Sources:
1. Medieval Icelandic manuscripts preserve poems that speak of a hall presided over by the warrior-god Óðinn (Óðin) and populated by Ælve 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 ‘Valklí’; 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 these 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 (bildstener) 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
Enklamsúl ‘Commemoration of Eric [Blood-axe]’

‘Hvat hes þat drauma; sagði Óðinn, ‘es ek hugðumyr fy dag lifu Valklín yfja fyr vognu fóki. Vuðka ek ensiðja, bað ek upp risa, bekkj at stra, bôrdar at leyðna, valkyrgirvin bera, sem viði komi.’ (v. 1)

‘What kind of dream is this,’ said Óðinn, ‘that a little before daybreak I thought I was preparing Valklí for a slain army? I awakened the elite 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 Enklamsúl (anonymous) is an elegy of King Eric Blood-axe (Enkl blóðs) commissioned by his widow Gunnhildr after his death in 954CE. Eric was at least nominally a Christian but the poem depicts him entering Valhll in ‘heathen’ style. Perhaps that was a matter of Gunnhildr’s personal beliefs.

A SECOND KEY TEXTUAL SOURCE
Groenismál : the speaker in this early medieval poem is the god Óðinn.

Finn hundrúð dura
ok um fórum tagam,
sva hvgik at Valklí vera;
áttu hundrúð einheira
ganga senn dr simur dugar,
þá er þar fara at viðt at vegu. (v. 23)

‘Five hundred and forty doors, that’s what I think there are at Valhll. 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 Ragnarök ‘the judgement of the gods’.

Mjók er aukkaen
þem er til Óðins koma
saktýnn at síði,
skogton er rann repi,
skiðjon er sain þakki,
bryniun um bekkj strað. (v. 9)

‘Very easily recognized is it, for those who come to Óðinn, to see his hall- comrades; the building has spoor-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 Valhll had its model in the Colosseum at Rome! But the Colosseum in fact had just 80 entrances. The number 540 might have been determined by its magical (9×60) rather than architectural significance.

SHOWING 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’ (tomb), found in apparently Scandinavian contexts in northern England. These tombs seem to imitate the corvus (‘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 Lyle, Denmark, also exhibiting the ‘aerodynamic’ design suited for a windy environment. (NB the prevalence of wind turbines in modern Denmark.)

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TENTATIVE CONCLUSION AND COMMENTS

Probably Valhll was envisaged by Viking-Age people as a splendid hall in ‘southern’ style (Carolinhgan or perhaps Byzantine), featuring that key prestigious Roman feature, the arch. This would be 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 fitted residence in the Afterlife as a southern-style Valhll?

But we can hardly reconcile this southern style with the depiction in Grímnismál, which includes a wolf on display at the western gable-end. Therefore at least two conceptions of Valhll 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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