

# A TEST CASE IN COMPARING TEXTUAL EVIDENCE WITH EVIDENCE FROM MATERIAL CULTURE

## CONCEPTIONS OF VALHÖLL

Sources:

1. **Medieval Icelandic manuscripts** preserve poems that speak of a [hall](#) presided over by the warrior-god Óðinn (Odin) and populated by elite Viking warriors who have died gloriously in battle. These warriors are selected by supernatural warrior-women called Valkyries 'choosers of the slain'. The native term for the [hall](#) is 'Valhöll', better known to us from the German adaptation 'Valhalla'. The chosen warriors reside in this [hall](#), spending their days hunting and their nights drinking and feasting, served by the Valkyries, until the coming of Ragnarök 'the reckoning of the gods', an Armageddon-like battle between the gods and malign forces such as the giants. On that day of reckoning the chosen warriors will be summoned to fight in defence of Óðinn and the other gods.
2. **Viking-Age picture-stones (*bildstenar*)** erected in memory of the dead on Gotland, a Swedish island in the Baltic Sea, contain depictions of warriors being welcomed to a great [hall](#).

Research questions: How was this [hall](#) envisaged in the Viking Age? Would it have been conceived of as a typical Viking-Age building or as something more exotic?

This poster explores these questions.

## A KEY TEXTUAL SOURCE

*Eiríksmál* 'Commemoration of Eric [Blood-axe]'

'Hvat es þat drauma,' sagði Óðinn, 'es ek hugðumk fyr dag lítlu  
 Valhǫll ryðja           fyr vegnu folki?  
 Vakða ek einherja,           bað ek upp rísa,  
 bekki at strá,           borðker at leyðra,  
 valkyrjur vín bera,           sem vísi komi. (v. 1)

'What kind of dream is this,' said Óðinn, 'that a little before daybreak I thought I was preparing Valhǫll for a slain army? I awakened the élite warriors, I bade them get up, cover the benches, and wash the drinking cups, and the valkyries to bring wine, as though a leader were about to arrive.'

Who is this 'leader'? The *Eiríksmál* (anonymous) is a eulogy of King Eric Blood-axe (Eiríkr blóðøx) commissioned by his widow Gunnhildr after his death in 954CE. Eric was at least nominally a Christian but the poem depicts him entering Valhǫll in 'heathen' style. Perhaps that was a matter of Gunnhildr's personal beliefs.

Shown, the text of v. 1 in one of the manuscripts (the Uppsala-Edda) containing this poem.

## A SECOND KEY TEXTUAL SOURCE

*Grímnismál* : the speaker in this early medieval poem is the god Óðinn.

Fimm hundruð dura  
ok um fiórom tögom,  
svá hygg ek at Valhǫllo vera;  
átta hundruð einheria  
ganga senn ór einom durom,  
þá er þeir fara at vitni at vega. (v. 23)

'Five hundred and forty doors, that's what I think there are at Valhǫll. Eight hundred chosen warriors exit at once from just those doors when they go to fight the wolf.'

The 'wolf' mentioned here is Fenrisúlfr, who will fight against Óðinn and the chosen warriors at Ragnarǫk 'the reckoning of the gods'.

Miðk er auðkent  
þeim er til Óðins koma  
salkynni at síá:  
skoptom er rann rept,  
skiöldom er salr þakiðr,  
bryniom un bekki strát. (v. 9)

'Very easily recognized it is, for those who come to Óðinn, to see his hall-comrades; the building has spear-shafts as rafters, has shields as roof-tiles, and the cushions for the benches are mail-shirts.'

*The Norwegian scholar Magnus Olsen interpreted the 540 doors as indicating that Valhǫll had its model in the Coliseum at Rome! But the Coliseum in fact had just 80 entrances. The number 540 might have been determined by its magical (9 x 60) rather than architectural significance.*

## SCHOLARLY RECONSTRUCTIONS OF VIKING-AGE BUILDINGS

Reconstructions are based on:

1. Viking-Age depictions of halls and other buildings: Shown here are two examples of the so-called 'hog-back' tombs, found in apparently Scandinavian contexts in northern England. These tombs seem to imitate the convex ('aerodynamic') design of halls or long-houses. Also shown is the Cammin Casket, which emulates such additional features as animal-heads at the gable-ends of the roof.
2. Modern reconstructions of buildings known from archaeological investigations: Shown here is a reconstruction of one of the great halls at Lejre, Denmark, also exhibiting the 'aerodynamic' design suited for a windy environment. (NB the prevalence of wind turbines in modern Denmark.)

## A KEY PICTORIAL SOURCE

### THE PICTURE-STONES OF GOTLAND

The picture-stones (*bildstenar*) are slabs of native limestone carved with scenes on a variety of subjects. Most of these scenes remain enigmatic and not firmly identified. Of the two examples shown here, the better-preserved is from Ardre, the more damaged from Tjängvide i Alskog, parishes on the Baltic island of Gotland. Both stone carvings are now thought to date from the ninth century.

To the left of the rider in the top panel of these stones, we see the front elevation of a building with three arches. Such a structure is otherwise unattested in the Scandinavian homelands at so early a date.

Question 1: Could the carver have modelled this image on Roman-style buildings (perhaps those of the Carolingian Empire)?

Shown here for comparison are

1. The Triumphal Gate-way at Lorsch, Germany, probably marking the grave of a member of the Carolingian imperial dynasty
2. A plan of Charlemagne's palace at Ingelheim, Germany – three-fold arcade shown at left
3. A Carolingian-era reception hall (now used as a church) at Oviedo, Spain

All three structures date from the ninth century and feature a triple arcade with upper storey.

Question 2: Is the three-arched structure on the picture-stones to be identified as [Valhöll](#)? A majority of scholars think so, interpreting the rider as Óðinn, the horse as his eight-legged horse Sleipnir, and the woman as a Valkyrie. The scene on the Tjängvide stone includes the wolf (*Fenrisúlfr*) that will fight against Óðinn's forces at Ragnarök, along with a corpse.

A minority of scholars prefer to identify the rider not as Óðinn but as the hero Sigurðr and the Valkyrie-figure as the arch-female-warrior Brynhildr, with the building to be identified as her hall (which according to the legend would be located in the region of modern Burgundy). But this interpretation leaves the other details in the scene difficult to account for.

## TENTATIVE CONCLUSION AND COMMENTS

Probably **Valhǫll** was envisaged by Viking-Age people as a splendid **hall** in 'southern' style (Carolingian or perhaps Byzantine), featuring that key prestigious Roman feature, the arch.

This would tie in with the fact that the most prestigious swords, spears, and helmets used by warriors were manufactured in the 'south' (~modern France) and brought to the North via plunder, gift-exchange, and trade.

The 'south' was prestigious – so what fitter residence in the Afterlife than a southern-style **Valhǫll**?

But we can hardly reconcile this southern style with the depiction in *Grímnismál*.

Therefore at least two conceptions of **Valhǫll** must have been current. This is probably one instance among many of the eclecticism and heterogeneity of early Scandinavian systems of belief.

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