

Valkyrjur, Wælcyrgran, and Witches:
An Anatomy of Old-English and Old-Norse Valkyries

Luke John Murphy, The University of Iceland, Iceland

The Valkyrie, although well-known in modern western culture, is a complex and multi-faceted figure. Extant “Valkyries” include the tragic-heroic female lovers of the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*, the celestial barmaids of *Grímnismál*, *Eiríksmál* and *Snorra Edda*, and the apparently mortal witches of the Old English *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*. What is more, other female figures and spirits, including *fylgur hamingjur*, *dísir*, and possibly even *nornir*, all display similar attributes – a causative association with death, appearance in a man’s final days of life, the power of flight, links with battle and bloodshed – that might be termed ‘valkyric’.

This paper seeks to break away from the overarching Romantic image of the Valkyrie popularised by Wagner in the nineteenth century, and to examine primary evidence for how these female spirits were regarded in the early medieval north, particularly in Old Norse- and Old English-speaking regions. It seeks to consider, and propose answers to, the following questions: which extant individuals can be positively identified as *valkyrjur* or *wælcyrgran*? What do these figures have in common? Can any attributes or functions be positively identified as definitive of these figures? Is it possible – or useful – to draw distinctions between *valkyrjur* and *wælcyrgran*, or between them and other female spirits described by extant sources? What constitutes, when all is said and done, a Valkyrie?