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GREENLAND

ICELAND

Western  
● Settlement

● Reykjavik

Eastern  
● Settlement

MARKLAND

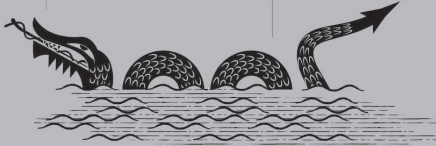
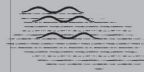
● L'Anse Aux  
Meadows

IRELAND

ENGL

VINLAND

NORTH  
ATLANTIC  
OCEAN





NORWAY

• Stiklestad

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FINLAND

Lake Ladoga

• Staraya Ladoga

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GARDARIKE

York

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• Dorestad

Dnicper

Don

Volga

• Kyiv

EAST  
FRANCIA

Paris

WEST  
FRANCIA

KHAZARIA

CASPIAN SEA

AL-ANDALUS

• Rome

BULGARIA

BLACK SEA

• Constantinople

EASTERN  
ROMAN EMPIRE

SICILY

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

Jerusalem

Baghdad

ARAB  
CALIPHATE

MIDGARD



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PROLOGUE

*Lindisfarne*

8 June 793

It was a cool, breezy day on the coast of north-eastern England. A day for strolling along the grassy cliffs and drinking in the sea air; for watching the seabirds high above, and skimming stones across the green-grey waves; for gazing out at the distant horizon, and wondering what lay beyond.

On the island of Lindisfarne, the monks had been up for hours. Some were bent over their desks, copying the exquisitely illustrated Bibles for which their monastery was famous. Others were working in the kitchens, or polishing and cleaning in the chapel, or patiently sweeping the long stone corridors.

But on such a fine morning, most of the younger men had slipped outside to work in the gardens. Life out here, two miles off the Northumbrian mainland, was often dark and wet and cold, so it was only sensible to make the most of the sunshine.

Lindisfarne, they all knew, was special – a place like no

other. There had been a monastery here for more than a century, attracting some of the holiest and most learned men in the land.

Its most beloved son, St Cuthbert, was buried only a few yards away, and every year hundreds of pilgrims came to pray at his tomb. This was a place where you could feel God close: a place of beauty, a place of peace.

The monks could never entirely forget the outside world. In recent months, pilgrims had brought reports of strange signs and omens. Some had talked of whirlwinds, and flashes of lightning, and great fiery dragons, soaring through the heavens . . .

But on such a morning as this, when all was well with God's creation, storms and dragons seemed very far away.

It was one of the younger monks, with his sharp eyes, who spotted the sails. He gave a cry and dropped his rake, pointing excitedly at the horizon, and his friends came running.

Yes! There was no mistaking it! Three great sails: one striped in red and white, one blue with the image of an animal, one a rich, deep yellow.

The ships were coming closer, as if heading for the island. The monks could not yet make out the men on board, but one of them turned to run for the Abbot.

As he did so, he almost bumped into another man standing right behind him, apparently frozen to the spot.

This monk was a foreigner, from the lands of the far North. A jagged scar ran from his brow to his jawline, as if somebody had tried to split his head in two. But he

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never spoke about his past, and none of them dared to ask about it.

Now he just stood there, staring at the sea, as the ships came closer, and closer, and closer. And on his face was an expression of utter horror . . .



The raiders charged up the beaches of Lindisfarne like a storm from the depths of hell.

The first monk they met, on the path leading up from the shore, they hacked to the ground without a word, an axe splintering his skull in a moment. Then they raced on up the slope, their swords eager for slaughter.

More monks came towards them, their hands raised to beg for mercy. The Vikings cut them down where they stood. Blood splattered over the turf.

Now they were into the monastery, crashing through the doors, roaring and howling with diabolical rage. They pulled down the crosses and smashed open the tombs.

They piled up the holy vessels and stamped on the relics. They tore off the altar cloth, ripped up the Bibles and dragged out the desks. And all the time they were laughing, a chorus of cruel and savage joy.

When it was all over, and their fury was spent, they



forced some of the survivors to carry their plunder down to the beach. And when all the treasures were aboard, they chained the younger monks together with fetters of iron, and forced them onto their longships, too.

They would fetch a pretty price, one of the raiders sneered, in the slave markets of the eastern riverlands.

That evening, as the sun sank over the Northumbrian hills, the longships set off for home. The rowers struck up their rhythm; the oars rose and fell.

Many of the monks were crying. But at the prow of the leading ship, the Vikings' captain barely noticed.

He was too busy inspecting the golden cross he had taken down from the altar. And as he turned it this way and that, to catch the last of the light, a wolfish smile spread over his tattooed features.

Then he thrust it away in his sack, barked an order at the rowers, and turned back to face the east.



The attack on Lindisfarne, which took place on 8 June 793, sent a wave of fear through the people of western Europe. In every corner of the Christian world, churchmen wrung their hands with horror, and parents hugged their children close.

So began the Viking Age, one of the most colourful,

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exciting and blood-soaked episodes in history. For the next three hundred years, striking from their hidden bases in modern-day Denmark, Norway and Sweden, the Scandinavian pirates stormed across the map, looting and pillaging.

Of course they weren't just raiders and killers. They were farmers and traders, shipwrights and craftsmen, wizards and poets, storytellers and dreamers. They left us brooches and bracelets of gold and silver, and sagas and legends that will never die.

But when most of us think of the Vikings, we think of battle-crazed berserkers and sword-wielding shieldmaidens. We think of Odin the One-Eyed and Thor the Thunderer. We remember the dragon-headed longships looming from the mist, the axes reddened with enemy blood, the howls of the vanquished and the songs of the conquerors.

The Vikings raided England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, looting towns and monasteries for silver and slaves. They rampaged through France, twice besieged Paris, attacked the golden cities of southern Spain and even launched raids in distant Italy and North Africa.

They sailed down the great rivers of the East and established a new kingdom at Kyiv, which gave birth to both Ukraine and Russia. They laid siege to Constantinople, capital of the last of the Romans, and served as bodyguards for the Emperor himself. They fought in the Holy Land, Sicily and modern-day Turkey, and even rode into the deserts of Asia.

In the far West, they founded a new country amid the

volcanoes of Iceland, and travelled to the freezing coasts of faraway Greenland. And most incredibly of all, they sailed more than two thousand miles west to the shores of North America, the first Europeans ever to do so.

The Vikings were murderous and magnificent, thrilling and terrifying. Among them were some of the most fearsome warriors in all history: Ragnar Hairy-Breeches and Ivar the Boneless, Sigurd Snake-Eye and Eric Bloodaxe, Sweyn Forkbeard and Harald Hardrada.

And they were joined by some of the most formidable women imaginable, from Olga of Kyiv, a Christian saint who roasted her enemies to death, to Aud the Deep-Minded, who sailed her longship to the land of ice and fire.

Much of the Viking Age is cloaked in mystery. Many of the most exciting stories come from the Icelandic sagas, blending fact and fantasy, myth and magic.\*

No historian can be sure what really happened, and what didn't. So any version of these dark and dramatic years always involves a bit of imagination – and this one is no different.

But before we plunge back into the world of the Vikings, here are two things we *do* know. First of all, they never called themselves 'the Vikings'.

To 'go viking' was to go on an adventure, a raid or a

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\* The sagas were the strange and wonderful stories produced by the people of Iceland, a mixture of histories, myths and folk tales. At first, people shared them by word of mouth, but later medieval scholars wrote them down.

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pirate voyage. So being a Viking wasn't a nationality; it was a way of life. It wasn't something you *were*; it was something you *did*.

Outsiders didn't generally call them the Vikings, either. The English called them the heathens, the pagans or simply the Danes, while people in the East called them the Rus or the Varangians.

And the Vikings themselves – the people who actually lived in Scandinavia – never thought of themselves that way. Instead, they called themselves 'the Northmen' or 'the Norse'.

The other thing we do know is a bit of a disappointment. *The Vikings never wore horned helmets.*

Their horned helmets were actually invented a thousand years later, for a stage production of Richard Wagner's opera saga *The Ring of the Nibelung* in 1876. Wagner's operas were based on the Norse myths, but the horned helmets were invented by his costume designer because they looked so glamorous.

Enough of this. Let's return to the story. Let's plunge back into the world of the Vikings: a world of heroes and monsters, seafarers and sorcerers, warriors and witches.

And let's begin at the beginning – with the gods, the giants and the dawn of time itself . . .



PART ONE

THE AWAKENING



## I

# *The Gods of Asgard*

In the beginning there was only ice and fire.

The kingdom of fire was Muspelheim, and it burned with a raging flame. No living thing could stand its heat, and from its blazing heart roared clouds of smoke.

The kingdom of ice was Niflheim, the mist-world, land of snow and cold and darkness. From here flowed eleven rivers, seething and simmering with a deadly venom.

Between the two kingdoms there was nothing: a void, a vast emptiness, called Ginnungagap. Into this void flowed the rivers of poison, and here they froze into layers of ice.

As the aeons passed, the sparks and smoke from Muspelheim drifted into the void. Fire breathed on frost, and slowly, slowly, the ice began to melt.

Ice became water. Water became life. Gradually the drops came together and took shape, and so was born the first living thing, Ymir, a cruel and barbarous giant.

The second creature formed by the water was Authumbla, the hornless cow. Her milk fed Ymir. She enjoyed licking the salt from the frost, and as she licked, another



being emerged from the ice. This was Buri, the forefather of the gods.

Buri had a son called Bor, who then had three sons of his own. The eldest was Odin, the second was Vili and the youngest was Ve.

The long years went by, and in the black nightmare of the void Odin and his brothers grew strong. They hated Ymir and his monstrous children, and one day they decided to kill him.

They chose their moment carefully, attacking when Ymir least expected it. As they struck him down, a tide of blood flowed from his wounds, drowning all his children except one – Bergelmir, ancestor of the frost giants, who managed to escape in a wooden boat.

Meanwhile, Odin and his brothers dragged Ymir's body to the heart of the void and set to work. From his flesh they made the earth. From his hair they made the woods, from his bones they made the mountains, from his blood they made the lakes and rivers, and from his teeth they made stones and rocks.

They tossed up his brains, and they became the clouds. Then they lifted up his vast skull and made it the dome of the sky, with a dwarf holding up each corner. The dwarves' names were Nordri, Sudri, Austri and Vestri – or as we would say, North, South, East and West.

In the heavens they placed two chariots. First came the chariot of Night, pulled by the horse Hrimfaxi with his snow-white mane. It was followed by the chariot of her son Day, whose steed was the golden-maned Skinfaxi.

## *The Gods of Asgard*

Every half-day they would cross the sky, until the end of time.

But Odin and his brothers were not quite done yet. While they had been busy, the frost giants – the children of Bergelmir – had settled along the edge of the earth, where the land meets the seas.

So Odin and his brothers decided to build an enclosure, with a great wall to keep the giants at bay. They fashioned a wall from Ymir's eyebrows, and set it around a fertile garden. And this they called Midgard – or as we would say, Middle-Earth.



One day Odin, Vili and Ve were walking beside the ocean, alone under the vastness of the sky. The beach was deserted. All they could hear was the roaring of the waves.

Then they spotted something lying on the sand – two thick stumps of wood, though whether they were driftwood washed up by the tide, or the remains of trees ripped from the earth, it was impossible to say.

The three gods lifted the stumps and began shaping them with their hands, giving them heads, bodies, arms and legs. They called one stump Ask, which means Ash. They called the other Embla, meaning Elm.

The three gods knelt. First Odin breathed into the mouths of the two figures, giving them the spirit of life. Then Vili gave them wit and feeling, so they could think and move. And finally Ve gave them eyes to see, ears to hear and tongues to speak.

So Ash and Elm, the first man and the first woman, looked around them in wonder – at the sand, the sea and the sky. They were the ancestors of every man, woman and child in Midgard.



Midgard was just one of the nine realms that made up the universe, which were spread over three different levels.

On the highest level were the kingdoms of the gods. One was Asgard, kingdom of Odin and his dynasty, the Aesir – a land of towering peaks and sparkling lakes, sun-dappled fields and golden halls. The second was Vanaheim, inhabited by a rival dynasty of gods, the Vanir. And there was a third kingdom on this level, too: Alfheim, land of the light-elves.

From Asgard a shimmering rainbow bridge, Bifrost, led down to the middle level, and the hills and fields of the fourth kingdom, Midgard. Off to the east, separated by rivers and mountains, was the fifth realm: Jotunheim, land of the giants. To the north was Nidavellir, the underground

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kingdom of the dwarves, a labyrinth of mines and caverns. And to the south was Svartalfheim, land of the dark elves, wreathed in mystery.

Finally came the bottom level, the underworld. Here lay the eighth kingdom, Niflheim, the land of shadow; and the ninth, the citadel of Hel, the terrible fastness of the dead.

All nine realms were connected by Yggdrasil, the great World Tree that ran through the heart of the cosmos. All kinds of creatures lived in its branches: an eagle at the top, a dragon called Nidhogg gnawing at the roots, even a squirrel called Ratatosk, who scurried up and down carrying mocking messages between them.

From Yggdrasil, three roots twisted down through the universe, one to Asgard, one to Jotunheim and the other to Niflheim. At the foot of the second root, in the kingdom of the giants, was the Spring of Mimir, the Well of Wisdom.

A drink from these bubbling waters came at a crippling high price. But for Odin, the chance to learn the mysteries of the universe was impossible to resist.

He gouged out his own eye and offered it to the waters. Then, as blood dripped from the empty socket, he drank eagerly from the well, desperate for the secrets he craved.

Still he wanted more. When the well's guardian, Mimir, was killed in a war between the gods, Odin murmured spells over his severed head, so that it would regain the power of speech. From that day he carried Mimir's head with him, listening to its whispered advice.

For the one-eyed god, though, even that was not enough. At last, in a strange and savage ritual, Odin took his enchanted

spear and plunged it deep into his side, before hanging himself upside down from a branch of the World Tree. Through this sacrifice, he prayed, he would gain the wisdom he sought.

Later, the poets imagined Odin's thoughts after he returned:

*I know that I hung on the windy tree,  
wounded with a spear, for nine long nights,  
dedicated to Odin, myself to myself,  
on that tree whose roots run  
from a place that no man knows.*

*No bread did they give me,  
nor a drink from a horn.  
Down I peered.  
I clutched the runes,  
screaming I took them,  
and then fell back again.*

The runes . . . the sacred symbols of time and space, the marks of power and sorcery, the keys that would unlock a thousand spells.

Through his sacrifice, Odin had won them for the people of Midgard.



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After his ordeal on the World Tree, Odin was never quite the same. There was a looming shadow behind him now, a sense of darkness and danger.

For the men and women of Midgard, he was the lord of all, the master of runes and magic, the friend of kings and ravens. But his many nicknames – the Ghost-Lord, the Battle-Screamer, the Hooded One, the Father of the Slain – hinted at the cruelty and violence of his deepest thoughts.

Among the Aesir, the gods of Asgard, Odin ruled unchallenged. His wife was Frigg, goddess of marriage. Their son was Baldur, gentlest of the gods, loved by all for his kindness and beauty.

Baldur was ‘so fair of feature, and so bright, that light shines from him,’ wrote one poet. ‘He is the wisest of the Aesir, and the fairest-spoken and most gracious; and when he speaks, everybody listens.’

In Midgard, though, the real favourite was his half-brother Thor, god of thunder and lightning. The son of Odin and a giantess, Thor was the image of rampaging Viking manliness, hot-tempered and red-bearded. He lived with his wife, the golden-haired Sif, in a huge hall, Bilskirnir.

Thor wore gloves of iron and an enchanted Belt of Strength, which made him twice as strong as any other god. Above all, he wielded his huge hammer, Mjolnir the Giant-Cleaver, the most famous weapon in the nine realms.

In Midgard, people loved hearing tales of Thor the Storm-Bringer’s adventures, especially his battles with the

giants. A particular favourite was his encounter with Thrym, king of the frost giants, who stole Mjolnir one night when Thor was sleeping.

In return, Thrym demanded the hand of the goddess Freyja in marriage. So Thor disguised himself as Freyja, hiding his beard beneath a bridal veil, and went along to Thrym's hall.

At the feast before the wedding, Thor forgot himself and devoured an entire ox, eight salmon and three horns of mead, which really should have given him away. But the slow-witted giant went ahead with the ritual anyway. And when the moment for their marriage came, Thrym called for Mjolnir to bless their union.

At that, Thor's heart laughed with joy. When the hammer was placed in his hands, he tore off his veil and stood revealed as the god of thunder, his eyes burning with blood-red rage:

*Thrym, king of ogres, was the first he killed,  
Then all the kin of the giants he slew . . .  
And so Odin's son won back his hammer.*

In truth, though, the plan hadn't been Thor's idea at all. Like so many tricks and stratagems, it had been the brain-child of his fellow god Loki, the Sly One, Lord of Mischief and Prince of Lies.

The son of two giants, Loki was a god unlike any other. He was handsome and charming, but utterly untrustworthy; he was funny and playful, but sly and vicious. He

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could change his shape, his voice, even his species: he might appear as a fish, a horse or a fly.

Loki was impossible to pin down, always twisting, always plotting. That made him dangerous. For beneath all the tricks, his heart was twisted with bitterness and hatred, black as night.

There were other gods too, of course. There was golden-toothed Heimdall, the watchman with the shrieking horn, who guarded the Rainbow Bridge.

There was blind Hod, Baldur's beloved brother. And there was Tyr, bravest of the Aesir, from whom we get the word Tuesday – just as Wednesday is Odin's day, Thursday is Thor's day and Friday is Frigg's day.\*

These were the best known of the Aesir. But there was another dynasty of gods, the Vanir. Their realm of Vanaheim lay close at hand, and in the first days of creation the two dynasties fought a terrible war.

Both lands suffered dreadful damage, and in the end they agreed to live in peace. As a sign of friendship, the Vanir king Njord, god of the sea, came to Asgard with his children, Frey and Freyja.

Frey was the god of rain and sun, peace and plenty. He rode a golden boar, and ruled the land of Alfheim, the Elf-Home, as his own.

Freyja, meanwhile, was a mighty goddess indeed. The mistress of women and witchcraft, love and creation, she

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\* The Anglo-Saxon name for Odin was Woden. So they called the week's middle day *Wodensdaeg*, which is why we call it 'Wednesday'.



rode in a chariot pulled by cats, and was considered the fairest of all the goddesses.

Her clothes were stitched with golden thread, her arms decorated with golden bracelets. But there was more to her than her beauty, for Freyja was as fierce as any man.



The gods of Asgard and Vanaheim were not alone in the universe. In the freezing, snowbound kingdom of Jotunheim lived the giants – ferocious, formidable but, as the tale of Thrym suggests, terribly dull-witted.

Midgard, too, was full of strange creatures. If you ventured underground, you might come across the dwarves, although they liked to keep to themselves.

The dwarves were careful creatures, lurking in the bowels of the earth. They were brilliant at digging and mining, and prided themselves on their craftsmanship. They loved stones and gems, which they worked into jewellery and trinkets of all kinds.

Then there were the elves, the Hidden People, creatures of great beauty and magic. They too kept a low profile, living in the mountains and forests, and no human could catch a glimpse of them.

But they were there, all the same. When your crops

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failed, or your child fell ill, the elves were often to blame. If you were sensible, you would leave gifts of food outside your house, to earn the elves' goodwill.

There were other monsters, too: serpents and dragons, werewolves and shape-shifters. Trolls and ogres roamed the northern wastes, while everybody knew that the *draugr*, the walking dead, haunted mounds and barrows at night.

Finally there were the children and grandchildren of Ask and Embla, the men and women of Midgard. Their time on earth was short, yet they spent much of it quarrelling and fighting, and the stories they told about their ancestors were remarkably violent.

Of all these tales, the most celebrated was that of Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer – a saga soaked in blood, but one told and retold for more than a thousand years.\*

Sigurd was a son and grandson of kings, a man of extraordinary spirit and valour. His sword was the ancient blade Gram, once broken but now reforged by his friend, the smith Regin.

Urged on by Regin, Sigurd fought and killed the dragon Fafnir, who guarded a great hoard of stolen gold. But the treasure carried a dreadful curse, and it brought Sigurd nothing but pain.

At Regin's request, Sigurd cut out and roasted the dragon's heart, so that his friend could eat it. But when he tested the meat to see if it was cooked, he accidentally tasted some

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\* The most famous stories inspired by this legend are probably J. R. R. Tolkien's books *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

of Fafnir's blood – and suddenly he found he could understand what the birds were singing.

To Sigurd's horror, the birds revealed that Regin was planning to kill him and steal the dragon's gold for himself. So Sigurd drew his sword, slew Regin and made off with the treasure.

More adventures followed. Sigurd fell in love with the shield-maiden Brynhild, and gave her a golden ring. But after a very complicated series of twists, Sigurd was betrayed and murdered, while Brynhild threw herself into the flames of his funeral pyre.

So perished the most tragic hero of all, 'greater in strength and ability, eagerness and courage', said the poets, 'than any other man who ever lived'.

To our ears this might sound a bleak and depressing tale. But to its original listeners, Sigurd's story was a reminder of what life was really like. Midgard was a cruel and dangerous place, and tragedy was never far away.

To survive in a universe with so many terrors, you had to be lucky. From the moment you were born, you had a guardian angel. Very rarely, people with special sight could glimpse them, but to most they were invisible.

When your luck came to an end, your guardian angel would fly from your side. So when the people of Midgard talked of their luck running out, they meant it literally.

There were things you could do to improve your chances. You might carry a magic amulet, or wear a symbol of your favourite god, such as Thor's hammer, around your neck.

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But if your story, like Sigurd's, was due to end, there was nothing you could do. Your life was ruled by fate; and fate was decided by the Norns, the three women who knew the destiny of all living things.

The Norns lived beside the Well of Urd, by the roots of Yggdrasil, and were shrouded in mystery. Their names were Past, Present and Future, and every day they collected water to keep the tree alive.

They were spinners, weaving the fates of all on their magical looms. They knew what had been, and was, and would be. When your time ran out, the spinners cut your thread – and your tale was over.

Yet all tales had an epilogue. For most people, death meant a long and terrible journey into the underworld. For nine days you travelled through the gloom and the fog, heading ever northwards and downwards, until you reached the Roaring River, with its covered bridge.

Once you crossed the bridge, you found yourself before the great death-gate of Nagrind, guarded by the monstrous hellhound, Garm. And when the doors swung open, you entered the realm of Niflheim, the kingdom of mist and ice.

At the heart of Niflheim was the citadel of Hel, with its huge black gates and soaring, shadowed halls. It was named after its mistress, Hel, Queen of the Dead, daughter of Loki and the giantess Angrboda.

Hel's face was so grim no man could look on her without a shudder, but her body was even more disgusting. Her top half seemed healthy enough, but below her waist she had a decaying, blue-green look, like a rotting corpse.

Her bowl was called Hunger, and her knife Famine. She slept in Sick-Bed, and her bed hangings were called Glimmering Misfortune.

Not all the people of Midgard, though, were fated to end up in Hel's chilly embrace. Those who fell in battle could hope for a very different fate, thanks to the Valkyries, shield-maidens of Odin and choosers of the slain.

Clad in glittering chain mail, armed with razor-sharp swords and spears, the Valkyries were beautiful and terrible, mesmerizing and bone-chilling. They revelled in slaughter, and as they urged their ghostly steeds through the skies, the horses' sweat fell as dew in the meadows and hailstones in the forests.

To gaze upon these warrior-maidens, said the poets, was 'like looking into flames'. Just the sound of their names could still your heart and freeze your blood:

*Killer*  
*Destroyer*  
*Battle-weaver*  
*Sword-sound*  
*Spear-flinger*  
*Shield-scraper*  
*Helmet-shaker*  
*Teeth-grinder*

Descending like a storm upon the battlefield, the Valkyries would sweep up the bravest of the fallen and carry them off to Asgard. Here there were two halls for the glorious dead.