.1905. Print on paper.

Beginning in the late-seventeenth century, the image of Moder Svea (Mother Sweden) became the personification of the nation of Sweden. By the early 1900s, Moder Svea was established into the common consciousness through depictions on paper money, print material, and nationalist propaganda, where she took on various visual motifs, including that of the valkyrie from the medieval period narratives (Figure 4). However, the concept of the horn-bearing motif was not an element. Instead, the shield, spear, plated armour with disk-shaped brooches, sometimes with a winged helmet, became the accoutrements for this new valkyrie. While using the same visual elements, the valkyrie was refashioned from an image of death and destruction, into victory and strength through unification against a common enemy.

Text: Death-doomed are they...

During this time, a similar cultural movement was taking place in Germany. It was at this time that the composer Richard Wagner created his *Der Ring des Nibelungen* opera out of an assemblage of Germanic and Scandinavian folklore. Wagner reinterpreted the ancient narratives, adding his own ideas for dramatic visual elements. It is evident from his personal library record in Dresden that his obsession with Germanic and Scandinavian texts served as a

primary source of inspiration for the opera.²⁶ Early in the process of developing his opera, Wagner wrote to a colleague to borrow a copy of *Völsunga saga*, saying that he did not intend ‘to model myself on it (you’ll soon see how *my* poem relates to the saga), but in order to recall precisely everything I had previously thought out in the way of individual details.’²⁷ The characters and some of the plot from *Völsunga saga* acted as the framework for his *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Specifically Wagner chose to use the German spelling for his characters, namely Wotan (Oðinn), Brünnhilde (Brynhildr) and Siegmund (Sigurd). He also created names for nine valkyries (including Brünnhilde) using similar naming patterns to the medieval texts previously mentioned. A few examples are, Grimgerde, Spear Maiden; Rossweisse, Horse White; and Waltraute, Faithful to the Fallen.²⁸

From Wagner’s libretto, characteristics of the valkyries can be ascertained, such as their relationship with the gods, mortals, and agency in battle. Most of this information comes from the words of Brünnhilde, the lead valkyrie. In her conversations with Siegmund, her role as a conveyer of the dead is illuminated as well as the horn-bearing role in Walhall [Valhöll]:

Brünnhilde *‘Siegmund!*
 Look on me
 Whom thou
 Must follow soon!

Siegmund *Who art thou, say*
 That dost stand so fair and so stern?

Brünnhilde *Death-doomed are they*
 Who look upon me;
 Who sees me
 Bids farewell to the light of life
 On the battle-field only
 Heroes view me;

²⁶ Sources from Wagner’s library: *Der Nibelunge Noth und Klage, Zu den Nibelungen*, Grimm’s *Mythologie*; *Edda*; *Volsunga Saga*, *Wilkina-und Niflungasaga*, *Da deutshe Heldenbuch*, *Die deutsche Heldensage*; *Untersuchungen zun deutschen Heldensage*, and *Heimskringla*.

Elizabeth Magee, *Richard Wagner and the Nibelungs*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 19.

²⁷ Magee, *Richard Wagner and the Nibelungs*, p. 13.

²⁸ Cord, *The Teutonic Mythology of Richard Wagner’s The Ring of Nibelung*, p. 510.

*He whom I greet
Is chosen and must go.*

Siegmund *When thou dost lead,
Whither follows the hero?*

Brünnhilde *I lead thee
To Wotan;
The lot he has cast
To Walhall must thou come.*

Siegmund *In Walhall's hall
Wotan alone shall I find?*

Brünnhilde *A glorious host
of heroes slain
Will greet thee there
With love holy and high...
Wishmaidens
Serve there serene:
Wotan's daughter
Wine will bring for thy cup.²⁹*

Later in the opera, Wotan describes in many different ways the roles of the valkyries in his service and their direct relationship with him and the Einherjar. He calls her will-doer, fulfiller of commands, wish-maiden, shield-maiden, lot-chooser, and hero-rouser.³⁰ All of these roles are synonymous with the attributes from the historic narratives, both the shield-bearing and horn-bearing. Because of her disobedience, he disowns her and strip her of her role on the battlefield and in Walhall.

Wotan *Wish-maid thou art no more;
Valkyrie thou art no longer: —
What now thou art
For aye thou shalt be!...
No more shall I send thee from Walhall
To seek upon fierce*

²⁹ Richard Wagner, *The Ring of the Nibelung: The Rhinegold & the Valkyrie*, trans. by Margaret Armour, (London: Williams Heinemann Ltd, 1976), pp. 123-124.

³⁰ Wagner, *The Ring of the Nibelung: The Rhinegold & the Valkyrie*, pp. 146-148.

*Fields for the slain;
With heroes no more
Shalt thou fill my hall:
When the high Gods sit at banquet,
No more shalt thou pour
The wine in my horn.³¹*

Much like the original text of the *Völsunga saga*, the dual nature of the valkyrie is expressed in Wagner's narrative. It's acknowledged that Brünnhilde embodied both the shield-bearing and horn-bearing roles before she was cast down.

Image: Horned and Winged Helmets

Wagner's vision for the opera included almost every detail, from the performers to the stage design, props, and costumes. He chose Carl Emil Doepler as the costume designer for the first performance in Bayreuth, Germany in 1876. Doepler's memoir, published in 1900, contains his correspondence with Wagner and thoughts during the design process. He was a professor in Berlin when he received the first letter from Wagner expressing his desire to commission the work in 1874.³²

*'Highly Honoured Sir, I take the liberty of asking you whether you would care to undertake the design and superintend the making of the costumes for the proposed festival performance of my tetralogy, The Ring of Nibelungs in the summer of 1876...I regard the problem I have set as offering a rich field for invention, for I actually ask no less than a characteristic picture made up of individual human figures, which will call up before our eyes with arresting vividness the people and events of a bygone culture far removed from the world of our experience.'*³³

In their correspondence and meetings over the following months, Wagner and Doepler discussed the inspiration for the costumes, but mostly Wagner commented on the style in which he did *not* want the costumes, namely 'medieval' or 'classical antiquity'.³⁴ Wagner, and

³¹ Ibid., pp. 146-148.

³² Carl E. Doepler, *A Memoir of Bayreuth 1876*, trans. by Peter Cook, (London: Peter Cook, 1979), p. 21.

³³ Ibid., p. 22.

³⁴ Doepler, *A Memoir of Bayreuth 1876*, p. 22.

consequently Doepler, were seeking a fresh approach to the visualisation of the narrative through an authenticity which had not been realised by artists before. Doepler created his own stylisation of Wagner's characters with this amalgamation of evidence. Pairing his personal research with the information from Wagner's text and Snorri Sturlson's Edda, he compiled a significant amount of cultural information into his forty costume illustrations, including the valkyries.³⁵

After reading the text Wagner sent, Doepler chose to study the 'Nordic remains of the Stone and Bronze Ages...[for] sufficient material to product something on this basis which is at the same time both poetically graceful and strangely powerful and new in its effect.'³⁶ He travelled to Copenhagen to visit museums and gather evidence for his designs. One of the most recognised elements of Doepler's designs is the horned helmet, and its popularity as a motif for Viking Age Scandinavians began with this Bayreuth performance.

In Copenhagen, Doepler probably would have seen the Grevensvænge figures (c. 800-500 BCE), which were purchased by the Danish National Museum some decades earlier (Figure 5). Part of his research could have been aided by the increase in interest for archaeological and cultural heritage occurring at this time. Antiquarian scholarship was starting to be published, like the first issue of the Swedish Historical Museum in Stockholm monthly bulletin in 1872, which featured the Torslunda plates from Öland, in Sweden (c. 6th-8th C CE).³⁷ These plates featured a similarly horned figure to the Grevensvænge figures found in Denmark (Figure 6).

³⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

³⁷ Kongl. Vitterhets, *historie och antikvitets akademien månadsblad*, (Stockholm: På Akademiens förlag, 1872-74), p. 90.

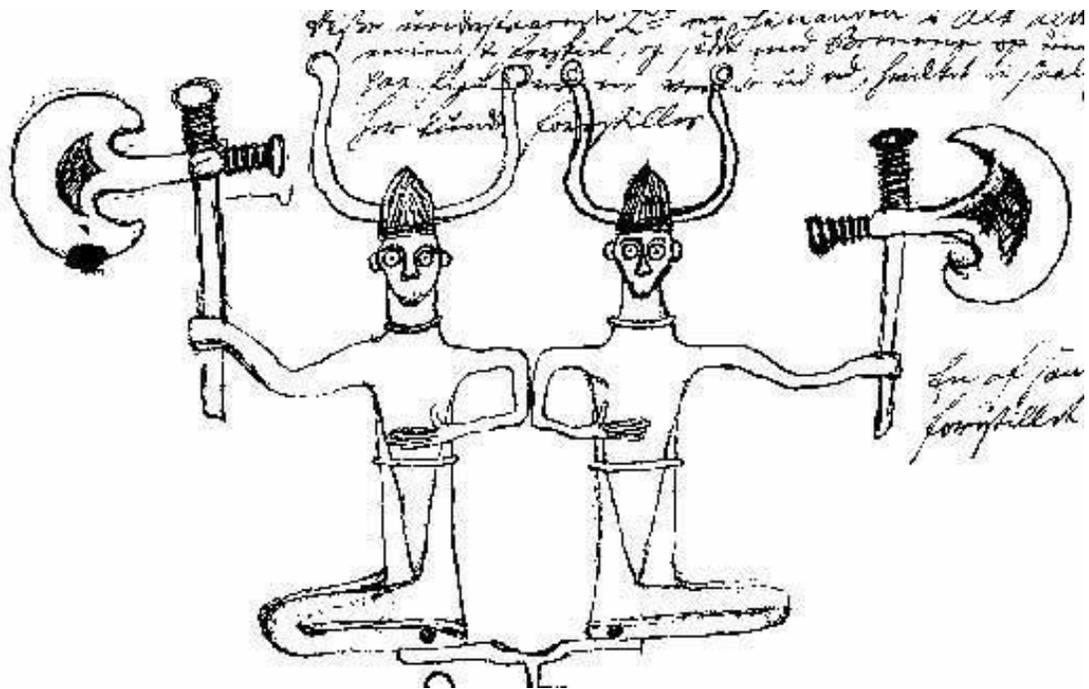


Figure 5. Grevensvænge Figures. Drawing on paper by Marcus Schnabel, 1779. Nationalmuseet (Denmark).



Figure 6. SHM 29750:211. Torslunda plate matrix, copy. Cast Bronze. Historiska Museet i Stockholm.

Mimicking the horned helmet design for male characters, Doepler utilised a winged helmet for the valkyries (Figure 7). His costume designs for the valkyries are multi-layered, physically and symbolically. The flowing folds of fabric cover their feet and falls in a way that suggests they are



Figure 7. Carl Emil Doepler. *Brunnhilde, Helmwise, and Ortlinde*. Chromolithographs. The Morgan Library & Museum.



Figure 8. Carl Emil Doepler. *Schwertlinde, Rossweise, Waltraut*. Chromolithographs. The Morgan Library & Museum.

suspended in air or weightless, giving them an ethereal quality not found in the other character's depictions (Figure 8).

Shrouded with many layers, each valkyrie costume differs from one another, but their feminine form is highlighted from the softness of the fabric, their flowing hair, and the definition of their breasts in the structured armour. With one hand they hold an ornate shield and with the other, a spear, referencing the valkyries' role in battle.

Comparing Doepler's designs and the photograph of Amalie Materna as Brünnhilde in the 1876 Bayreuth production reveals how precise the final costumes were to the original designs, down



Figure 9. Amalie Materna (with Grane) as Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*. Bayreuth production. Photograph by J. Albert, Munich, 1876. Metropolitan Opera Archives. The Morgan Library & Museum.

to the patterned and textured details of the armour, jewelry, and fabric (Figure 9). Doepler's depictions of the valkyries proved to be fleeting, but perhaps became the catalyst to a long succession of interpretations of the valkyrie for the next two centuries.

The popularity of Wagner's opera across Europe and the United States enabled new stylisations of these characters across different media, especially illustration. In 1910, when Arthur Rackham's illustrated edition of the English translation, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, was published, it was immediately successful with the public audience. Rackham's images are still easily

recognisable to this day.³⁸ The artist used his magical, heavily-textured style of drawing to incorporate the tempestuous atmosphere of the opera's movements into each visual composition. His illustrations develop key characters as the plot progresses. Available to a wider audience than even the opera, the written narrative of the epic paired with Rackham's illustrations became a familiar and approachable format for both adults and children for generations. This development impacted the reception of the valkyrie motif in the early twentieth-century context.

From the first illustration of Brünnhilde by Rackham, the viewer will recognise familiar iconographic elements from Doepler's Brünnhilde. Her ensemble includes a winged helmet, long billowing hair, a spear, a dagger with ornate handle, a shield, armbands, a full breastplate, long billowing hair, a spear, a dagger with ornate handle, a shield, armbands, a full breastplate,



Figure 10. Arthur Rackham. *Brünnhilde*. Pen and ink with watercolor on paper. *The Ring of Niblung*.

a bright red cloak, and wrapped leather sandals (Figure 10). A look of determination and pride exudes from her expression as she stands on the top of the rocky landscape. As this is the

³⁸ Wagner, *The Ring of the Niblung: The Rhinegold & the Valkyrie*, inside front cover.

viewer's first encounter with Brünnhilde, it establishes her characterisation as a stoic and formidable force in this sublime setting, emphasising her supernatural qualities.

Another of Rackham's dramatic interpretations is the *Ride of the Valkyries*, which directly correlates to the movement in the opera of the same title (Figure 11). This composition had been popular with artists in the mid-nineteenth century in Europe, such as the Norwegian painter, Peter Nicolai Arbo (Figure 12). In an apocalyptic manner, the valkyries charge through



Figure 11. Arthur Rackham. *Ride of the Valkyries*. Pen and ink with watercolor on paper. *The Ring of Niblung*.

the clouds, on their horses with spears forward. The motion and power of the valkyries' militaristic flight creates the driving force of the composition which purposefully matches the tone of the operatic movement. There is nothing comforting or welcoming to the ride as the valkyries scream their battle-cry. This composition appears to be an interpretation of stanza 15 of the poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, as well as other fragments and prose from the fourteenth century, which describe the battle-role of the valkyries.

The valkyries' association with horses as their transport harkens back to the Viking age picture stones that depict valkyries with men on horseback. However, instead of interacting with warriors on horseback entering Valhöll, the valkyries themselves are on horseback because it is their agency that directly impacts the fates of men. This agency was described in *Darraðarljóð* with their weaving and riding off to the battle field to collect the dead.

Impact: Heritage

With Wagner playing such a direct role in the operatic narrative and visual elements on stage, it is easy to see the direct connection between the characterisations of the valkyrie in text and image. The descriptions of the valkyries from *Der Ring des Nibelungen* focused on their relationship to each other as part of a group, to their leader Wotan, and to the heroes they carry to Walhall. Their roles as both guardians of heroes and transporters of the fallen in battle is emphasised through their actions and words. The armour, spear, and shields that adorned all of valkyries reinforced the violence inherent in their nature.



Figure 12. Peter Nicolai Arbo. *Valkyrie*. oil on canvas. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 1864.

Visually, both Doepler and Rackham chose to follow Wagner's ideas and emphasised the battle aspect of their character. However, Doepler's choices to review artefacts from the Bronze Age instead of the Viking Age, led to his distinctive interpretation. This shift impacted the public's perception of the character, and this was continued with Rackham's own interpretation.

As *Der Ring des Nibelungen* became popular across Europe and in the United States, this motif of the valkyrie found its way into the greater public eye. The supernatural and figurative nature of the valkyrie from earlier periods was subdued by their characterisation in Wagner's narrative. However, it also distanced the valkyrie from its historicity. Instead of being an entity that was relevant to the cultural belief system and impacted the people's lives (or deaths) directly, the valkyrie was transformed into a symbol of various cultural ideologies: freedom, victory, nationalism, and heritage. The fact that this narrative was approachable to the audience, acting as purely entertainment and not as ideological truth with potential ramifications for their culture, also added to this interpretation of the character. Through this, the valkyrie's transformation to a symbol rather than an entity was solidified, and it made it

easier to utilise the valkyrie motif in other ways, like advertising and illustration. With an increase in printed media reaching the public, the valkyrie continued to reach a larger audience outside Scandinavia into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Super-Heroines: Valkyries of Post-modern Popular Culture

In the twentieth century, the valkyrie continued to be adapted for use in entertainment primarily in Europe, Japan and the United States. Art, music, novels, theatre, television, video games, and the film industry all utilised the now popular character. The following characterisations show how each retained the heroic nature from the valkyrie's battle role to create the standard theme for the character. The Looney Tunes music short, *What's Opera, Doc?*, continued to promote Wagner and his valkyrie in 1957, through a comedic interpretation of Bugs Bunny as Brünnhilde and Elmer Fudd as Wotan (Figure 13). In the 1990s, the popular television character of *Xena, Warrior Princess* appeared fighting a group of valkyries (Figure 14). A Playstation video game from 2018 called *God of War* included nine different valkyries as part of their Norse mythological canon, which the protagonist had to defeat in order to advance. These appeared as spirits covered in ornate armour rather than human-like beings and is one of the most recent characterisations of the valkyrie to significantly deviate from the popular pattern established by Wagner (Figure 15).

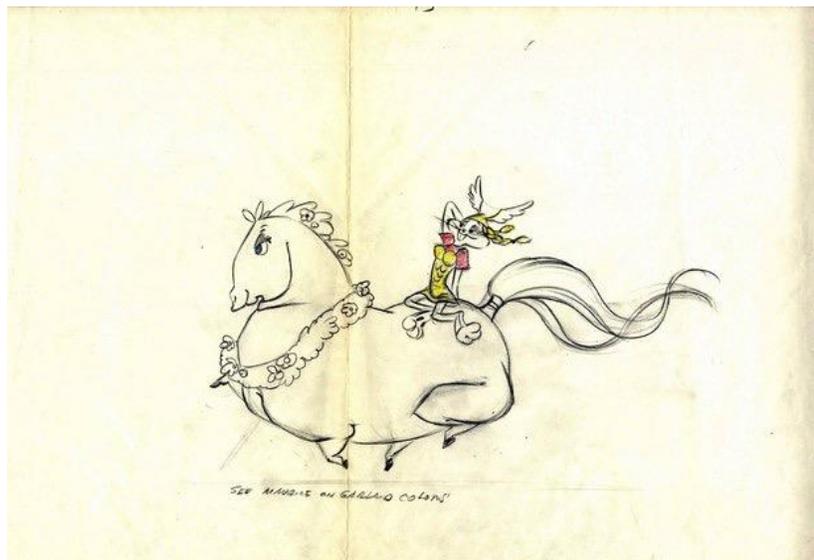


Figure 13. Chuck Jones. Character layout drawing, 'What's Opera, Doc?' 1957.
Looney Tunes Characters © & TM Warner Bros



Figure 14. Film still from *Xena, Warrior Princess: Return of the Valkyrie*. 2000. Studios USA Television Distribution.



Figure 15. Igor Catto. Valkyrie character art. *God of War*. 2018. SIE Santa Monica Studio.

Of all the interpretations from the recent decades, one of the most popular interpretations of the valkyrie began with character written by Roy Thomas for Marvel Comics. Brunnhilde, also known as Valkyrie (Val), was introduced as a character in the Marvel universe as part of *The Avengers* #83 from December 1970. She continued to appear in over 395 issues of various comic series, with the bulk of her narrative encompassed in *The Defenders* series.³⁹ As a comic book heroine, this valkyrie was stylised differently than previous depictions and continues to evolve for new audiences.

Text: What doth the Valkyrie say?

The background for Brunnhilde's character stemmed from the same narrative that Wagner used for his opera, the *Völsunga saga*. Brunnhilde is a valkyrie, will-doer of Odin and lover of Siegfried (another name for the character of Sigurd or Siegmund), who in the comics is a previous incarnation of the god Thor.⁴⁰ Restless as merely a transporter of the dead Asgardians, she seeks adventure on Earth, where her body and soul are separated by a sorceress bent on using Valkyrie's powers for her own endeavours. Thus begins the narrative of Valkyrie in issues of *The Defenders*. She talks in antiquated speech or through thinly-veiled puns. 'I shall not be satisfied 'till this sword drinks thy immortal life's blood!'⁴¹ 'For a thousand years, thou has held mine immortal body in bondage enchantress, but now, by the gods, thou shalt pay!'⁴² 'Like Hela they will.'⁴³

Image: Skin-tight and Shiny

In the early comics, such as the 1972 *The Defenders* #109 'Vengeance! Cries the Valkyrie', Valkyrie's outfit was a stark white bodysuit, with gold boots, armbands, and a blue cape (Figure 16). Her hairstyle was two loose braids, one on either side of her face, and she carried a gold

³⁹ Richard A. Hall, *The American Superhero: Encyclopedia of Caped Crusaders in History*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2019), p. 27.

⁴⁰ 'Brunnhilde: Valkyrie,' <<https://www.marvel.com/characters/valkyrie-brunnhilde>> [accessed July 1, 2019]

⁴¹ J. M. DeMatteis *Vengeance! Cries the Valkyrie*, (New York City: Marvel Comics, 1982), p. 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, cover.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.



Figure 16. George Roussos. *The Defenders #109: Vengeance! Cries the Valkyrie!* 1972. Marvel Comics.

sword called Dragonfang. Aside from being blonde, like a stereotypical Scandinavian, nothing about her ensemble appears to be like the historical representations previously discussed, (Doepler's valkyries carried spears, not swords).

Valkyrie's appearance had an overhaul throughout the series. In *The Defenders #45 'Divided We Duel'*, the white full bodysuit changed to a black leotard and black lace-up sandals. Her gold ornaments were reduced to armbands only, which were silver or sometimes blue (Figure 17). Metal accessories were added to the leotard to suggest a breastplate, which appeared to be a basic silver brassiere. This emphasis could be a simplification of the armour seen on Doepler's valkyries, which also emphasised the breasts in a few of the costumes, but included much more armour in general. Instead of a winged helmet like Doepler's valkyrie, it is Valkyrie's white horse, Aragorn, that has wings. As she 'ride[s] into battle...astride her flying steed', this visualisation harkens back to the motif of the Ride of the Valkyries (Figure 18).⁴⁴ Aragorn coloring adds another level of connection for Valkyrie and death for a modern western audience since many supernatural horses (like unicorns and Death's pale horse) are usually

⁴⁴ Buscema, *Divided, We Duel!* (New York City: Marvel Comics, 1977), p. 22.

depicted as being white. One of Wagner's valkyries is named Rossweisse, referencing a white horse. Most of these details concerning Valkyrie's style in the Marvel Comics remained largely unchanged even into the 1990s (Figure 19).

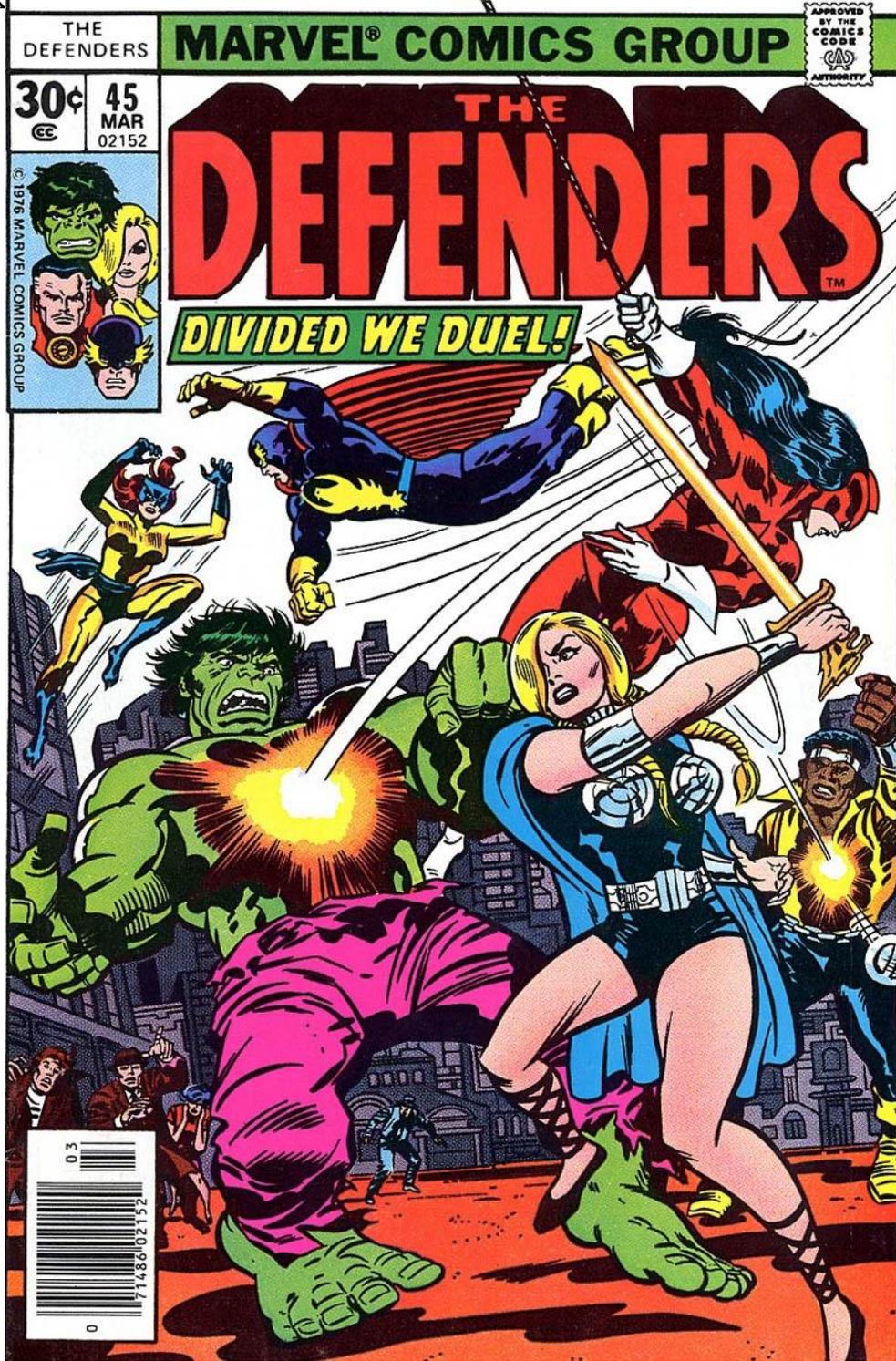


Figure 17. Klaus Janson. *The Defenders* #45 'Divided We Duel'. 1977. Marvel Comics.

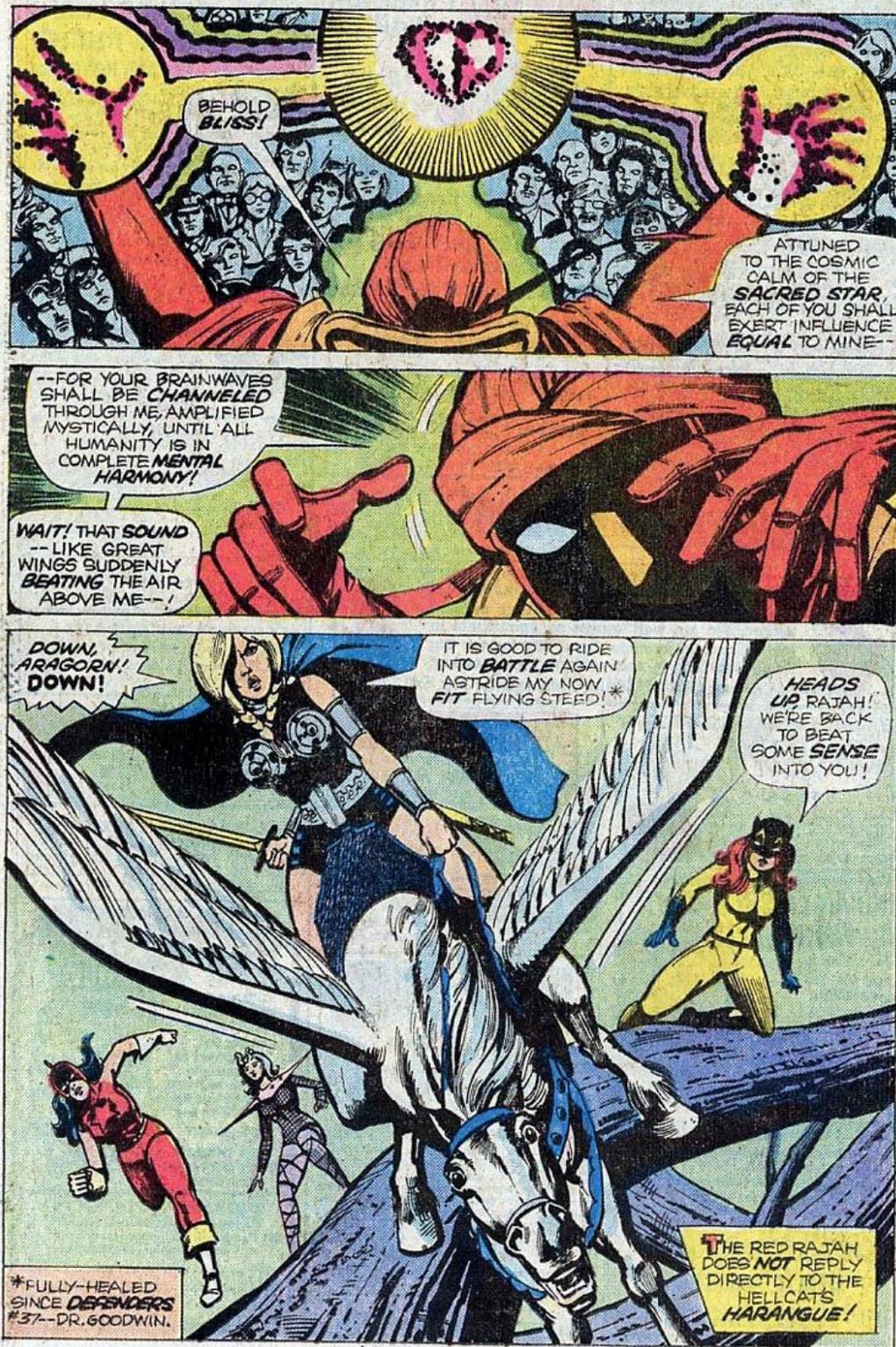


Figure 18. Klaus Janson. Page 22 from *The Defenders* #45 'Divided We Duel'. 1977. Marvel Comics.

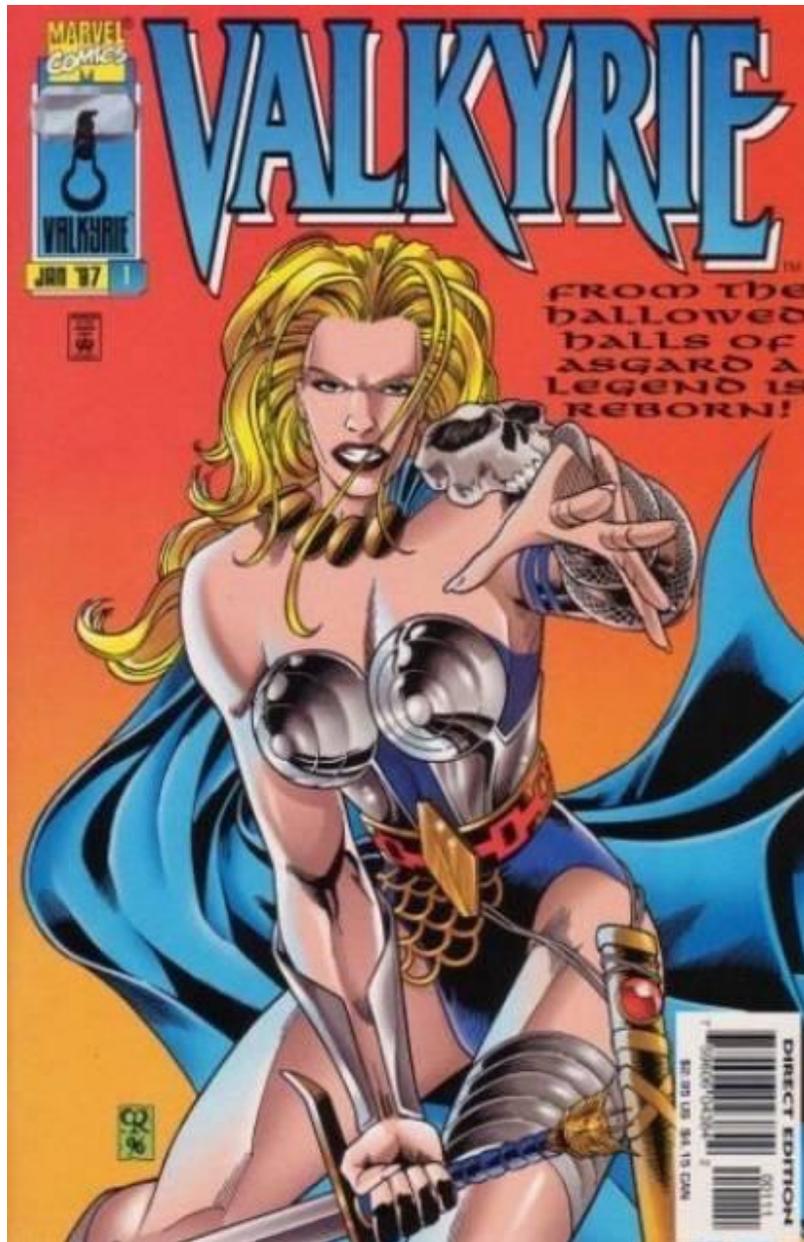


Figure 19. J.M. Matteis. *Valkyrie #1: 'Without Wings'*. 1997. Marvel Comics.

Valkyrie's most recent incarnation came with the film *Thor: Ragnarok* in 2017, wherein the character's depiction was dramatically altered from the comics original stylisation. Tessa Thompson, the actress who portrayed the character, has dark hair and a dark complexion. Even her 'traditional valkyrie' costume took a dramatic turn, with the only consistent element to the comics being a blue cape (Figure 20). The grey body suit with superimposed panels attempted

to allude to panelled armour. In a flashback from the film, Valkyrie is shown wielding a sword and riding a dapple-grey, winged horse as she charges into battle alongside the other valkyries (Figure 21). While Valkyrie frequently drinks during the film, she never offers up any in the same manner than the Viking Age valkyries were depicted as doing so. This was a subtle way to



Figure 20. Film still from *Thor: Ragnarok*. 2018. MARVEL.

include the concept of the drinking horn without replicating specific historic imagery. Throughout the past forty years, Marvel Comic's interpretation of the valkyrie character adapted to the different artists' choices and plots of the storylines. Each type of stylisation



Figure 21. Film still from *Thor: Ragnarok*. 2018. MARVEL.

maintained some familiar elements from previous narratives in history, but not completely imitating any specific iteration. This allowed for complexity to be added to Valkyrie's character and her overall narrative in the comics while maintaining some level of continuity for the sake of the audience.

Impact: Battle-ready Woman

Regardless of all the stylisation changes throughout the comics and film, the battle aspect of the valkyrie remained unchanged. As a heroine transposed from literature into popular culture, Marvel's Valkyrie maintained some of the ideological attributes from the narratives: a supernatural being associated with horses, agency, and battle-prowess. It was easy for the authors and artists of Marvel's Valkyrie to utilise the battle-role of the character for their supernatural battles with themes of good versus evil, but they also used her to demonstrate a political-charged battle.

As the character was developing in the 1970s, first wave feminism had started to take root in the United States. It was a fitting time for the artists at Marvel to introduce a number of female characters into their superhero lineup. Valkyrie's character often acted as a feminist icon, emphasising the value and equality of women and even subverting male authority and male superheroes. In two specific issues (*Avengers* #83 1970 and *Hulk* #9 2008) she participated in the league of Lady Liberators, seeking to showcase the strength and viability of women as physical fighters, even taking down a rogue Hulk. Valkyrie and her league of ladies may have been fighting literal battles against evil villains, but symbolically they were fighting a different battle, one for equality.

As a harbinger of death Marvel's Valkyrie is a strong force and a compelling opponent for the villains in the comic series. She, like many recent interpretations of the valkyrie, has elements taken from the narrative popularised by Wagner, but also has added visual attributes to fit with the visual motifs of specific media and audiences. Even with variation emphasis on battle, weaponry, victory, and even horsemanship all carried over into the imagery of the past few decades.

Underlying theme: Valkyrie as Victory

Since the Viking Age, the valkyrie and its motifs have expanded to encompass many attributes, including death, prophecy, battle, victory, supernatural power, heritage, national pride, and female authority. The lack of concrete information from the Viking Age paired with the scattered information from the medieval texts enabled the ambiguous character to be easily moulded throughout history. In the nineteenth century, Richard Wagner's interpretation of the valkyrie became one of the most recognised due to the prolific nature of his opera and the socio-political atmosphere of the time. Doepler's choices to incorporate cultural heritage from the Bronze Age left a lasting impression on the public's understanding of the Scandinavian history and Rackham's surreal illustration style influenced many young children's minds. However, it was the valkyrie's thematic elements that remained strongest from both text and imagery through the centuries. These themes were continually interpreted and led to the production of different imagery depending on the audience or artists' intention for the character.

The theme of victory is the most constant throughout the various interpretations. The stylisation of victory exhibited through the valkyrie varied, but it has always been associated with victory, either literally or symbolically. Victory can be seen in many ways: triumph over death through a new life in Valhöll seen in *Grimnismal*, on the battle-field, as in the battle of Clontarf in *Darraðarljóð*. or Helgi's defeat of Hunding in *Helgakviða Hundingbana*. In later representations, this victory transformed the valkyrie into a metaphor for political or entertainment purposes, such as Moder Svea for Swedish nationalism or Marvel's Valkyrie for feminist ideologies.

With victory as its common theme, the motif of the valkyrie took on many forms and attributes suited for its intended audiences. Most commonly it included shield-bearing aspect's imagery of weaponry and armour to stress the valkyries' battle-role. Related aspects such as the horse and singing were also incorporated. While it is common for celebrations after a victory to include drinking of some kind, the horn-bearing aspect of the valkyrie became subtler due to the active quality of the shield-bearing aspect's imagery.

As different cultures from throughout time interpreted this character, the valkyrie gained new contexts and attributes, which impacted its future audiences leading to even more variety in interpretations. While this article's exploration merely highlights some of the more recognised depictions of the valkyrie throughout history, there are many more interpretations which fit into the same thematic structure. With its current position in popular culture in the West, the valkyrie's motif is likely to continue to shift, each form being adapted by the artists' own interpretation of victory.

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