

Hidden Treasure-Historical Truth

Valkyria, Viking Heroine

By Katherine Bone

Throughout time pirates have roamed the seas as a reckoning force, plundering and slaughtering, stealing and burning, all for the sake of filling their own pockets or the coffers of kings. Much has been written about Black Beard, Captain Kidd, Sir Francis Drake, and other notorious men, who rode the seas in search of easy prey, but little is known about women who pirated the seas.

To go a Viking, is to pirate. Vikings, of old, were masters of the sea. They were dreaded adversaries who attacked sleeping communities, while cloaked in darkness. Their longships were seventy foot long clinker-built sea faring marvels, fastened with iron and tightly caulked. Flexible construction held the longship afloat in troublesome seas and the design featured a dragon or serpent figurehead at the bow.

Vikings were skilled oarsmen and sometimes worked sixty to seventy oars at a time. Shields were positioned alongside each boat, not only to keep them within reach or to signal other boats, but for protection against wind and ocean spray. Gilded masts, red died rigging, and a lantern at the masthead led the way, while gold embroidered silk sails, handmade by Viking women, helped propel the boats through penetrable inland channels, or fiords. One of these vessels alone could carry ten tons back to the mead halls to an awaiting feast where scop, or bards, wove tales of adventure in spellbinding sagas meant to praise kings and heroes.

In Viking sagas, a hero was categorized as having *fierce falcon eyes* and a heroine kept her eyes downcast, at all times, in part to show modesty and insure her chastity until an alliance was needed, but mainly because one innocent glance at a robust suitor often fed a hero's untamable passion.

There is a story in Viking lore about one such heroine named Alfhild, or Alwilda, who was so beautiful she kept her face hidden within her robes to keep from provoking men to lust. Her story is written in book seven of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* (Deeds of the Danes), in Olaus Magnus' *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (History of the Northern Peoples), and in Charles Ellms' supposed inaccurate version, *Pirate's Own Book*, published in 1837.

Alfhild was adored by her father and following old tradition, he gave her two snakes to guard her door and her virginity. A prince named Alf, however became enamored with Alfhild and killed the snakes in order to win her hand. Ordinarily, this would have been enough for Alfhild's father, Siward, King of the Goths, to approve of the match, but Siward had already promised Alfhild that he would not force her to marry. To everyone's dismay, Alfhild responded strangely. She did something no other woman before her had ever done. She rejected her prince, donned men's clothing, recruited other females, and obtained a longship and crew in order to follow the ways of the valkyria from Viking mythology.

Valkyria were Odin's handmaidens, warlike goddesses who rode horses into battle to decide who would live and who would die, so they could escort the dead back to Valhalla, the Hall of the Slain, for a great feast. In this hall, fallen heroes were served by the Valkyria underneath a roof of battle shields and highly polished spears, amidst walls of gold.

Like Viking men, a female pirate had to learn to wield a sword, axe, bow, and spear. She had to learn how to strand-hew, or eat raw meat. She slept in leather sleeping bags on the beach or commandeered her own hall, a place where she could rest; bury treasure, and scop ballads of her own adventures. She kept a faithful dog to lick clean her wounds and took part in a blood pact ceremony to ensure loyalty among her followers, so that blood revenge would be taken should any be killed. She offered a sword by the hilt to her new thanes, or chief officers, who worked themselves up in the berserk tradition by screaming shrilly, biting the edges of shields, and foaming at the mouth, so that no one would know they were women during a fight.

To captain a ship, she learned how to navigate by the sun, stars, tides, and ocean currents. She had to recognize the migrant patterns of birds and whales, and overcome a fear of dragons, which was an ever present fear of the times.

According to Olaus Magnus' writings, Alfild's raiding was more than ordinary. Whether it was mercenary, true piracy, or part of the peaceful sea trade, it is known that she infuriated the Danes because they sent their fleet out to end her marauding ways.

One such fleet included Prince Alf, who had tracked Alfild's longships to a narrow fiord in Finland. While Alf's longships waited to attack, Alfild sent her longships out to meet him posthaste, thereby forcing him into a fight. In retaliation, Alf took Alfild's ships, one at a time, until he at last boarded her vessel and watched expectantly as one of his lieutenants removed Alfild's horned helmet. When his eyes finally met hers, Alf was struck, once again, by Alfild's beauty. Since he had already slain the serpents at her door, his wounded ego sought restitution. Plying Alfild with kisses, he took her virginity, made her change back into female attire, sailed to Denmark, confined her to his palace, and sired a daughter named, Gurid.

Much debate continues on whether or not Alfild's story, handed down through Viking lore, is true. Scandinavian records confirm much of the characters in Olaus Magnus' tale were real but little if nothing at all is written about a woman named Alfild in history books. However, there were other such living valkyria who plied the seas.

One generation later, around 870, Frey, the King of Sweden, killed the king of the Norwegians and put all Norwegian women in a brothel. When Ragnar, overlord of Denmark, heard this, he raced to the rescue. As Ragnar and his men drew near, the subjugated women dressed as men, escaped, and joined his camp. One of those women was Ladgerda, who fought amongst the bravest of Ragnar's men at the forefront of battle, winning Ragnar's respect. He fell desperately in love with her and when she set two beasts at her door, he speared one, strangled the second, and took her into his arms.

Hetha, Wisna, and Webiorg, were Viking pirates and longship captains.

Queen Aud, the widow of Olaf the White, led an organized expedition from the Western Isles of Scotland to Iceland, which carried livestock to populate that new land, and paved the way for Erik the Red, who sailed from Iceland to Greenland around 982. Erik the Red became the father of Leif Eriksson, thought to be one of the first Europeans to set foot in North America.

Imagine you are sitting near a raging fire listening to Viking males proclaim heroic deeds, but like Alfild, the virginal beauty, sit idle no longer. Shake off the traditions, negativity, and thoughts of doubt, that cripple. Like valkyria and female Viking pirates of long ago, break away from fears of failure or success, and grab hold of the dream that will lead to the fulfillment of your soul.