

# Valkyries in the Water-Meadows: A Little-Known Piece of Winchester Folklore

**Intro:** Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts as well as enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

**Eric:** Hi, I'm Dr. Eric Lacey, Senior Lecturer in Language and Linguistics at the University of Winchester, and I am delighted to be your host for this week's episode for the Hampshire HistBites podcast. In this episode, we'll be looking at a piece of local Winchester folklore which deserves to be better known. Dating from the Anglo-Saxon or early medieval period, this bit of folklore is not only localized in the environs of Winchester, but also tells us some details about an unusual creature: the English version of the Old Norse *valkyrja*. And in this week's podcast, we'll be looking firstly at the local accounts, which describe some of these creatures living in the Water Meadows, just outside of the city and then exploring more generally what these *wælcyrge* in English were and how they differed from their Old Norse counterparts. For those who have not come across the Old Norse valkyrie before, these are fantastic figures of Old Norse myth. They are accomplices of Odin. They are choosers of the slain. They are usherers of the slain to Valhalla, the hall where warriors can feast all night and then fight all day. And sometimes in the sagas valkyries are these figures who are lovers of heroes and thus identify some of the noblest and most able of the heroes in the Old Norse realm. These are quite poetic figures who were cherished and drawn upon by the English romantic poets. What we'll see when we look at the *wælcyrge* and the figures that lived in the Winchester Water Meadows, however, is that the English version of these creatures was not quite so romanticized, and perhaps this is why they were not so well known. We'll begin this episode by looking at the specific story of these *wælcyrge* living in Winchester's Water Meadows.

Our earliest version of this story dates to the 970s, where it's recorded by a Frankish monk named Lantfred, in a text entitled 'The Translation and Miracles of St Swithun'. It's important that we appreciate some of the access that Lantfred had. Mark Atherton, in his splendid book, 'The Making of England', notes that Lantfred had permission to range and roam throughout the city, like an investigative journalist, in order to find out more about this foreign city of Winchester. Lantfred was allowed to interview whomsoever he pleased whensoever he pleased. And so he records the testimonies of bakers, of merchants, of other priests, of just about every aspect of society. And it was on one of these forays that Lantfred picked up the story of the valkyries in the Water Meadows. We can be pretty sure as well that the story was in general circulation. Writing a couple of years after Lantfred was another Winchester monk, this time a local, named Wulfstan, sometimes known as Wulfstan the Cantor. Wulfstan repeats many of the details from Lantfred's story, but also adds a couple of extra bits and bobs that he must have encountered in his own experience of this folkloric tidbit, rather than just because he was copying from Lantfred's tale. Now, rather than get entrenched in the texts written by Lantfred and Wulfstan, I think it would be more interesting to talk about what this story they record is. And it begins with a citizen of Winchester, Lantfred doesn't tell us much about him, Wulfstan notes that he's quite a wealthy citizen, and he takes his mules out to

pasture in the Water Meadows. He falls asleep out there for a couple of hours, and then when he wakes up, he decides that he wants to go back home into the city.

As he's walking along the Itchen, back to the city of Winchester, he espies on the riverbank, two figures. As he gets closer, it becomes apparent that they are female or at least female like. They're both dark, they're both naked. They're described as being blackened like Tisiphone, one of the Furies, they're armed with venom and poison.

And we're also told that they are "*coruinis quas humana cohibebat statura*", raven-like creatures that just happened to be in human form. When they see the man, they entreat that he comes join them in couched euphemisms- I won't be able to do justice to them while also keeping this family friendly, so I'll leave those euphemisms up to your imagination.

Now whether out of virtue because he didn't want to be ensnared in such an unbecoming situation or out of cowardice, the Winchester citizen tries to run away. As he is running away, these women say to him in a joint voice "*quo, moriture, abis?*", "where dead man, or man who'll soon be dead, where are you going?" And they try and chase after him and catch him. They're unsuccessful, but they're joined by the third of them, both the Latin text tells us that it's like the third of the Furies, the Furies from classical myth. This one looks rather different to them. While these are dark and naked, the third one is tall, and light colored and is wearing a snowy white garment. Rather than try and attack the Winchester man head-on, the third figure tries to hide behind a hill. Now we're told that this figure is extraordinarily tall, so it needs the cover of something colossal like a hill. This hill is St Giles' Hill or St Catherine's Hill. As the Winchester citizen rounds the corner, she jumps out and attacks him. She folds up her sleeve into a plait three times and then tries to strike him with it, quite an unusual attack. The Winchester citizen invokes God's protection and so the sleeve isn't able to touch him. But a gust is able to emanate from the sleeve and wash over him. It paralyzes him entirely on his right side and he collapses. Because he's under God's protection, all three figures have to jump into the Itchen to try and escape. And after lying in paralyzed agony for a little bit, the Winchester citizen manages to drag himself into the East Gate of the city, which is more or less where the Winchester City Mill is today, and he's found by his kinsmen who, long story short, end up getting him healed through the intervention of St Swithun. Now the most interesting details for me, are these details about the supernatural women. We don't get many folkloric tidbits from the early medieval periods, and we really don't get very many folkloric tidbits that are so localizable.

In this story, we're able to tell that he's grazing his mules in the Water Meadows, that he walks along the Itchen, that it's the Itchen that these three figures dive back into, and that it's one of the hills either St Giles' or St Catherine's that the tall white figure attacks him from. But even more interesting for me, is the fact that these women represent the English version of what valkyries were. And what we'll do next is we'll talk about the differences between the Old Norse valkyrie and the Old English *wælcyrge*, *wælcyrge* singular, or *wælcyrrian* plural. And talk about the distinctive features of the English *wælcyrge* that is manifested in the story in this Winchester tidbit, which deserves to be better known.

At first blush, it may seem that these figures in the Winchester story have very little in common with the valkyries of Old Norse myth. The reason for that is that Old English *wælcyrge* had very little in common with the *valkyrja* of Norse mythology. To make sense of this, we'll need to think about the broader background of Old English and Old Norse.

They are both Germanic languages, which means they have a shared ancestry. This shared ancestry, however, a language we sometimes refer to as common Germanic, was centuries and centuries before we get Old English and Old Norse written down. What this means is that there are centuries of time, not only for the languages to diverge and develop differently, as can be seen in how different Old Norse and Old English are as languages, but also the speakers had time to develop differently and develop different cultures and develop different beliefs. And the differences between *wælcyrge* and *valkyrja* are part and parcel of that broader divergence that we see between Old English and Old Norse. If we dig below the surface, however, we'll see some kernels and vestiges of the shared ancestry of *wælcyrge* and *valkyrja*, but the differences between them are part of what make examining this English version of the valkyrie so interesting.

The most unique feature of the Old English *wælcyrge* was its ability to paralyze. There's nothing like this in the Old Norse. And yet when all English translators were struggling to find some equivalent to the classical Gorgon, that mythological beast, which could turn men to stone with a single stare, what they opted for was the *wælcyrge*.

In a book known as the *Liber Monstrorum*, there is an animal with eyes that can petrify its victims and the Old English translator rendered that as the animal having *wælkyrian ēagan*, the eyes of a *wælcyrge*. It is clear then that the *wælcyrge* was able to petrify its victims, but it was not necessarily seen as a direct equivalent of the Gorgon.

Sometimes the Old English translators had to say that the Gorgon was merely *wælcyrgeinc*, like a *wælcyrge*. So, what this tells us is that while the *wælcyrge* had some paralytic abilities, it wasn't exactly the same as the Gorgons, it didn't turn its victims to stone. And indeed, when we look at our Winchester story, what we see is an attack, which could paralyze the victim, render it stone-like, but was not exactly the same as the classical Gorgon.

Another curious detail of the Old English *wælcyrge*, which has no parallel in the Old Norse *valkyrja*, valkyrie, is its association with poison. In the Winchester story, we saw that the two figures that the citizen first encountered were armed with poison, even if we never really saw what that poison did. When Old English translators were faced with texts describing Alecto, one of the Furies, using poison, their word of choice was *wælcyrge*, the Old English valkyrie.

It also seems to have had some rather amorous connotations. Sometimes Venus was translated *gydene wælcyrge*, especially when she's described in rather debauchurous contexts. *Gydene* means goddess, while *wælcyrge* is our word for the Old English valkyrie. And we saw those amorous associations again, with those first two figures the citizen encountered who tried to beckon him over with euphemisms which he ran away from.

This has some counterpart in the Old Norse, where we see many of the mythological figures taking valkyries as brides. It's a little bit more positive in the Old Norse material, but as I said earlier, we should expect some difference, these figures have been diverging for centuries and centuries.

In the other respects, we also see some substantial overlap between the *valkyrie* of Norse myth and the Old English *wælcyrge*. Both were choosers of the slain and in our Winchester story, we saw that the two dark figures, when they encounter the man say, "*quo, moriture, abis?*": "where are you going, man doomed to die?"

Now *moriture* is a complicated Latin construction, it's a future participle. But the sense of it is somebody that we have identified is going to die. And this resonates with exactly what the word *wælcyrge* and the Old Norse, *valkyrja*, literally means. In this connection it's also interesting to note that in Old English, ravens were thought to presage the deaths of men in battle and in one text, a poetic translation of the Old Testament Book of Exodus, we have a raven hovering over a battlefield described as '*wælceasega*'.. Now this is a slightly different word to *wælcyrge*, but it has exactly the same semantics. It means 'chooser of the slain'. If this is a sort of punning roundabout way of referring back to the *wælcyrge*, then we have some very, very solid evidence for the Old English *wælcyrge* being associated with ravens. Now in our Winchester tale, we have some very solid evidence of that because our first two dark figures were called "*coruinis quas humana cohibebat statura*" raven-like creatures that happens to be in a human shape, that were occupying a human shape. And when we look in the Old Norse, valkyries are both accompanied by and sometimes transform into ravens.

So, we see some of these vestiges that hint at the common heritage of valkyrie and *wælcyrge*, but we also see both broadly in Old English and in our Winchester story, some of the ways in which *wælcyrge* were rather different, rather distinctly English and insular. Perhaps the single biggest way, other than paralysis that they differ from the Old Norse *valkyrja*, however, is the fact that *wælcyrge* is the preferred term in Old English for translating Furies, those classical creatures, which were terrifying, which were associated with battle, and which comprised figures like Alecto and Tisiphone. When Lantfred was trying to translate his word-of-mouth story into Latin, he had to say that the creatures were like Alecto and like Tisiphone because he was trying to explain, well, what is an Old English *wælcyrge* in Latin? And so he went to, doubtlessly some of the manuscripts in Winchester at the Old Minster, looked at how they've rendered Tisiphone and Alecto when they were trying to translate them into English and found that *wælcyrge* was the word you use there. And therefore, if he was trying to explain a *wælcyrge* in Latin, why not just flip this conventional translation?

There are many, many, many descriptions of *wælcyrge* in Old English in these very difficult to interpret forms of evidence known as the gloss. Now the gloss is where a translator is trying to leave, imagine cheat sheets or a little cheat note for friends reading the same text. They've got a Latin text in front of them and in between the lines they prop more or less equivalents into English. But those equivalents only work in the context of that Latin text, they're not writing out full dictionary entries, they're just writing out what would best translate this Latin word here and now in Old English. And what we get *wælcyrge* in this form quite a lot, glossing the Furies, glossing Alecto, glossing Tisiphone, glossing even Bellona the goddess of war. And that gives us a little hint about both *wælcyrge* and *valkyrja*, the Old Norse valkyrie, having these common associations with warfare. None of that seems to persist in our Winchester story, but we shouldn't expect it to, just because entities have associations doesn't mean that they have to be present at all times. Just because elves happen to be associated with secrets and knowledge doesn't mean that every time we see an elf, their secrets and knowledge are foregrounded.

We have to take the same approach of expecting nuance, of reading only what is most relevant at a given moment, especially when we're looking at these poorly attested entities in older material. Taking all of this together, we see that the Winchester figures were associated with paralysis. They wielded venom, they have sexual and amorous connotations. They are equated with the Furies in the story. And we see that all of these properties are true of the Old English word *wælcyrge*. What we've also seen, however, is that we need to bear in mind that

the Old English *wælcyrge*, while meaning the same thing as valkyrie, was a rather different beast. It wasn't the lover of heroes. It wasn't the warrior woman that we see in the Old Norse sagas, but a rather more terrifying creature, one which could paralyze, one which was venomous, one which was a lover in a very debauched way and one which always glossed and rendered the worst aspects of the Furies. They were frenetic, they were mad. They were hungering, they were lusting. And we see that hungering and lusting too, in the way that the dark figures chased after our Winchester citizen, perhaps because he spurned them, perhaps just because they were looking for a fight.

This brings us to the end of this week's episode. I hope you've enjoyed finding out about the story of the valkyries in the Water Meadows, and also finding out about how the English version of the valkyrie was understood, how different it was from its somewhat romanticized Old Norse counterpart. If you have any questions, queries, qualms, consternations, and/or quibbles, or you'd just generally like to find out more, please do not hesitate to drop me an email at Eric dot Lacey, spelt E R I C . L A C E Y @winchester.ac.uk.

Thank you very much for listening.

**Outro:** We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, [www.winchesterheritageopendays.org](http://www.winchesterheritageopendays.org), click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you.