

***BERSERKIR*: A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE PHENOMENON IN
LITERATURE AND LIFE**

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Abstract

This thesis discusses whether *berserkir* really went berserk. It proposes revised paradigms for *berserkir* as they existed in the Viking Age and as depicted in Old Norse literature. It clarifies the Viking Age *berserkr* as an elite warrior whose practices have a function in warfare and ritual life rather than as an example of aberrant behaviour, and considers how usage of PDE 'berserk' may affect the framing of research questions about *berserkir* through analysis of depictions in modern popular culture. The analysis shows how *berserksgangr* has received greater attention than it warrants with the emphasis being on how *berserkir* went berserk. A critical review of Old Norse literature shows that *berserkir* do not go berserk, and suggests that *berserksgangr* was a calculated form of posturing and a ritual activity designed to bolster the courage of the *berserkr*.

It shows how the medieval concept of *berserkir* was more nuanced and less negative than is usually believed, as demonstrated by the contemporaneous existence in narratives of *berserkir* as king's men, hall challengers, *hólmqongumenn*, Viking raiders and Christian champions, and by the presence of men with the byname *berserkr* in fourteenth-century documents. Old Norse literature is related to pre-Viking Age evidence to show that warriors wearing wolfskins existed and can be related to *berserkir*, thus making it possible to produce models for Viking Age and medieval concepts of *berserkir*.

The modern view of *berserkir* is analysed and shows that frenzy is the dominant attribute, despite going berserk not being a useful attribute in Viking

Age warfare which relied upon men holding a line steady rather than charging individually.

The thesis concludes that ON *berserkr* may be best translated as PDE ‘champion’, while PDE ‘berserker’ describes the type of uncontrollable warrior most commonly envisaged when discussing *berserkir*.

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Abbreviations and Explanatory Notes

The following conventions have been adopted throughout this thesis.

Linguistic Abbreviations

Franc	Franconian
Fris	Frisian
Gk	Greek
Ic	Icelandic
IE	Indo-European
Lat	Latin
Mal	Malay
NNw	Norwegian (<i>nynorsk</i>)
Nw	Norwegian (<i>bokmål</i>)
OFr	Old French
OFris	Old Frisian
ON	Old Norse
PDE	Present Day English
PGmc	Proto-Germanic
Ru	Russian
Thr	Thracian

Bibliographical abbreviations used in the footnotes

Abbreviations have been used for texts that have been referenced numerous times. Each time a text is referenced after the first, the conventions in the table below have been followed.

<i>CV</i>	Cleasby, Richard, Gudbrand Vigfusson and W. A. Craigie, rev. by W. A. Craigie <i>An Icelandic-English Dictionary</i> , 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957)
<i>Edda</i>	<i>Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern</i> , ed. by Gustav Neckel, 5th edn, rev. by Hans Kuhn, 2 vols (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1983)
<i>Fsn</i>	<i>Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda</i> , ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1959)
<i>Ks</i>	<i>Konunga sögur</i> , ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 3 vols ([n.p.]: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1957)
<i>LMIR</i>	<i>Late Medieval Icelandic Romances</i> , ed. by Agnete Loth, 5 vols, Editiones Arnarnagæanæ Series B, vols 20-24 (Munksgaard: Copenhagen, 1962-65)
<i>NGL</i>	<i>Norges Gamle Love indtil 1387</i> , ed. by R. Keyser and P. A. Munch, 5 vols (Christiania: Grondahl, 1846-1895)
<i>NR</i>	<i>Norse Romance</i> , ed. by Marianne E. Kalinke, Arthurian Archives III-V, 3 vols (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999)
<i>ONP</i>	Helle Degenbol <i>et al.</i> , eds, <i>Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog. A Dictionary of Old Norse</i> , 4 vols (Copenhagen: 1981-[2004])
<i>Orðstöðulykill</i>	Bragi Halldórsson and Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir, eds, <i>Íslendinga sögur. Orðstöðulykill og texti: The complete sagas of Icelanders with lemmatized concordance</i> (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1996)

<i>Snorra Edda</i>	Snorri Sturluson, <i>Edda Snorra Sturlusonar</i> , ed. by Magnús Finnbogason (Bókaverzlun Sigurðar Kristjánssonar: Reykjavík, 1952)
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References to *Íslendingasögur* in the text are to the Íslenzk fornrit volume in which they appear in the form ‘Íf, volume number, page number’. Primary sources that are not part of a series are referenced by the saga name alone. Other texts are abbreviated to the author’s name, a short form of the title of the work, and the page number. Throughout, the *MHRA Style Guide* has been followed as closely as possible for footnotes and the bibliography except where stated otherwise.¹

Explanatory notes

Where quantification of elements within Old Norse literature has been undertaken, I have derived the data from searches done using *ONP* and *Orðstöðulykill*, unless otherwise stated.

The orthography adopted for general reference throughout the text is that used in *ONP* unless quoting directly from a source text or where variant spellings need to be highlighted.

Throughout the analysis, some elements have been repeated to maintain the coherency of the argument. The large volume of available evidence and previous scholarship necessitates this approach to ensure that all evidence

¹ *MHRA Style Guide: A handbook for authors and editors*, 3rd edn (London: Modern Humanities and Research Association, 2013)

relevant to a specific argument is considered together, although cross-references have been used where they will prove useful instead.

Translating ON *berserkr* and *berserksgangr* is problematic because the English translations are semantically loaded. For purposes of clarity, the Old Norse terms are used throughout except where specifically referring to PDE ‘berserk’ and ‘berserker’ being used in sources under discussion.

All translations given in the text are my own unless otherwise stated.

1 Introduction

In the thirteenth century, when Snorri wrote about the madness that was *berserksgangr*, of how Óðinn's men attacked furiously like mad dogs or wolves and were as strong as bears or bulls, he created an enduring image.² While he did not call Óðinn's men *berserkir*, the fact that he was describing *berserksgangr* indicates that they were, and the attributes of shield-biting and howling that Snorri described are those of *berserkir* in Old Norse literature. These *berserkir* were fearless, frenzied and invulnerable to iron or fire. They fought without armour and were practically superhuman. This image of ferocious, uncontrollable and uncontrolled warriors has endured through to the present day and appears to be so strong that no one has questioned whether *berserkir* actually went berserk. The following analysis sets out to redress the balance by seeking an answer to that question. In doing so it reassesses the phenomenon of the *berserkr* and provides an alternative interpretation of their actions and their probable historical reality.

The body of research into *berserkir* is larger than could be included in a single thesis. Therefore this study highlights and references the most important works that demonstrate the themes of research into *berserkir*. It adopts a thematic approach, because most scholars have focused closely on one aspect of *berserkir* and this approach permits a clear, structured analysis. This thesis begins with a review of the methodology applied, followed by a review of the source material to demonstrate the broad range of sources available and

² Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit, 26, 4th edn (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), p. 17.

includes an assessment of the reliability of that material. Chapter 3 discusses how previous scholars have analysed and understood *berserkir*. It also shows that few studies have been interdisciplinary. Chapter 4 examines depictions of *berserkir* in Old Norse literature through detailed analysis of the apparent symptoms of *berserksgangr*, the roles that *berserkir* play in Old Norse literature, and onomastic patterns related to them. In doing so it provides a definition of the medieval Scandinavian concept of *berserkir* that may be used to analyse the non-literary sources discussed in chapter 5. My goal is to demonstrate that the medieval conception of *berserkir* was more complex than modern interpretation admits.³ Chapter 5 analyses the archaeological evidence for wolfskin and bearskin wearing warriors in early medieval north-western Europe and pre-Viking Iron Age Scandinavia.⁴ This analysis uses the law codes of the Germanic peoples in addition to the archaeological and literary evidence to create a model of the Viking Age *berserkr*. It considers how parallels to *berserkir* from other cultures have been used in previous attempts

³ Throughout this thesis, ‘modern’ means the period from the start of the nineteenth century to the present day. Where greater precision is required, I state the year, decade or century as appropriate

⁴ Due to the differences in periodisation between different parts of Europe, I shall generally refer to the early medieval period to cover non-Scandinavian parts of Europe and use Scandinavian periodisation for discussing Scandinavia. Where I have to refer to both Scandinavia and other parts of Europe at the same time, I shall refer to the Scandinavian periods but the European periods should be understood in those instances.

to define *berserkir* in the Viking Age, and whether those parallels provide useful evidence to support the conclusions drawn. Chapter 6 reviews how *berserkir* have been depicted from the nineteenth century to the present day in general histories and popular culture to show that modern vocabulary relating to *berserkir* and *berserksgangr* complicates and perhaps shapes the interpretation process because it is so heavily slanted towards the concept of frenzy and fits that it precludes a more nuanced evaluation. Chapter 7 considers how the evidence examined in the previous chapters can be used to produce three models of *berserkir*: the probable historical reality of the Viking Age; the medieval concept of the *berserkr*; and the modern idea of what a *berserkr* was. It highlights how these differ and in which elements they are the same.

In preparing these models, this thesis concludes that *berserkir* existed in the Viking Age and that they were elite, professional warriors who formed a lord's closest bodyguard. Their role included duelling on behalf of their lord as champions, and PDE 'champion' is the best English translation of ON *berserkr* instead of PDE 'berserker' which describes a frenzied warrior. The *berserksgangr* of medieval literature and the Viking Age warrior was posturing to frighten the enemy and bolster their own courage, not a form of frenzy or battle madness. It may have been intended to gain the favour of Óðinn as the god of the social elite and of war.

Old Norse literature depicts *berserkir* as king's bodyguards, *hólmqongumenn*, hall-challengers, vikings and *militēs Christi*. *Berserkir* may have more than one of these roles in a text. Although usually antagonists, *berserkir* in Old Norse literature are not always portrayed negatively and they

are not generally depicted as going berserk. Their role is varied and often defined by the requirements of genre.

Finally, this thesis concludes that the view of *berserker* as mad, uncontrollable warriors fighting in a frenzy is a modern phenomenon propagated in popular culture and perpetuated in academic analysis. It suggests that the language used to discuss *berserker* has shaped the dialogue about them and concludes that it has misled scholars in the past, so an alternative vocabulary needs to be created to permit more neutral discussion.

2 Background, methodology and the source material

2.1 Introduction

It is a truism to state that those who research the past generally recreate the present in that past, in that they generate interpretations of the past by analogy with the present. Using the ‘common sense’ approach, an archaeologist finding a ceramic vessel would compare that vessel to those of which they have direct experience and ascribe a function to the vessel based on the function of those vessels that most closely resemble it in the archaeologist’s experience.

Similarly, when trying to understand the way people thought in the past, it is usual to ascribe motivations and thought patterns that differ little from our own. This ‘common sense’ approach assumes that humanity does not change at its core and that thought patterns are universal.⁵ However, it fails to take account of socio-cultural variations that might shape and alter each person’s cognitive map and thus their approaches to problem solving in particular and life in general. The interpretive approach adopted by post-processualism sought to engage more with the ancient mind-set but still shares some of the failings of this ‘common sense’ approach for the same reasons. It assumes, without any scientific basis, that the modern archaeologist can shed their modern preconceptions and project their mind back into the past to interpret

⁵ Ezra B. W. Zubrow, ‘Conclusion’, in *The Ancient Mind: Elements of cognitive archaeology*, ed. by Colin Renfrew and Ezra B. W. Zubrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 187-190 (187-88).

the motives for actions based on the material remains that have survived.⁶ This seems highly improbable. In a similar vein, Halsall has shown that understanding the early medieval approach to warfare, a field in which the *berserkr* is supposed to have excelled, requires a significant cognitive shift, because the motivation for and conduct of wars was shaped by the philosophies of the time, which are not the same as our own.⁷ When we consider that a Christian, medieval general might put his faith as much in God as he would in his troop dispositions, the difference between modern ideas of tactics and strategy and those of the past becomes immediately clear.⁸ This difference in thought processes carries across into other aspects of society too. What is understood by PDE ‘berserker’, and thus how *berserkir* are perceived, is strongly affected by related vocabulary, especially PDE ‘berserk’.⁹

With these comments in mind, it is necessary to consider a number of factors when trying to research the *berserkr*. Firstly it is important to consider how the language that is used to discuss the subject shapes the interpretations that are considered viable. Secondly societal norms of behaviour between the

⁶ For a discussion of this see Colin Renfrew, ‘Towards a cognitive archaeology’, in *The Ancient Mind: Elements of cognitive archaeology*, ed. by Colin Renfrew and Ezra B. W. Zubrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 3-12 (p. 10).

⁷ Guy Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450 - 900* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), pp. 6-10.

⁸ Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, p. 7.

⁹ See 6.5.

Viking Age, when *berserkir* were part of society, the medieval period, when Old Norse literature was written down, and the modern period are not likely to be the same. Therefore, consideration must be given to understanding how the attitudes, morals and mores of each period differ. These are areas that the cognitive theory which inspires my analysis seeks to shed light upon.¹⁰

Another consideration is the nature of the evidence for *berserkir*. The surviving written evidence post-dates the Viking Age, while the archaeological evidence pre-dates it, but only a small number of Viking Age references to *berserkir* exist. Dating and analysing the available material can be problematic and yet is necessary if the portrayals of *berserkir* in this material are to be fully understood. The difficulties and problems associated with the source material are outlined in Section 2.3 which also considers how to take into account or overcome those difficulties when interpreting it.

2.2 Methodology

Most scholars have focused on a single aspect of *berserkir* in the past, resulting in rather one-dimensional interpretations of who and what *berserkir* were. This has historically limited overall understanding of *berserkir* by not addressing the multiplicity of related and apparently contradictory meanings that ON *berserkr* had in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Scandinavia.¹¹ Such an approach is sensible because it cleaves to the individual scholar's academic strengths, but it can also be misleading because it can over-emphasise

¹⁰ See 2.2.

¹¹ See 4.4.

particular traits, such as *berserksgangr* (the berserker frenzy), which has seen more than its fair share of analysis.¹² Even where a multi-disciplinary approach has been attempted, research has defaulted to the literature with all other sources considered to be secondary and inferior, on the grounds that the surviving descriptions of *berserkr* are literary, so the final analysis must remain literary.¹³ While this is true insofar as ON *berserkr* is only known from the surviving Old Norse literature, it does not present the full picture that can be gleaned from the available evidence. It also limits understanding of what thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Scandinavians thought *berserkr* were. For these reasons, this analysis aims to be a fully multi-disciplinary re-examination of the *berserkr* using a cognitive approach to identify the medieval Scandinavian interpretation of *berserkr*, and from there to develop a model for the probable historical reality of Viking Age *berserkr* and to address the issue of why the modern image is so focused on *berserkr* going berserk.

¹² See 3.2 and 4.3.

¹³ For multi-disciplinary research that follows this tack see: Benjamin Blaney, ‘The Berserkr: His Origin and Development in Old Norse Literature’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Colorado, 1972); Gerard Breen, ‘The Berserkr in Old Norse and Icelandic Literature’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cambridge University, 1999); and to a lesser extent Vincent Samson, *Les Berserkr: Les guerriers-fauves dans la Scandinavie ancienne, de l’âge de Vendel aux Vikings (VI^e-XI^e siècle)* (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presse Universitaire du Septentrion, 2011).

The cognitive approach follows developments in cognitive science and seeks to apply its principles to other fields of study. In the case of this study the primary theoretical frameworks are cognitive poetics and cognitive archaeology, because the former includes techniques for analysing the main body of primary evidence in the form of the literature that features *berserkir*, while the latter may be used to assess the earlier, non-literary evidence that may have been contemporaneous with the existence of *berserkir* or similar style warriors in pre-Viking Age Scandinavia. The methodologies of cognitive poetics and archaeology are inherently interdisciplinary, so it is not problematic to combine them because both draw on the same roots and are complementary. This approach, while not adhering rigidly to a single theoretical approach, has the potential to produce a viable model of what a *berserkr* was during the Viking Age, how *berserkir* were perceived during the medieval period and how they have been perceived since the nineteenth century.

Old Norse literature forms the base on which the models are built, because it is the source of our knowledge of ON *berserkr*. The analysis places Old Norse literature into its historical context and analyses it as one element of a continuum within which *berserkir* existed, rather than considering it in isolation. That continuum comprises the Viking Age reality of *berserkir*, the medieval Nordic perception of that reality and its depiction in Old Norse literature, and the modern idea of the Viking Age reality filtered through the medieval perception and influenced by modern use of PDE 'berserk'.

Steblin-Kamenskij has queried our ability as modern people with modern sensibilities to understand and interpret Old Norse literature

properly.¹⁴ He has suggested that we are more likely to recreate the present in the past than we are to achieve true understanding, because we cannot understand the nuances of the language as a native speaker of Old Norse in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries would have. Additionally, our understanding of concepts that underlie the presentation of facts within Old Norse literature, such as what constitutes history, may act as a barrier to understanding the literature, because modern expectations are different from those of the medieval audience. Further barriers are offered by our artificial categorisation of the Old Norse sagas by period and/or subject matter. These channel thought processes and generate expectations. By using close analysis combined with contextual awareness, these barriers can be overcome to some extent. A cognitive approach to the analysis of the source material inspired by the disciplines of cognitive poetics and cognitive archaeology will address these issues by generating awareness of them, which will, in turn, permit a more nuanced discussion of the source material. It seeks to show how to get past modern preconceptions and engage directly with the material to show the paths that medieval minds followed. As a result the cognitive poetic approach can lead to a situation where the self-aware and self-critical reader can recognise the socio-cultural influences that guide their interpretation of the text, which in turn can enable a deeper understanding of the text itself and perhaps even come close to perceiving the text as its original readers might have. This in

¹⁴ M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind*, trans. by Kenneth H. Ober (Odense: Odense University Press, 1973).

turn can aid interpretation of the source material to demonstrate what a historical *berserkr* might have been.

The analysis addresses modern depictions of *berserkir* in literature, films and other media to show how these popular depictions are rooted firmly in nineteenth- and early-twentieth century concepts of *berserkir*, and how these concepts affect the interpretation of ON *berserkr* even before analysis using the primary sources has begun.

Cognitive archaeology is the study of past thought patterns as inferred from the surviving material remains. It seeks to codify the assumptions that have previously been made about how people thought in the past, and how they approached their daily lives, by placing these assumptions on a scientific basis drawn from new understandings of how the human brain works. In this it differs from the interpretationist approach of post-processualism, which sought to distance itself from the scientific functionalism of processualism.¹⁵

Creating a greater understanding of past societies' basic thought processes can also inform our understanding of their writings, their society and their approaches to life in general. In this regard, cognitive archaeology and cognitive poetics have much in common, although each focuses on a different aspect of the human experience, notwithstanding the fact that manuscripts are

¹⁵ For post-processualism see, for example: Ian Hodder, *Theory and Practice in Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1995); Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and practice*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1992); Christopher Tilley, *Material Culture and Text: The art of ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 1991).

archaeological artefacts in their own right with an autonomous existence that is separate from the heteronomous existence of the texts they contain.

In the case of Viking Age Scandinavia, what we understand as the Viking Age is a construct of nineteenth-century antiquarians.¹⁶ The nineteenth-century model reinforced the sense of self that European societies at that time were seeking to create for themselves by finding precursors of that identity in Viking Age society. This model has influenced much later work and has obscured the fact that there was no over-arching monolithic Scandinavian society during the Viking Age, which affects interpretation, as is clearly evidenced in the popular culture material.¹⁷ Instead, it is more useful to recognise that geographical and social sub-cultures existed and to analyse the data with that in mind. As Svanberg has noted through the study of burial archaeology, local sub-cultures are endemic throughout Scandinavia and it is likely that these extended throughout the activities of each community, not just in relation to burials.¹⁸ As such, the variations might also reflect variations in local practice as reported to the authors of the sagas. The main problem with identifying any local subcultures lies in the inability to identify closely the location where a particular episode originated. Nevertheless, it may still be

¹⁶ Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the old North in nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 3-4.

¹⁷ See Chapter 6.

¹⁸ Fredrik Svanberg *Decolonizing the Viking Age 1*, Acta Archaeologica Lundensia Series in 80, 43 (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 2003), pp. 190-91.

possible to identify broader trends, such as those originating in Norway versus those originating in Iceland, even if those trends cannot be more closely localised than that.

Of interest for my own research is the model of an aristocratic continuum which, while socially comparatively small, was geographically broad and more homogeneous than other sub-cultures within Scandinavian and Germanic society, reflecting greater contact between the upper echelons of society than might be expected at the lower levels.¹⁹ *Berserkir* would have functioned within this aristocratic continuum and any interpretation of their nature, function and form should consider this.

Interpreting the archaeological material about *berserkir* requires an understanding of the society that engendered them, which means coming to terms with local sub-cultures as well as the broader society. The cognitive archaeologist seeks to do just this by setting aside their modern prejudices and focusing instead on all of the evidence in a holistic manner, looking beyond just the physical remains to incorporate ideas of myth and history from the period into their analysis. Of great importance for my work is analysis of the context of archaeological remains that may depict *berserkir*. Application of these same principles to the texts can yield valuable insights, excavating away preconceived notions and ideas to try to get to the core of what it is to be a *berserkr* in the primary sources, while examining those self-same ideas that have accreted to the core and formed modern ideas of what a *berserkr* is and was.

¹⁹ See Chapter 5.

Not all of the source material is archaeological or textual. Research into *berserkr* has included psychological, medical and botanical studies among others, so I shall address the issues these raise for my own analysis.²⁰ While these subjects lie outside my area of expertise, the articles are sufficiently explanatory for me to integrate their results into my own work and my cognitive framework welcomes such interdisciplinarity. Given my lack of expertise within those areas, I do not propose to analyse the research per se, but I shall examine the framework within which the research was conducted and test the validity of the researchers' assumptions based on this. As will be seen, while the research itself may be sound, the interpretation is often based on a flawed understanding of the primary source material.²¹

Given that there are significant similarities between the poetic and the archaeological approaches, it is reasonable to use each to complement the other. This methodology will involve analysis of the evidence on its own merits and also by seeking to understand its context and the mind-set of the authors and their listeners or readers. Such an approach aims at a deeper understanding of the mind-set of the texts' authors than might normally be achieved and thus their ideas about what a *berserkr* was will be clearer. In pursuing this course I intend to understand more clearly how the concept of the *berserkr* has developed, how it was used by the creators of the primary source material, and how it has developed through time into the modern conception of the *berserkr*. The final goals of this analysis will be a full re-evaluation of the

²⁰ See 3.2.

²¹ For example, see Fabing's research in 3.2.1.

berserkr that questions the received view of their activities, roles and behaviour.

2.3 Source material

The range of source material for this study is potentially vast in terms of genre, medium and time-frame. It ranges from Latin literature of the first century to archaeological remains of the seventh century to twenty-first-century books and films. The primary source material for the study of the Viking Age and medieval *berserkr* comprises Old Norse literature (e.g. the *Íslendingasögur*), Latin histories (e.g. Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*), law codes (e.g. *Grágás*) and archaeological remains (e.g. the Torslunda matrices).²² The primary source material for the modern *berserkr* comprises popular culture material produced from the nineteenth century to the present day. Popular culture encompasses any non-academic material produced for general consumption. This includes novels, films, graphic novels and games.

Given the vast extent and largely derivative nature of much material containing *berserkir*, post-medieval and early modern Icelandic *rímur* will not be analysed, because they add nothing to the medieval depictions and do not link the modern source material to Old Norse literature. The connection between Old Norse literature and modern depictions has been made directly without significant input from post-medieval Icelandic literature.²³ Of

²² See Appendix 2 for a selected list of sagas containing *berserkir* together with presumed dates of composition.

²³ See 6.4.

necessity the scope of the modern material must be restricted, because of the large volume of material that is available. A review of modern concepts of the *berserkr* in Western Europe, let alone the rest of the world, would be beyond the scope of this study because of the quantity of source material available. It is likely that such representations of *berserkir* will prove to be largely similar due to the increasing cultural homogeneity that exists and continues to develop as a result of the ubiquity of English-language films and the dominance of English on the internet. For these reasons and to prevent the scope of this thesis becoming unmanageable, the analysis will focus on English-language sources and will cover only a representative sample.²⁴

Beyond the difficulties of potentially having too much source material, each of the sources that I have chosen to use has its own individual advantages and disadvantages when trying to analyse it and relate it to the other sources as I show below. These difficulties are discussed here so that later chapters may focus on what the source material has to say rather than on what problems are inherent in any examination of said source material.

²⁴ Key sources include: P. G. Foote and D. M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (London: Book Club Associates, 1973); John Haywood, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings* (London: Penguin Books, 1995); Paddy Griffith, *The Viking Art of War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1995); John Haywood, *Encyclopaedia of the Viking Age* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000); and Martin Arnold, *The Vikings: Wolves of war* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

2.3.1 Old Norse literature

Old Norse literature survives in several forms. The largest body of literature is the sagas, which in itself encompasses a range of genres and subject matter, and provides the main source material for *berserkir* while Old Norse histories such as *Landnámabók* or *Íslendingabók* also contribute some evidence to the discussion.²⁵ Old Norse poetry is the other main source for *berserkir*, including both Eddic and skaldic verse, although the level of detail available is low due to the requirements of Old Norse poetic form.²⁶ Each of these has its own problems and issues that must be addressed and I discuss those briefly below.

2.3.1.1 The Old Norse sagas

The Old Norse sagas are the main source from which ON *berserkr* is known, and they formed or expressed the basic ideas that went on to inspire later popular culture material. This thesis focuses primarily on the *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*, because these provide the bulk of the evidence for *berserkir* in the Viking Age, and together with *riddarasögur*, they are examined to provide information about medieval Scandinavian concepts of *berserkir*. Of particular interest here are *Heimskringla*, *Egils saga*, *Eyrbyggja*

²⁵ Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 13-36.

²⁶ Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2005; repr. 2011), pp. 6-18.

saga, *Grettis saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* which between them provide a significant proportion of the evidence.

The majority of sagas were written in Iceland in the late twelfth to fourteenth centuries, but some were written or translated in Norway, such as those translated for King Hákon Hákonarson in the thirteenth century.²⁷ This places their date of writing at some distance from the periods they describe, and thus they must have relied upon oral traditions, which in turn places constraints on their historical accuracy.²⁸ Inaccuracies, misremembered information or authorial invention in the texts limit the usefulness of sagas as historical sources. Constraints may also result from geographically limited bodies of data as a result of narratives being preserved in variant forms in different areas. Nevertheless, they may preserve historical information that can be teased out by careful and critical analysis.

Genre

The classification of sagas by genre (*Íslendingasögur*, *riddarasögur*, *konungasögur*, *fornaldarsögur*, *byskupasögur* and *samtíðarsögur*) based on theme, time-frame or subject matter can be useful in providing a simple frame of reference for discussions, but can be used uncritically and lends an air of

²⁷ Clunies Ross, *Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, pp. 22 and 80-81.

²⁸ Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A discourse on method*, trans. by Nicholas Jones, Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, 2 (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 305-06.

homogeneity to groups of sagas that is not necessarily present in the originals, potentially leading to attributed value and ideas of genre that were never intended or are possibly non-existent. It encourages seeing each group of sagas as a distinct entity even where sagas of different genres may share many generic elements.²⁹ Each saga is an individual product of a particular place and time, and must be considered on its own merits as well as within its genre. This method permits the examination and comparison of similar material within sagas of different genres, while retaining an open-minded approach to their interpretation.

The origins and dates of the Icelandic sagas

Developing a chronology of the sagas is problematic.³⁰ Many only survive in manuscripts written long after the original is supposed to have been written. Most chronologies rely on events and or descriptions that have parallels in other sagas and then sort the sagas relative to each other. Some use external criteria to assign a *terminus post quem* for the saga based on people or events described, but for many this is only viable for understanding the date at which the original events took place, and not the date at which the saga was written down. I have sorted the dates available with a view to identifying if there are any underlying patterns of usage that relate to the appearance of *berserkir* in the sagas, focusing on the corpus of *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*

²⁹ Philip Cardew, *A Translation of Þorskjǫrðinga (Gull-Þóris) saga* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), pp. 24-25.

³⁰ Clunies Ross, *Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, pp. 61-62.

because those are most likely contain fossilised memories of *berserkir* rather than purely invented depictions.³¹ For the purpose of this thesis I have taken as a starting point the dates provided in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*.³² While these volumes do not explain how they arrived at the dates provided, they are more recent than the Íslenzk fornrit editions and thus draw on more recent scholarship. This does not mean that they are immune to dispute, so I have also considered the dates given in the Íslenzk fornrit editions when constructing the chronology. Dates of the *fornaldarsögur* have been taken from editions of those works or from critical literature related to them.

Another issue that needs to be addressed lies in the antiquity of the narrative versus the earliest date of its commitment to the written page. Dating of sagas as discussed above applies to the written form of the saga as it survives to the present day. It is probable that the saga existed in an earlier oral form before it was written down.³³ Whether this form actually resembled the product that has reached us is hard to tell. Although there are numerous difficulties in dating the sagas, Einar Ól. Sveinsson has stated that he believes it is possible to date the *Íslendingasögur* to reasonably narrow margins. However, as he points out, given the range of factors that can affect evidence,

³¹ See 4.8 and Appendix 2 for analysis of the dating evidence and a catalogue of the dates used.

³² *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: including 49 tales*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson, 5 vols (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997).

³³ Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 115-18.

dating sagas is an exercise in probability rather than certainty.³⁴ This applies equally to dating other sagas, for *berserkir* are not only found in the *Íslendingasögur*, but also all other genres of saga except for the *byskupasögur* and *samtíðarsögur*.

As mentioned above, we do not know how long a saga was in circulation as an oral tale before it was written down, what variants existed, or even if it existed as a defined oral tale. An earliest possible date of composition for the whole narrative may be established by examining the latest historical elements that are included, such as the names of descendants of people mentioned. However, there is no guarantee that the saga was written down at this date or whether the narrative existed in oral form for some time before this. In actuality, it is likely that the authors of the sagas had access to earlier traditions and narratives, even if the written versions were not verbatim retellings of oral narratives. Thus, each saga should also be treated as a unique entity in addition to its generic attributes, because no single theory of composition is likely to encompass all sagas as a result of the wide variety of factors that could have gone into their composition.³⁵

³⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Dating the Icelandic Sagas: An essay in method* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1958), p. 127.

³⁵ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A historical survey* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 116-119.

Reliability as sources for *berserkir*

Interpretation of the reliability of sagas has varied from absolute acceptance of their historicity to outright denial of their value as historical sources.³⁶ In the nineteenth century sagas were considered to be a fixed oral tradition that had been written down, thus representing actual historical detail passed down unchanged from the time of the events described.³⁷ Later they were considered by some to be purely literary creations with no historical worth. It is more likely that they represent a codification of tradition and history as understood by those that wrote them down. The time span between the events described and the writing of these sagas is substantial and thus permits error and misrepresentation to creep in even before considering any authorial invention applied during their composition. Likewise, *konungasögur* that describe *berserkir* were also written down approximately two hundred years after those *berserkir* putatively existed and no more recent *berserkir* are described in them. Therefore, the descriptions must be interpreted with care, because they too provide a medieval Nordic view of who and what *berserkir* were.

As a result of the problems inherent in identifying historical detail, each saga needs to be analysed as an individual work, although some generic rules may be applied. For example, while *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* can be useful sources for the study of historical *berserkir* or

³⁶ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, trans. by Peter Foote (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1992), pp. 204-06.

³⁷ Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A short introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 130-34.

how they were perceived in the medieval period, *riddarasögur* are less useful in this regard, because they are often translations or imitations of courtly romances from other countries. The primary value of *riddarasögur* lies in how they use ON *berserkr*, because this usage can highlight the value and meaning of ON *berserkr* in the medieval period.³⁸

Conclusions about the sagas

Issues of genre are largely a matter of understanding the psychological implications of such labels on the reader and researcher. Uncritical application of genre labels can constrain analysis to a particular group of sagas and to particular ideas about those sagas, thus limiting the potential for deeper understanding of them. Nevertheless genre is still important insofar as it provides a convenient frame of reference for discussion and provides a key to the ways that previous scholars have thought about and discussed the sagas. Dating and origins of the sagas as they survive now have a much clearer effect on how the sagas may be interpreted. Understanding the reliability of dating and the origins of the source material is paramount in determining the extent to which it may be used to analyse the Viking Age *berserkr*.

2.3.1.2 Old Norse poetry

Old Norse poetry is generally divided into two categories: Eddic poetry, and a large corpus of skaldic poetry that is quoted within the sagas or *Snorra Edda*.³⁹

³⁸ See 4.4.5.

³⁹ Clunies Ross, *History of Old Norse Poetry*, pp. 6-7.

Not all of these poems mention *berserkr*, but they are all keys to understanding the period and its culture.

The *Poetic Edda*

The *Poetic Edda* is not a single cohesive text, but rather a compilation of poems that was recorded in the Codex Regius c.1270, and which have as their themes the myths and heroes of the Nordic world.⁴⁰ Eddic poetry is also considered to include a number of poems or fragments of poems in other manuscripts that also have this same theme, such as *Hyndluljóð*, which is preserved in *Flateyjarbók*. Only two Eddic poems, *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Hyndluljóð*, include ON *berserkr* and this usage is discussed in chapter 4.⁴¹

The main problems with using Eddic poetry as evidence are issues of dating and provenance. Fidjestøl highlights these issues when discussing the attempts of Finnur Jónsson and de Vries to provide a chronology of Eddic poetry, as well as providing his own commentary on the difficulties inherent in creating a coherent chronology.⁴² The authors of these poems are anonymous and it is unknown where or when the poems were first composed, or when the tales that they tell first arose. The only sure date for them is the date of the

⁴⁰ Judith Jesch, 'Poetry in the Viking Age', in *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink and Neil Price (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 291-98 (pp. 293-94).

⁴¹ See 4.2.

⁴² Bjarne Fidjestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry: A historical survey and methodological investigation*, ed. by Odd Einar Haugen (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag, 1999), pp. 104-08, 177-84 and 201-03.

manuscripts in which they reside, which provides a definite *terminus ante quem*. In some cases, historical characters such as Attila are found, which evidence provides a *terminus post quem* for those poems, but most Eddic poetry does not have evidence this clear.⁴³ Internal clues can help with dating the poems, such as in the case of *Atlamál in grænlenska*, which can only have been composed in or after the late tenth century, if its Greenlandic origin is accepted, because there were no Scandinavians in Greenland prior to that time.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the place of origin is not generally clear for these poems and relies on the ability to date the poems accurately, so poems that are thought to pre-date the late ninth century must have originated in Norway, Sweden or Denmark because Iceland was not populated until the late ninth century. This leaves the origin and provenance of Eddic poetry uncertain. However, the final form of the Eddic poems, as transmitted to the present day, is clearly Icelandic so my own analysis of poems that mention *berserkir* will focus on and analyse that form, while considering that earlier oral forms of the poems probably existed.⁴⁵

⁴³ *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. by Gustav Neckel, 5th edn, rev. by Hans Kuhn, 2 vols (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1983), I, 234-257.

⁴⁴ *Edda*, I, 242-57.

⁴⁵ Clunies Ross, *Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, p. 7.

Skaldic verse

Skaldic verse differs from Eddic poetry in several important ways, in that it is generally credited to named poets; it deals with largely historical personages and events; and its metre and style are different, being more complex. Skaldic verse is easier to date, because it is usually credited to named poets with the earliest being Bragi inn gamli Boddason who lived in the first half of the ninth century.⁴⁶ This means that we know when the verses were supposed to have been composed. Skaldic verse is generally a feature of *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur* and is used to support the prose text or to provide a form of direct speech for the characters. In its supporting role, it is supposed to be reliable source material. Snorri speaks for the reliability of skaldic verse as evidence when he says in his prologue to *Heimskringla* that he believes what is set out in skaldic verse to be true because it would be mockery to compose a praise poem about a king that included events that the audience knew not to be true.⁴⁷ Snorri's position is not unreasonable, especially when one considers that he would almost certainly have witnessed the performance of skaldic verse from his visits to the Norwegian court, so he was probably writing from personal experience. The ornate structure of skaldic verse means that it should be harder to alter through time, which supports Snorri's view. Any emendation is likely to result in a verse that does not make sense, assuming the verse was not composed *de novo* at the time that it was written down or when the saga

⁴⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, 4 vols (København: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1912-1915), B I (1912), 1.

⁴⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 5.

was first composed in its surviving form. However, as Whaley notes, the surviving manuscripts contain plentiful evidence of variation and corruption, so the verses may not be as reliable as hoped.⁴⁸ In addition to this, they are rarely quoted together with the rest of the poem so the full context of what is being written is lost, being supplied only by the saga author's prose. Beyond these considerations, we also must review the usefulness of skaldic verse as evidence. It does not go into detail and is often a complex but artistic way of expressing a simple concept. Witness, for example the strophe quoted below from *Haraldskvæði* by Þorbjörn hornklofi, which is thought to be the earliest textual reference to *berserkir*, based on the probable date of composition of this poem:

Grenjuðu berserkir; guðr vas þeim á sinnum;

emjuðu ulfheðnar; ok ísqm dúðu.⁴⁹

(Berserkers bellowed; battle was about to begin,

Wolfskins screamed; and shook steel.)

This poem commemorates the battle of Hafrsfjörðr, which was fought in the late ninth century, and is dated by Finnur Jónsson to the ninth century, while

⁴⁸ Diana Whaley, 'Skaldic Poetry', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 479-502 (p. 488).

⁴⁹ 'Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)', ed. by R. D. Fulk, in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages: Poetry from the kings' sagas I, from mythical times to c. 1035*, ed. by Diana Whaley, 9 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012-present), I, 91-117 (p. 102).

Fulk suggests a date of c. 900, although it is only preserved in later written sources such as *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*.⁵⁰ This particular verse does not actually give any more details about the warriors than that they shouted and waved their weapons at the start of the battle, an action that any warrior might be expected to do. This level of detail is typical for skaldic verse. Thus, skaldic verse is not necessarily the reliable and useful source that Snorri thought it was. However, it does feature the earliest known usage of ON *berserkr* and it does link *berserkir* with *ulfheðnar*, so it has value in this study, and is analysed in chapter 4.⁵¹

2.3.2 Medieval histories

Sagas and poetry are not the only medieval sources for *berserkir*. There are also a number of histories in both Latin and Old Norse. These histories generally pre-date the main period of saga writing, with the earliest known vernacular history being the elder version of *Íslendingabók* by Ari fróði, which was written in the early twelfth century and is said by Snorri Sturluson to have been the first history written in Old Norse.⁵² A Latin history by Sæmundr fróði

⁵⁰ Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldedigting*, B I (1912), 22-25; 'Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)', ed. by Fulk, p. 91; for the verse in context see Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 116; and 'Nóregs konunga tal', in *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum*, *Fagrskinna – Nóregs konunga tal*, ed. by Bjarni Einarsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 29 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1984), p. 67.

⁵¹ See 4.2.

⁵² Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, pp. 5-6.

was written a little earlier in the twelfth century but does not survive except in summary form as *Nóregs konungatal*, which was composed in the late twelfth century.⁵³ These are the earliest histories known from Iceland and were based on oral tradition, although only *Íslendingabók* is considered in this thesis.

From this time on, many more histories were produced, with many being *konungasögur*, the stories of Scandinavian kings told in Old Norse. There was clearly some interest in Norway, probably because of the Norwegian crown's attempts to annex Iceland at this time, and a focus on external affairs, albeit with an Icelandic point of view. Such histories continued to be produced throughout the twelfth century and up to the end of the thirteenth century with the high point of production being the last quarter of the twelfth century and the first quarter of the thirteenth century, when Snorri Sturluson wrote *Heimskringla*.⁵⁴ In Norway, towards the end of the twelfth century, *Historia Norwegie* and *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* were produced in Latin, while *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sǫgum* was produced in the vernacular. Of these three only the author of *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* is known, the Norwegian monk Theodoricus monachus.⁵⁵ Of these histories, only *Heimskringla* references *berserkir*, so it is the only one of these texts that will be analysed in chapter 4.

⁵³ Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldedigting*, B I (1912), 575.

⁵⁴ Clunies Ross, *Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, pp. 22-23.

⁵⁵ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Royal Biography', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 388-402 (pp. 390-91).

Historiography about Scandinavia began earlier, when Adam of Bremen wrote his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* c. 1070 which includes valuable details about the Swedish cult at Uppsala.⁵⁶ Of all the historiographers of Scandinavia, he was the one writing closest to the time when *berserkir* might have still been present in kings' warbands but he does not mention them.

Saxo Grammaticus wrote his *Gesta Danorum* c. 1185 and Sven Aggesen, who was a contemporary of Saxo, wrote his *Brevis historia regum Daniae* around the same time.⁵⁷ Sven's work is not considered here because it does not mention *berserkir*, but Saxo's work has been used by previous scholars as evidence for *berserkir*, as is discussed in chapter 3, and will be analysed further. An assessment of its value and reliability is included separately below.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. by Francis J. Tschan, new introduction and selected bibliography by Timothy Reuter (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. xii.

⁵⁷ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: Danmarkshistorien*, ed. by Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. by Peter Zeeberg, 2 vols (Copenhagen: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab & Gads Forlag, 2005), I, 31-32; *The Works of Sven Aggesen Twelfth-Century Danish Historian*, trans. by Eric Christiansen, Viking Society for Northern Research Texts Series, 9 (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992), p. 2.

⁵⁸ See 2.3.3.7.

It is possible to date many of these historical works based on the latest events portrayed or because the authors and the time when they lived are known. This makes contextualising the histories easier than is the case with sagas. We also know that skaldic verse was used extensively as source material and verification.⁵⁹ This means that the caveats that apply to skaldic verse also apply to the medieval histories. Most of the histories relied heavily on oral tradition and / or earlier works that relied on oral tradition. Saxo acknowledges the debt he owes to scholars in Iceland, who gathered the histories that he has set into Latin, while Snorri states that he has written down the traditions as handed down by wise men and as recorded in documents. There is little verification of the veracity of their sources other than a straight recourse to authority. When Snorri goes on to state: ‘En þótt vér vitim eigi sannendi á því, þá vitum vér dæmi til, at gamlir fræðimenn hafi slíkt fyrir satt haft’ (But although we may not know the truth of this, still we know as proof of this that wise men of old have held such things to be true), the hazards of trusting these sources too closely should be immediately manifest.⁶⁰ These are not stories of events as told by a witness but rather traditions that have been handed down through the years with all the attendant possibility of change or error that entails.

⁵⁹ See 2.3.1.2.

⁶⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 4.

2.3.3 Textual evidence from non-Scandinavian sources

Although ON *berserkr* is only known from the Old Norse literature of the medieval period, other medieval authors have written about Scandinavia in the Viking Age in Latin. Notable among these are Saxo Grammaticus and Adam of Bremen. There are also Latin histories, such as *Historia Norwegie*, which have no attributed author. None of these works address the issue of *berserkir* directly, but they still have value as tools for understanding the mind-set of the medieval Scandinavians and thus being able to interpret their works.

Other works deal with the Germanic tribes of the pre-Viking Iron Age, or early medieval period, in Europe and the East. Tacitus' *Germania* has long been used as evidence for the activities of Viking Age Scandinavians, despite having been written some seven hundred years before the Viking Age. Other authors such as Paulus Diaconus described the activities of eighth-century Germanic tribes, while those like Leo Diaconus or Ibn Fadlān wrote about the activities of the Rus, who may be used as a model for the Scandinavian tribes of the ninth century, because their society developed under Swedish rulers and thus they adopted Scandinavian traits, although the extent to which their customs underwent Slavic influence needs to be considered when using this evidence.⁶¹

⁶¹ See Wladyslaw Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), and Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus: 750-1200* (London: Longman, 1996) for more detailed discussion of the Rus. See also 2.3.3.8, 4.3.5 and 5.2.11.

None of these sources uses analogues of ON *berserkr*, but they do recount the ferocity and customs of the Germanic tribes, which can inform understanding of *berserkir*. They also discuss the practice of warfare by Germanic tribes and, in some cases, refer to wolf-warriors or dog-warriors, who may be analogous to *ulfheðnar*. Therefore all of these authors are referenced in the discussion in chapters 4 and 5.

This section undertakes a critical analysis of the reliability of these authors and provides the context for understanding how they can inform understanding of *berserkir*. The main content of their works is discussed in the appropriate sections but is referenced here to permit clear and critical discussion of its reliability and to prevent cluttering the later analysis with assessments of these works.

2.3.3.1 Publius Cornelius Tacitus (c. A.D. 55 to c. A.D. 120)

Tacitus wrote his *De origine et situ Germanorum* (henceforth *Germania*) in the first century A.D. and it was published in A.D. 98. It appears to have been written as a description of the Germanic peoples and a warning of the threat they posed to Rome.⁶² However, Tacitus never undertook journeys among the Germanic tribes and cannot claim first-hand knowledge of them. His work

⁶² Cornelius Tacitus, *Cornelii Taciti de origine et situ Germanorum*, ed. by J. G. C. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), pp. xii-xix; Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, trans. by M. Hutton and W. Peterson, rev. by R. M. Ogilvie, E. H. Warmington and M. Winterbottom, Loeb Classical Library, 35 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 119-20.

drew upon a range of Greek and Roman authors, probably including Posidonius, Julius Caesar and Pliny.⁶³ Anderson also stated that Tacitus used oral accounts from traders and returning Roman officers to bolster his descriptions.⁶⁴ The final four chapters of *Germania* in particular must have relied upon the words of traders because the Roman army had not come into direct contact with the eastern Germanic tribes and Scandinavians at this time.

When discussing Tacitus as a source for *berserkir*, it is important to recognise the temporal gap between Tacitus' time and the Viking Age. This limits the usefulness of his information, which is further limited by his relying upon second-hand accounts. It is also important to recognise that Tacitus was writing in an ancient tradition of ethnography that has its own style and *topoi*, not least of which was the idea that all primitive peoples had, at root, similar traits, characteristics and customs. As a result of this, what one author wrote about one tribe might be applied wholesale to another tribe, purely because both were primitive, such as the description of the Germanic tribes, which Norden traces back to Posidonius' descriptions of the Celts and Scythians.⁶⁵ Similarly, Anderson notes that Tacitus' phrase 'tantum sui similem gentem' (each of them like his own race) was originally coined by Hecataeus about the Egyptians and was used afterwards of the Scythians, the Cimbri and finally by

⁶³ Anderson, ed., *de origine et situ Germanorum*, pp. xix-xxvi.

⁶⁴ Anderson, ed., *de origine et situ Germanorum*, pp. xxv-xxvi.

⁶⁵ Eduard Norden, *Die germanische Urgeschichte in Tacitus' Germania* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1920), pp. 114-15.

Tacitus of the Germans.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, comparing Tacitus' descriptions with those of later authors can highlight trends of Germanic belief and behaviour that developed throughout the first millennium and saw their culmination, for this study at least, in the *berserker* of the Viking Age and their depiction in medieval literature. Tacitus' usefulness is primarily in his descriptions of Germanic pre-battle activities and in identifying the traits of warrior brotherhoods that may be used to determine whether *berserker* were one.⁶⁷

2.3.3.2 Ammianus Marcellinus (4th century)

Ammianus Marcellinus was a former soldier and a Greek, as he wrote at the end of his work, who served in the army of Constantius II and his successor Julian the Apostate.⁶⁸ What is known about Ammianus comes primarily from his *Res Gestae*. He was born in Syrian Antioch and he earned a place in the *protectores domestici* while still young, a post that was only available to the well-born. He became part of Ursicinus' command in 353, with whom he was involved in trials for high treason in Antioch, suppressing Silvanus' revolt in Gaul, and fighting the Persians in the East. In this last campaign, Ammianus had a narrow escape from the Persians while acting as a courier for Ursicinus. Ammianus seems to have acted as a spy, scout and courier for Ursicinus on

⁶⁶ Anderson, ed., *de origine et situ Germanorum*, p. xxix; Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 134.

⁶⁷ See 4.3.5, 4.4.3, 5.2.16 and 5.4.3.

⁶⁸ *Ammianus Marcellinus*, trans. by John C. Rolfe, 3 vols (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1982), III, 504-05.

this campaign, so he observed the Persian army crossing the Anzaba, which led to his being involved in the defence of Amida. After Amida fell, he managed to escape the city and return to Ursicinus after many adventures. Less is known of his life after Ursicinus was deposed in 360, but he appears to have taken part in Julian's campaign against the Persians in 363. When Jovian succeeded Julian, Ammianus appears to have returned to Antioch and remained there for some time with brief sojourns abroad to Egypt and Greece, before settling in Rome shortly before 383. It was in Rome that he wrote his history, which evidence from the beginning of Books xxv and xxvi suggests was published episodically. Given his military experience and first-hand accounts of battles, Ammianus is likely to be more reliable than authors like Tacitus, who only wrote from second-hand information.

Ammianus' work can be linked to images on bracteates and helmet plates of a mounted warrior with another warrior attacking the mounted warrior's horse from underneath by this tactic which he describes at the battle of Strasburg.⁶⁹ The link between these artefacts and Óðinn is made by some scholars because of the presence on some of a figure like that on the fourth Torslunda matrix which has been interpreted as Óðinn, because it has only one eye, and on others the presence of one or more ravens either flying or as bird-headed horns on the helmet.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ See 5.2.4, 5.2.7, 5.2.8, 5.2.9 and 5.2.17; see also Figs 5.9, 5.11, 5.26, 5.28 and 5.32.

⁷⁰ See 5.2.

2.3.3.3 Jordanes (sixth century)

Jordanes (Iordanis) wrote *de origine actibusque Getarum* (henceforth *Getica*, which is the usual short title ascribed to it) in response to one Brother Castalius requesting that he produce a summary of Cassiodorus' now lost history of the Goths.⁷¹ Jordanes' work concludes with the events of the mid-sixth century and was probably completed in 551 A.D., because he states in the preface to *Getica* that he interrupted writing his *Romana*, which was completed no more than a year after *Getica*.⁷² The *Romana* is a two-part history, the first part of which covers the history of the world from Creation to the Augustan empire. The second part begins with the birth of Romulus and ends with the defeat of the Ostrogoths by Narses at the Battle of Mons Lactarius in A.D. 552/3. *Getica*, although apparently a separate volume, actually fulfils the role of third part in the trilogy as Jordanes states in the preface to *Romana*.⁷³

⁷¹ Iordanis, *De origine actibusque Getarum*, ed. by Alfred Holder (Tübingen: Mohr, 1882), p. 1; Iordanis, *Iordanis Romana et Getica*, ed. by Theodorus Mommsen, *Monumenta Germaniae historica inde ab anno Christi quingentesimo usque ad annum millesimum et quingentesimum. Auctores antiquissimi* (Berlolini: apud Weidmannos, 1961), p. 53.

⁷² *Romana* has been published under a variety of titles but no English translation exists.

⁷³ *Romana*, Chapter 4; Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800) Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 21.

Cassiodorus' work amounted to twelve books, while Jordanes' work is a single short volume. There has been some discussion about the extent to which Jordanes was responsible for the work he is credited with, whether it was solely a Cassiodoran product condensed and summarised or whether the voice of Jordanes shows through.⁷⁴ Although he was a Goth himself, his work needs to be used carefully, because the provenance of his information, even in the period up to his own time is not certain and the compression of Cassiodorus' work into a single volume will have led to much being omitted.

Jordanes' work feeds into the discussion on early Germanic parallels to *berserkir* and has also been used to justify the connection that *berserkir* are thought to have had with Óðinn.⁷⁵

2.3.3.4 Procopius (fifth to sixth century)

Procopius was born in the late fifth century in Palestine. He chronicled the reign of the Emperor Justinian and the life of Belisarius, with whom he travelled extensively, publishing eight books. As an eyewitness to these events his knowledge is likely to be good, although he is hardly an impartial observer, because his good standing in the Byzantine court would have relied upon him writing what his readers wanted to read. By contrast, his *Anecdota* vilifies Justinian and Theodora, Belisarius and his wife Antonina in a manner that is completely overblown, but which still casts doubt on the reports in the *Histories*. Despite these contradictory narratives, Luján shows how the

⁷⁴ Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, pp. 23-25.

⁷⁵ See 3.3 and 5.4.3.

information related to Slavic pagan practice is reliable within the bounds of Greek historiography. This suggests that other elements of Procopius' descriptions can be reliable too, provided that his personal bias and political necessity is taken into account.⁷⁶ These descriptions are useful because they contribute to the discussion about whether *berserker* wore armour and whether there was a tradition of initiation rituals among Germanic tribes that might be used to justify interpreting berserker as initiates and initiators.⁷⁷

2.3.3.5 Paulus Diaconus (eighth century)

Paulus Diaconus was a monk at Monte Cassino with personal knowledge of Charlemagne's court, who wrote in the eighth century.⁷⁸ His *Historia Langobardum* was written towards the end of his life after 787 A.D. when he returned from the court of Charlemagne to Cassino, but he died before he was able to complete it. The value of his work lies in his writing about his own people, the Langobards, so his writing encompassed the traditions with which he had grown up. However, he also wrote in the tradition of his time,

⁷⁶ Eugenio R. Luján, 'Procopius, De bello Gothico III 38.17-23: a description of ritual pagan Slavic slayings', *Studia Mythologica Slavica*, 11 (2008), 105-112 (p. 106).

⁷⁷ See 3.3, 5.2.16 and 5.4.3.

⁷⁸ Ludwig Bethmann, 'Paulus Diaconus Leben und Schriften', *Archiv der Gesellschaft für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde zur Beförderung einer Gesamtausgabe der Quellenschriften deutscher Geschichten des Mittelalters*, 10 (1851), 247-334.

collecting, transmitting and linking together often-contradictory narratives, so he cannot be relied upon completely, especially with regards to chronology.⁷⁹

2.3.3.6 Leo Diaconus (tenth century)

What little is known about Leo the Deacon is gleaned from comments in his *History*.⁸⁰ He was probably born before 950 but the date of his death is unknown. He was ordained as a deacon after 970 and became a member of the palace clergy under Basil II in Byzantium. He was present on the campaign against the Bulgars in 986, where he was nearly captured or killed at the Battle of Trajan's Gate. At the beginning of his history, he states that he will only write down what he has seen or what he has verified as true from those that saw it:

At quae deinceps acciderunt, quae partim ipse oculis meis vidi ... partim ab oculatis testibus diligenter exquisivi, haec persequar scriptura.⁸¹

⁷⁹ *History of the Langobards by Paul the Deacon*, trans. by William Dudley Foulke (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1907), pp. xxxvi-xxxviii.

⁸⁰ *The History of Leo the Deacon: Byzantine military expansion in the tenth century*, trans. by Alice-Mary Talbot and Denis F. Sullivan, *Dumbarton Oaks Studies*, 41 (Washington D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2005), pp. 9-11.

⁸¹ Leo Diaconus Caloensis, *Leonis diaconi Historiae libri decem*, ed. by Carolus Benedictus Hasius, in *Patrologiae cursus completus*, ed. by J.-P. Migne, Series Graeca posterior, 117 (Paris: Migne, 1864), col. 662.

(But I will now set down in writing subsequent events, both those that I saw with my own eyes ... and those that I verified from the evidence of eyewitnesses)⁸²

With this in mind, he ought to be a fairly reliable source. It is useful that several other extant sources are available for this period, such that his reliability as a witness may be proved.⁸³ However, some passages in his text are contradictory, which suggests that he used sources with different biases from each other. Therefore, his objectivity is not as great as his own words claim, but as an eyewitness he can be useful nevertheless. His work has been used to help understand the howling of *berserkir*.⁸⁴

2.3.3.7 Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1150 – c. 1220)

Little is known of Saxo's life. He was apparently from a warrior family in Sjælland and his patron was the Archbishop of Lund, Absalon, at the time he wrote the sixteen volumes of *Gesta Danorum*, which was based on oral tales, earlier histories and inscriptions on stones, as well as the personal recollections of Archbishop Absalon.⁸⁵ Saxo's warrior background may account for his predilection and preference for warrior virtues in his history, so the more

⁸² *The History of Leo the Deacon*, trans. by Talbot and Sullivan, p. 58.

⁸³ *The History of Leo the Deacon*, trans. by Talbot and Sullivan, pp. 31-36.

⁸⁴ See 4.3.5.

⁸⁵ *Saxo Grammaticus: The history of the Danes. Books I-IX*, ed. by Hilda Ellis Davidson, trans. by Peter Fisher, 2 vols (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), II, 9-11.

warlike kings receive more favourable comments. The reliability of *Gesta Danorum* is shaped by Saxo's sources. The early books deal with the legendary past and include four books with tales that are only known from those volumes, while others are verified in different Norse sources. The suggestion here is that Saxo may have invented or embellished at will to suit his narrative.⁸⁶ It is only when he reaches the final volumes that cover the history of Denmark in the years from the mid-twelfth century onwards that Saxo becomes a more reliable witness to events.

Saxo's work has been used to justify conclusions about naming traditions among *berserkir*, their role in kings' warbands, the wearing of animal pelts, the interpretation of *berserksgangr* as a form of rabies, and a right of rapine among berserkir.⁸⁷

2.3.3.8 Ibn Fadlān and other Arabic authors

There are many authors, like Ahmad ibn Fadlān, who encountered the Rus in their travels or who suffered from their raids. Ibn Fadlān travelled north in 921-22 to the court of the Volga Bulgars as part of a mission from the Caliphate of Baghdad. He recorded what he saw as he travelled, including his famous description of a Rus funeral. His descriptions provide eyewitness testimony about the Rus, which may inform knowledge of Scandinavian society, although gaps in his comprehension of their customs and the

⁸⁶ *History of the Danes. Books I-IX*, ed. by Hilda Ellis Davidson, II, 8-9.

⁸⁷ See 3.2.3.3, 4.4.1, 4.4.3, 4.5, 5.2.6, 5.2.12 and 5.2.14.

difficulties of relating the Rus directly to Scandinavian society must be taken into account when using this evidence.

Ibn Rusta wrote a seven-volume encyclopaedia that was completed in 913, although only one volume still survives. He describes the Rus as physically very capable and fearless to the point of never leaving the battlefield until they have won, but his work appears to depend on an earlier ninth-century source rather than personal observation.⁸⁸

Mas'ūdī writing in the tenth century describes a Rus raid in 913 on the shores of the Caspian Sea in graphic terms that leave little of the bloodshed to the imagination.⁸⁹ He was a traveller who settled in Egypt and wrote a universal history in 943.

The tenth-century philosopher and historian Miskawayh describes a Rus attack on Azerbaijan that took place in 943, expounding on the physical size, strength and prowess of the Rus, while also adding that the last surviving member of the Rus expedition killed himself rather than be captured.⁹⁰

While these authors all discuss the strength, size and fearlessness of the Rus, none mention *berserkir* specifically, so it is not possible to use their contemporary knowledge to expand on this subject more than to state that the

⁸⁸ *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness Arab Travellers in the Far North*, trans. by Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (London: Penguin Books Lts, 2012), pp. 126-27.

⁸⁹ *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, trans. by Lunde and Stone, pp. 144-46.

⁹⁰ *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, trans. Lunde and Stone, pp. 147-52.

Arab writers perpetuated the image of the fearless Scandinavian warrior, who would fight to the death rather than surrender. For this reason, they are not mentioned further.

2.3.4 Law codes

Law and law cases play a large part in the *Íslendingasögur*, indicating that a tradition of rule by law existed up to the time when they were written down. The survival of so many law codes reinforces the idea that they were an important part of Scandinavian society in the Viking Age and medieval period.⁹¹ It is unfortunate then for this study that *berserkir* are barely mentioned. *Berserksgangr* is mentioned in *Grágás*, the Icelandic law code.⁹² *Grettis saga* also mentions that Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson passed a law outlawing duelling and *berserkir* in the early eleventh century, which may indicate earlier Norwegian legislation that has not survived, or at least a late fourteenth-century folk tradition that such was the case.⁹³

⁹¹ For a brief overview of the surviving law codes see Gudmund Sandvik and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Laws', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 223-44.

⁹² See also 3.2.3.1, 4.4.3 and 5.3.

⁹³ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar: Bandamanna saga, Odds þátr Ófeigssonar*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, *Íslensk fornrit*, 7 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936), p. 60.

The main problem with using *Grágás* as a source is that it is only known from later manuscripts the earliest of which date to the mid- to late thirteenth century. Of these the Codex Regius is thought to have been written about 1260, while Staðarhólsbók is thought to date from around 1280.⁹⁴ As Dennis et al. note, the two texts are not identical.⁹⁵ They have elements in common that are thought to stem from the same earlier source but there are also elements where significant variation in detail and depth occurs. The fact that the section that details the penalty for *berserksgangr* is substantially the same in both indicates that this may be an original Icelandic law from early in Iceland's history and thus from a period when *berserkir* were a part of society.⁹⁶ No other Scandinavian law code mentions *berserkir* or *berserksgangr*, so it is not possible to use them to verify *Grágás*.

Despite the lack of corroborating evidence from Scandinavia, other law codes have been used to support theories about *berserkir*, including *Lex Baiuvariorum*, which describes *campio cinctus* (belted or girded combat) as a form of judicial duel.⁹⁷ *The Emsiger plattdeutscher Text, Rüstringer friesischer*

⁹⁴ *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás: The Codex Regius of Grágás with material from other manuscripts*, trans. by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins, University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies, 3 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980), p. 13.

⁹⁵ *Laws of Early Iceland*, trans. by Dennis, Foote and Perkins, p. 17.

⁹⁶ See 5.3.

⁹⁷ *Lex Baiuvariorum*, ed. by Konrad Beyerle (München: Max Hueber Verlag, 1926), pp. 136-38.

Text and *Westerlauwerscher friesischer Text* of the general Frisian laws dating from after 1200 record a form of duel in which the warriors fight with bare thighs, which may mean that they had to strip down to a loincloth for the fight.⁹⁸ Unfortunately, the Latin originals of these laws are no longer extant and they only survive in medieval editions alongside the *Lex Frisionum*, which records duels but not their form.⁹⁹

Other Germanic lawcodes mention judicial combat but do not describe how the combatants must dress or comport themselves, such as *Lex Ribuaria* sections 36 (32).4, 60 (57).2, and 62 (59).4.¹⁰⁰ *Lex Salica* does not describe judicial combat, but it must have existed as a concept within the Salian Frankish domain, because Gregory of Tours (VII.14 and X.10) mentions it,

⁹⁸ *Friesische Rechtsquellen*, ed. by Karl Freiherr von Richthofen (Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1840), pp.76-78 (Ems. I) and 77-79 (Rüst. and Westerl.).

⁹⁹ *Lex Frisionum*, ed. by Karl August Eckhardt and Albrecht Eckhardt, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Fontes iuris Germanici antiquae in usum scholarum separatim editi, 12 (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1982), pp. 46 and 60.

¹⁰⁰ *Lex Ribuaria*, ed. by Franz Beyerle and Rudolf Buchner, Monumenta Germaniae historica inde ab anno Christi quingentesimo usque ad annum millesimum et quingentesimum, Legum nationum Germanicarum, 3.2 (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1954; repr. 1965), pp. 88, 108 and 115.

although he does not describe the process or dress of the combatants.¹⁰¹ The lack of direct references to duelling may result from the failure of the laws governing it to survive in the written record, or perhaps because not all judicial duels were circumscribed by the rituals that appear to be associated with the Norse *hólmganga* (duel).

2.3.5 Archaeological remains

Some archaeological finds from England, Germany and Scandinavia depicting warriors have been thought to be depictions of *berserkir*.¹⁰² These finds pre-date the Viking Age and are found scattered throughout north-western Europe, possibly indicating some level of homogeneous cultural continuum within this broader area.¹⁰³ They are linked to *berserkir* by their depiction of warriors dressed in animal-skins and interacting with a figure which has been interpreted as Óðinn.¹⁰⁴ However, there is no direct link between these images and the texts that preserve descriptions of *berserkir*, which has led to criticism of this interpretation that is largely focused on Hauck's tendency to interpret

¹⁰¹ Gregory of Tours, *Gregorii episcopi turonensis libri historiarum X*, ed. by Bruno Krusch and Wilhelmus Levison, *Monumenta Germaniae historica inde ab anno Christi quingentesimo usque ad annum millesimum et quingentesimum: Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, 7 vols (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1951), I.1, 336 and 494.

¹⁰² See 5.2.

¹⁰³ See 5.5 and Figure 5.1.

¹⁰⁴ See 5.2.

all depictions of a rider on bracteates as Óðinn.¹⁰⁵ There is a significant time differential between the date of the artefacts and the date of the written sources. For example, the Torslunda matrices, one of which features a one-eyed figure (possibly Óðinn) together with a figure that appears to be a warrior dressed in a wolfskin, are of sixth- to seventh-century date while the sagas that refer to *ulfheðnar* (wolfskins, a type of figure related to *berserkr*) date from the thirteenth century or later, a gap of some six hundred years. Such a time differential allows for significant variation and change in what is understood by the term. However, despite this gap and the possibility of significant change, it seems that the two depictions are of substantially the same warrior-type.¹⁰⁶

2.4 Secondary source material: modern depictions of *berserkr*

The final chapter of this thesis examines how modern popular culture adopts and adapts the figure of the *berserkr*. For purposes of this thesis, modern refers to all depictions from the beginning of the nineteenth century through to the present day and popular culture refers to all non-academic sources produced for general consumption, which can include but is not restricted to novels, films, comics and games.

¹⁰⁵ Nancy L. Wicker and Henrik Williams, 'Bracteates and Runes', *Futhark: International Journal of Runic Studies*, 3 (2012), 151-213 (pp. 161-65); See also 5.2.9.

¹⁰⁶ See Chapter 5.

I have chosen the early nineteenth century as a starting point for this because my analysis focuses on English-language material and the term ‘berserker’ was first seen in print in an English-language novel in 1822.¹⁰⁷ This keeps the quantity of data sufficiently large to be usable, while remaining manageable if a representative selection of material is chosen. Trying to incorporate additional material from other languages would result in too broad a study to fit comfortably within the constraints of this thesis. This is particularly the case because I propose to examine not just literature but all forms of depiction within popular culture. Thus, literature, games, graphic novels and films all fall within my purview.

Analysis of the popular culture material seeks to understand the extent to which that culture is informed by academic research, while also understanding how academic research may be affected by depictions in popular culture that shape the language used to discuss *berserker*. The popular culture material is, in many ways, easier to engage with than the medieval material and many of the problems associated with the primary source material do not exist with regard to the secondary source material, because the full body of evidence is available, unlike the medieval material, which is dependent upon the survival of manuscripts. Thus, it is easier to find the source material and there is more of it. There are fewer problems understanding the world-view and mind-set of the authors of modern material, especially when examining only English-

¹⁰⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘berserk’ <<http://dictionary.oed.com>> [Accessed 11 January 2007]; Sir Walter Scott, *The Pirate* (Lerwick: The Shetland Times, 1996), p. 16.

language source material, which is not necessarily the case with the medieval literature. This is particularly true where the source material is in a foreign language such as Latin or Old Norse, because, even with a good reading knowledge of the language, nuances and subtleties that would be obvious to a native speaker are not always immediately obvious to the non-native reader. Where popular culture material becomes more difficult to interpret is in the differentiation of how much of its depiction is informed by academic research and how much owes its genesis to artistic interpretation. Modern authors are likely to adopt and adapt their material so that the finished result ceases to resemble medieval descriptions of *berserker* to any great degree. Nevertheless I shall show what lies at the core of these descriptions and identify common elements that demonstrate what modern authors have learnt from the academic domain and the primary material.

3 Defining the *berserkr*: a survey of previous research

Research into *berserkr* also includes research into *ulfheðnar*, because the two are directly linked in *Haraldskvæði*, *Grettis saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*.¹⁰⁸ This connection enables analysis to be undertaken that might otherwise not be possible, because *berserkr* appear to have been a specifically Scandinavian phenomenon, so scholars have used pre-Viking Age references to hound- and wolf-warriors (i.e. *ulfheðnar*) as a model for understanding *berserkr*.

Because previous scholarship on *berserkr* has tended to focus on the individual scholar's own discipline, this chapter adopts a thematic approach, grouping similar research together in roughly chronological order to provide a coherent context for the development of theories about *berserkr*. The themes investigated by scholars in the past have encompassed a variety of topics that may be best summarised as follows:

- The interpretations of the terms *berserkr* and *ulfheðinn*;
- *Berserksgangr*;
- The *berserkr* as initiator and cultic warrior;
- Roles of *berserkr* in the Icelandic sagas;
- Scandinavian shape-changing traditions and lycanthropy; and
- Parallels to the *berserkr* in other cultures.

¹⁰⁸ 'Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)', ed. by Fulk, pp. 102 and 113-114; Íf, 7, p. 5; *Vatnsdæla saga: Hallfreðar saga, Kormáks saga, Hrómundar þáttr halta, Hrafn þáttr Guðrúnarsonar*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit, 8 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939), p. 24.

Given that these themes are largely self-contained, with most researchers focusing only on narrow areas, rather than adopting a holistic approach, this is the most suitable methodology for describing and discussing their research.

Three wider studies have been undertaken, all PhD theses. Blaney and Breen separately reviewed both the body of evidence and the previous research in some detail, although still with a largely literary bent and only using non-literary sources to support their conclusions.¹⁰⁹ Blaney's thesis sought to show that understanding and usage of the term *berserkr* developed and changed through time, and that the contradictory narratives about *berserkir* actually reflected that development. Breen attempted a holistic examination of *berserkir* but ultimately defaulted to a primarily literary approach because *berserkir* are only named in, and records of them are only transmitted through, the Old Norse sagas. For this reason, he believed that *berserkir* could only really be understood based on the literary sources, and that other sources were of little use. Samson adopted a similar approach to Blaney and Breen in his initial analysis, but undertook a more exhaustive analysis of material culture.¹¹⁰ He concluded that *berserkir* were members of a warrior brotherhood with distinctive costumes and that they disappeared as society changed with the advent of Christianity, and new values were adopted for the *hirð* (bodyguard,

¹⁰⁹ Blaney, 'Berserkr'; Breen, 'The Berserkr'.

¹¹⁰ Samson, *Les Berserkir*; see also Ruarigh Dale, a review of *Les Berserkir: Les guerriers-fauves dans la Scandinavie ancienne, de l'âge de Vendel aux Vikings (VI^e-XI^e siècle)*, by Vincent Samson, *Saga-Book*, 37 (2013), 69-71, for a more detailed review of Samson's work.

warband). While much of the research reviewed in this chapter has already been discussed by Blaney, Breen and Samson, it is necessary to reappraise the conclusions they have drawn, because of their approach, particularly with reference to the non-literary sources and their initial decision to identify *berserkir* as warriors who went berserk, without questioning whether they actually did so. Therefore I shall summarise the important details of each topic here, revisiting the original sources as necessary and including new material where possible, and append my own discussion and conclusions to show the advantages and shortcomings of the different approaches that have been taken.

3.1 The interpretation and etymology of ON *berserkr* and *ulfheðinn*

As mentioned above, ON *berserkr* and ON *ulfheðinn* occur within Old Norse literature as related terms, as in *Vatnsdæla saga*, where reference is made to ‘þeir berserkir, er Úlfheðnar váru kallaðir’ (those *berserkir*, who were called *Úlfheðnar*), which suggests that *ulfheðnar* were a sub-group of *berserkir*.¹¹¹ This is reinforced in *Grettis saga*, where it states ‘hét konungr á berserki sína til framgöngu; þeir váru kallaðir úlfheðnar’ (the king ordered his berserks to be courageous; they were called wolfskins).¹¹² Whether these authors were following a tradition that dated back to pagan Scandinavia, or whether the authors’ understanding of the term was a contemporary one is impossible to know at this remove, although both sagas were written at least one hundred

¹¹¹ Íf, 8, p. 24.

¹¹² Íf, 7, p. 5.

years apart.¹¹³ However, the connection is also made, initially tentatively, in *Haraldskvæði* strophe 7, when *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* are described performing similar actions in the same strophe at the start of the battle.¹¹⁴ This tentative connection is then made explicit in strophes 20 and 21 when the response to ‘At berserkja reiðu vil ek þik spyrja’ (I wish to ask you about the equipment of the *berserkir*) is:

Ulfheðnar heita, þeir es í orrostu blóðgar randir bera.¹¹⁵

(they are called wolfskins, those who carry bloody shields in battle)

This suggests a more enduring connection and this link has been considered important for the study of the etymology of *berserkr*. The etymology of *ulfheðinn* is not disputed, so I shall briefly discuss it before moving on to the more problematic etymology of *berserkr*.

3.1.1 *Ulfheðinn*

Ulfheðinn is a compound noun with two parts: ON *ulfr* ‘wolf’ (< PGmc **wulfaz*) and ON *heðinn* ‘fur coat’ (of uncertain etymology).¹¹⁶ Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon stated that it derives from PGmc **haðina*, which may be related to Thr **kitōn* and Gk *χιτών* (both meaning ‘underclothing’).¹¹⁷ The

¹¹³ See Appendix 2.

¹¹⁴ ‘Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)’, ed. by Fulk, p. 102.

¹¹⁵ ‘Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)’, ed. by Fulk, pp. 113-14.

¹¹⁶ Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Íslensk orðsifjabók*, 2nd edn ([Reykjavík]: Orðabók Háskólans, 1989), p. 1083 s.v. *úlfur*.

¹¹⁷ Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Orðsifjabók*, p. 312 s.v. *héðinn*.

earliest textual appearance of ON *ulfheðinn* is alongside ON *berserkr* in strophes 7, 20 and 21 of *Haraldskvæði*.¹¹⁸ In *Haraldskvæði* ON *ulfheðinn* is a common noun. However, Ulfheðinn is also known as a personal name in several variants. The forms **ulueþin** (U 799), dating from the late twelfth century, and **ul(f)hiþin** (Sö 307), dating from the Viking Age, are known from rune stones in Sweden.¹¹⁹ Related to these is the Franconian personal name, Wolfhetan, which is cognate with Ulfheðinn and probably dates from the eighth or ninth century, based on examples cited by Müller.¹²⁰ Ulfheðinn as a personal name is present in Old West Norse in *Landnámabók* which records Úlfheðinn Brúnason, Úlfheðinn Véfrøðarson and Úlfheðinn á Víðimýri as all living in the tenth century in Iceland.¹²¹ Lind records these same examples of tenth-century date and also others of eleventh- to fifteenth-century date.¹²²

¹¹⁸ 'Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)', ed. by Fulk, pp. 102, 113 and 114; see Appendix 1 for these strophes in full.

¹¹⁹ *Upplands runinskrifter*, ed. by Elias Wessén and Sven B. F. Jansson, 4 vols (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1940-1958) III.1 (1949-51), 398-401 (p. 399); *Södermanlands runinskrifter*, ed. by Erik Brate and Elias Wessén, 2 vols (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1924-36), I, 283-84 (p. 283).

¹²⁰ Gunter Müller, 'Zum Namen Wolfhetan und seinen Verwandten', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 1 (1967), 200-12 (p. 201).

¹²¹ *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968), pp. 170, 171, 226 and 244.

¹²² E. H. Lind, *Norsk-Ísländska Dopnamn ock Fingerade Namn från Medeltiden* (Uppsala: Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1905-1915), cols 1049-51

Thus examples of the personal name Ulfheðinn are known from the Viking Age through to the late medieval period, even though evidence is scarce for the common noun in the early part of this period beyond its usage in *Haraldskvæði*. The presence of these personal names has been interpreted by Blaney as a development of the common noun through an appellative form to a personal name.¹²³ If this is true then the common noun existed in Franconian prior to the eighth century too. Müller states that *Wolfhetan* derives from PGmc **wulfa-heðanaz*, consisting of **wulfaz* and **haðina-* and may indicate a much earlier potential date for the compound form **wulfa-heðanaz*.¹²⁴ The earliest usage of antecedents to *ulfheðinn* is uncertain, because all earlier forms of it are reconstructions, but it seems likely that these antecedents were present in Proto-Germanic and possibly even earlier. Nevertheless, it is certain that these compound forms make semantic and logical sense, so the interpretation of ‘wolfskin’ is appropriate, and its formation pre-dates the Viking Age.

3.1.2 *Berserkr*

ON *berserkr*, like ON *ulfheðinn*, is a compound noun comprising two parts; *ber-* and *serkr*. There is little dispute about the meaning of ON *serkr* (shirt, a

and 1302; E. H. Lind, *Norsk-Isländska Dopnamn ock Fingerade Namn från Medeltiden: supplementband* (Oslo: Jacob Dybwads Bokhandel, 1931), col. 795.

¹²³ Blaney, ‘Berserkr’, pp. 32 -35.

¹²⁴ Müller, ‘Wolfhetan’, p. 210.

certain number of skins), which can also be used of a coat of mail.¹²⁵ Given that there is little dispute about ON *serkr* and that dating it is not feasible because it is not certain whether it is an early form (IE **ser* ‘to bind together’) or a loan from the Lat *serica* (silks), I do not propose to discuss its etymology further.¹²⁶ The real dispute, and the main source for understanding the etymology and meaning of ON *berserkr*, lies in the meaning and origin of the first element, *ber-*, which has been variously offered up as the Old Norse adjective *berr* (bare), or as one of the Old Norse substantives **beri*, **berr* or **ber* (bear), as discussed below.

On the face of it, understanding the meaning of *berserkr* should be a fairly simple task because a thirteenth-century source exists that defines *berserksgangr*, and from this a meaning of *berserkr* may be deduced. Snorri Sturluson explained his interpretation in *Ynglinga saga*: ‘hans menn fóru brynjlausir ok váru galnir sem hundar eða vargar’ (his men went without armour and were as mad as dogs or wolves).¹²⁷ Thus, *berserkr* were men that did not wear armour in battle, according to Snorri. He appears to have believed that ON *berserkr* derived from *berr* meaning ‘bare’, which translates literally as ‘bare-shirt’ and means ‘without armour’ (i.e. with no armour over

¹²⁵ *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, ed. by R. Cleasby, G. Vigfusson and W. A. Craigie, rev. by W. A. Craigie, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 523 s.v. *serkr*.

¹²⁶ Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Orðsifjabók*, pp. 806-07 s.v. *serkur*.

¹²⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 17.

the top of the shirt), presumably based on his understanding of thirteenth-century Icelandic. Snorri's view appears to have been dominant in *berserkr*-scholarship for hundreds of years. Noreen cites six examples of early works that retain Snorri's definition:

1. Gudmund Andreæ's *Lexicon Islandicum*, printed in 1683, states that a *berserkr* is 'Miles qvi sine armis, lorica Galea, &c. pugnat, á Ber / nudus, & serk, indusio' (a soldier who fought without arms or armour);
2. Verelius's *Hervarar saga* (1672) where it states that they went 'sine lorica' (without armour);
3. Jon Erichsen's 1773 edition of *Kristni saga* included an appendix containing a compilation of stories about *berserkir*, in which he identified *serkr* as generally meaning 'shirt' but in this instance meaning 'armour', and thus he also cited them as going into battle without armour;
4. Björn Halldorsson's Icelandic dictionary of 1814 states that they went into battle '*uden Brynie, Panser, blot i Underklæder*', i.e. without armour and only in their underclothes;
5. N.M. Petersen, writing in 1839, says that the *berserkir* '*frembød det blotte Bryst imod Fjendens Hug*' (offered up their naked breasts to the enemy's blows); and
6. R. Keyser wrote in 1847 that '*I striden fore de frem brynjeløse, i den bare Serk eller Kjortel, deraf udentvivl deres Navn*' (In battle they

advanced without armour, only in a shirt or tunic, from which without a doubt comes their name).¹²⁸

Thus Snorri's interpretation persisted without any great scrutiny through to the middle of the nineteenth century.

Sveinbjörn Egilsson was the first to propose an etymology derived from a word for bear in 1860.¹²⁹ He considered *berserkr* and *ulfhedinn* to be etymologically parallel constructions, and so he proposed that the first element was **berr* 'bear', a form related to ON *bera* 'she-bear'. Cleasby and Vigfusson's dictionary, originally published in 1874, followed suit. It stated that *berserkr* could not mean 'without armour' 'because *serkr* is a subst. not an adj.' and that deriving *berserkr* from **berr* (c.f. the cognate German *bär* = *ursus*) meaning 'bear' is preferable.¹³⁰ They cited as supporting evidence the fact that 'in olden ages athletes and champions used to wear hides of bears, wolves and reindeer (as skins of lions in the south)'.¹³¹ The wearing of animal-skins also links *berserkir* to *ulfhednar*, and provides a neat parallel construction in word form and in usage because *ulfhedinn* is used as a synonym for *berserkr* in some sources, such as the previously quoted passage

¹²⁸ E. Noreen, 'Ordet bärsärk' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 48 (1932), 242-254 (p. 248).

¹²⁹ Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon Poëticum: Antiquæ linguæ septentrionalis* (Copenhagen: Societas Regia Antiquariorum Septentrionalium, 1860), p. 51 s.v. *berserkir*.

¹³⁰ CV, s.v. *berserkr*.

¹³¹ CV, s.v. *berserkr*.

from *Vatnsdæla saga*. With the appearance of Sveinbjörn Egilsson's dictionary, the first real alternative to Snorri's definition was offered. Fritzner followed Sveinbjörn Egilsson, and Cleasby and Vigfusson, in the late nineteenth century, stating that *berserkir* used a bear's pelt instead of armour. He also defined *berserkir* as:

Mand som af og til gaar berserkgang især under stridens hede gribes af at vildt dyrisk raseri, der giver ham overordentlig styrke, giver hans optræden et rædselsfuldt udseende og gjør hans angreb saa godt som uimodstaaeligt.¹³²

(A man that sometimes undergoes a berserk fit especially in the heat of battle is seized by a wild, animalistic fury, which gives him extraordinary strength, gives his face a fearsome aspect and renders his attack virtually unstoppable.)

The supplement to Fritzner's dictionary mentions Noreen's research but without commenting, merely stating '*første ledd mul berr*' (first element possibly *berr* 'bare').¹³³ In 1932, Noreen championed a derivation from ON *berr* 'bare'.¹³⁴ In doing so, Noreen opposed Sveinbjörn Egilsson's interpretation, and took his lead directly from Snorri. This form is paralleled in other Old Norse words, e.g. *berfættr* (bare-footed or bare-legged) and

¹³² Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*, corrections and supplement ed. by Didrik Arup Seip *et al.*, 4 vols (Oslo : T.J. Møller, 1954-1972), I (1954), 132 s.v. *berserkr*.

¹³³ Fritzner, *Ordbog*, IV (1972), 49 s.v. *berserkr*.

¹³⁴ Noreen, 'Ordet bärsärk', 242-254.

berbakt (bare-backed), so it is not without precedent.¹³⁵ It is also a simpler construction than any form that relies on reconstructing lost words, as the opposing argument does. However, Noreen's argument is largely derived from Snorri's description in *Ynglinga saga*. He fails to recognise that a scholar of Snorri's ability could easily have derived his own etymology from the language of his time or that the medieval interpretation of ON *berserkr* may have differed from the Viking Age interpretation. Nevertheless, Noreen's view is still preferred by some scholars. Kuhn, writing in 1968, agreed with Noreen, on the grounds that the *Lex Baiuvariorum* described how warriors in single combat should fight wearing only a loincloth or belt.¹³⁶ Kuhn believed that *berserkir* were the same as the duellists described in the *Lex Baiuvariorum* and the same as the Old Frisian *berskinze cempa* (warrior with bare thighs).¹³⁷ These people were legal duellists and Kuhn related the Latin-derived *cempa* (from *campus*, meaning 'a field of combat' in this instance) to ON *kappar* (champions). As further evidence for this, Kuhn also cited an Anglo-Saxon gloss from c.700, which shows *cempa* as Lat *gladiator*.¹³⁸ This indicated to him that *berserkir* derived from the gladiators, whose schools

¹³⁵ CV s.v. *berbakt* and *berfættr*.

¹³⁶ Hans Kuhn, 'Kämpfen und Berserker' *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 2 (1968), 218-227, p.219; *Lex Baiuvariorum*, ed. by Beyerle, pp. 138-40; see 5.3.

¹³⁷ Dirk H. Boutkan and Sjoerd Michiel Siebinga, *Old Frisian Etymological Dictionary* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), s.v. *berskinz(i)e* and *kampa*; see 5.3.

¹³⁸ Hans Kuhn, 'Kämpfen', p. 219.

were to be found in the territory of the Langobards, and that their traditions had migrated northwards.

Where Sveinbjörn Egilsson reconstructed ON **berr* for ‘bear’, Falk and Torp state that ON *berserkr* is derived from ON **beri*, whose feminine equivalent ON *bera* (she-bear) does survive in Old Norse.¹³⁹ Similarly, the diminutive forms *bersi* and *bessi* (bear, little bear), which are also used as male personal names, support this view; as Blaney points out, it is unlikely that male personal names would have been derived from a word for a female animal, at least not in any complimentary or positive sense, so a lost masculine form of the noun is more likely.¹⁴⁰ The reconstructed forms are also supported by the composite forms *berharðr* (tough as a bear) and *berfjall* (bear skin) in Old Norse, so it is not a stretch to posit such a reconstruction, even though it must have been replaced by ON *björn* early in the evolution of the language. Von See also believed that *berserkr* meant ‘wearing a bear shirt’. However, he maintained that Þorbjörn hornklofi had invented both *berserkr* and *ulfhedinn* and that there never were any such warriors as

¹³⁹ H. S. Falk and A. Torp, 1960 *Norwegisch-Dänisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch: mit Literaturnachweisen strittiger Etymologien sowie deutschem und altnordischem Wörterverzeichnis* 2nd edn, 2 vols (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1960), I, p. 70 s.v. *Berserk*.

¹⁴⁰ Blaney, ‘Berserkr’, p. 29; for *Bersi* as a personal name see, for example: Íf, 5, pp. 19 and 76; Íf, 7, pp. 42, 84-86 and 186; and Íf, 8, pp. 233-40, 246-250 and 252-254.

berserkir.¹⁴¹ He does not appear to have taken into consideration the earlier uses of *ulfheðinn* as a personal name or the existence of early cognate forms among the Germanic peoples, as discussed above. He does not discuss how and when ON *björn* supplanted **berr/*beri*. Von See's argument that Þorbjörn hornklofi invented the terms *ulfheðinn* and *berserkr* fails, when we consider how little written material actually survives in Old Norse from the late ninth and early tenth century when Þorbjörn hornklofi lived, through to the thirteenth century when Snorri wrote *Heimskringla*. It is hardly surprising that no further examples exist in the body of surviving literature and inscriptions, because that body of literature is so small. Thus, von See's argument does not seem reasonable. Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon notes that an etymology based on 'ber- "björn" og *serkur*' is more likely than an etymology meaning 'bare shirt', which he describes as 'fremur ólíklegt' (highly unlikely).¹⁴²

Other, more recent dictionaries also prefer this meaning. For example, Bjorvand and Lindeman state that Nw *berserk* 'brukes om historiske forhold og er gjenopptatt fra norr. berserkr [...] som egentlig betyr "bjørne(skin)serk" og så ble navnet på krigere som bar slik' (is used in a historical context and is taken from ON *berserkr* which actually means 'bear(skin) shirt' and so

¹⁴¹ Klaus von See, 'Berserker', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschung*, 17 (1961), 129-135 (p. 133).

¹⁴² Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Orðsifjabók*, p. 52 s.v. *berserkur*.

became the name of the warriors that wore them).¹⁴³ They further state that the first element of *berserkr* derives from PGmc **beran-*, which originally meant ‘brown’, implying that there was a taboo against actually identifying a bear with its correct nomenclature in case doing so summoned the bear to the speaker.

The *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* cites many examples of *berserkir* and provides three separate definitions of the word with examples from Old Norse texts:

1. ‘berserk, warrior with special qualities’;
2. ‘warrior, champion’; and
3. ‘Saracen, person of foreign heathen descent’.¹⁴⁴

This is a safe course to follow but does not contribute directly to the debate about its etymology, although it does expand upon the circumstances in which *berserkr* was used in the literature and hints at the development and use of the term.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes the dispute about the etymology under ‘berserker’ and cites Cleasby and Vigfusson as well as Fritzner as providing the most probable etymology, but also offers an English word ‘baresark’, with the meaning ‘bare shirt’, also derived from *berserkr*:

¹⁴³ Harald Bjorvand and Fredrik Otto Lindeman, *Våre arveord: etymologisk ordbok*, rev. by Harald Bjorvand (Oslo: Novus, 2007), p. 71 s.v. *berserk*.

¹⁴⁴ *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog. A Dictionary of Old Norse*, ed. by Helle Degenbol *et al.*, 4 vols (Copenhagen: 1981-[2004]), II (2000), cols 258-59 s.v. *berserkr*.

¹⁴⁵ See Chapter 4.

‘Berserk –er

Also berserkar, -ir; bersark. Cf. BARESARK. [Icel. *berserkr*, acc. *berserk*, pl. -ir, of disputed etymology; Vigfusson and Fritzner show that it was probably = ‘bear-sark,’ ‘bear-coat.’]’.¹⁴⁶

This etymology does not include more recent discussion, because it was last updated in 1877 but, as I have shown, the debate about the etymology has not progressed significantly since the entry was published.

3.1.3 Conclusion

As this brief examination has shown, there are two proposed etymologies for ON *berserkr*, one meaning ‘bare-shirt’ or ‘without armour’ and the other meaning ‘wearing a bearskin’. The discussion over which is correct continues to this day and the dispute is recognised even in English-language sources like the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It is unlikely we shall ever know when or where ON *berserkr* as a compound noun arose, given that there are pre-Viking Age precursors of its component elements, and thus an equivalent compound noun could have existed, as is the case with *ulfheðinn*. Similarly, both proposed etymologies could have arisen simultaneously, and thus both could be correct for different regions. However, it is possible to identify the more likely option and work on that basis for the initial interpretation. Based on the evidence available, the meaning of ‘wearing a bearskin shirt’ or ‘wearing bearskin armour’ is to be preferred, because the lexical symmetry of its construction with that of *ulfheðinn* indicates a coherent linguistic basis for the

¹⁴⁶ *OED Online* s.v. ‘berserk’.

construction and a parallel development of the two types of warrior. This form is supported by archaeological and art historical evidence.¹⁴⁷ As Cleasby and Vigfusson noted, and as was discussed earlier, the formation of a compound noun from two substantives is more common in Old Norse, thus further reinforcing this conclusion.

With regard to an etymology rooted in ON *berr-* ‘naked’, although not mentioned by any of the scholars discussed in this section, Snorri has a penchant for describing warriors in battle without armour, which may further weaken the argument for using his definition to address the issue of the Viking Age meaning of *berserkr*. One example of this is Hákon góði, a Christian king who reigned in Norway in the mid-tenth century and is described as throwing off his armour at the battle of Fitjar: ‘Hákon konungr hafði þá fylkt liði sínu, ok segja menn svá, at konungr steypði af sér brynjunni, áðr orrosta tóskk’ (King Hákon had then arrayed his troops, and it is said that the king took off his armour before the start of the battle).¹⁴⁸ King Hákon has no evident characteristics of a *berserkr*, but still takes his place in the line of battle and removes his armour before the fight begins. Depictions of *berserkir* in the sagas, including Snorri’s own descriptions of them, are covered in greater detail in Chapter 4, but it suffices to state for now that his predilection for demonstrating the bravery of his characters in this manner indicates a stylistic convention rather than a genuine description. For this reason, arguments based on Snorri’s definition appear weaker than they might

¹⁴⁷ See Chapter 5.

¹⁴⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 186.

otherwise do. As a result, it seems likely that Snorri's definition derives from his understanding of thirteenth-century Icelandic rather than from a genuine tradition reflected in the surviving sagas that have been transmitted through to the present day.

Having discussed the potential for identifying the etymology and the various attempts at doing so, it remains to state that any approach that seeks to produce a single monolithic etymology or definition for the whole of Scandinavia belies the multiplicity of cultures that probably existed at the time. While the image that survives in the popular consciousness is of a single homogeneous Scandinavian culture, regional variations must have existed. Different areas are likely to have had their own traditions and, more importantly for this study, their own understanding of who and what a *berserkr* was. Such variations could have included both unarmoured and bearskin-wearing warriors under the same name in different times or places. Moreover, this study covers a broad time span. Given that language and usage changes with time and given the nature of this study, it is as important to understand what individuals meant or understood by ON *berserkr* at the time and in the place that they were writing, as much as it is important to understand what it might originally have meant.

3.2 *Berserksgangr*

Berserksgangr is possibly the most iconic element in the descriptions of *berserkrir*. It is usually translated into English as 'berserk's fit/fury', although

its etymology does not support this.¹⁴⁹ The component elements of *berserksgangr* are ON *berserkr* which was discussed above, and ON *gangr* (walking, motion or movement). No other usage of ON *gangr* implies or states that it means a fit or frenzy, so it is less likely that *berserksgangr* indicates a fit or frenzy than that it means a way of moving, and that *berserksgangr* could be better translated as ‘the berserk’s movement’ or ‘the berserk’s way of moving’, and by considering it to refer to a way of acting that is appropriate to the role of a *berserkr*.¹⁵⁰ By translating it as ‘frenzy’, scholars are immediately channelling their analysis into a particular mode of thinking, as the topics discussed below demonstrate.¹⁵¹

In the sagas, *berserksgangr* is accompanied by a number of physical signals. *Berserkir* are described as chewing on their shields and howling horribly as is described in Chapter 64 of *Egils saga*: ‘þá kom á hann berserksgangr, tók hann þá at grenja illiliga ok beit í skjöld sinn’ (then the berserk’s movement came over him and he began to howl horribly and to bite his shield).¹⁵² Such descriptions are often stock images that signal a particular

¹⁴⁹ *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*, II, col. 259 s.v. *berserksgangr*.

¹⁵⁰ CV s.v. *gangr*; see also 4.3.4 to 4.3.6 for analysis of *berserksgangr*.

¹⁵¹ See chapter 6 for discussion on how the English translations guide interpretation.

¹⁵² *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* ed. by Sigurður Nordal, Íslensk fornrit, 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), p. 202; for other examples see: Íf, 7, pp. 67, 135-36; Íf, 8, p. 124; and *Eyfirdinga sögur: Víga-Glúms saga, Qgmundar þáttur dytts, Þorvalds þáttur tasalda, Svarfdæla saga, Þorleifs þáttur*

type of encounter in the Icelandic sagas leading to the death of the *berserkr*.¹⁵³ Even though this is a stock description, it has excited the imagination of researchers who have expended a significant amount of effort on working out how *berserkir* achieved *berserksgangr*. However, it is notable that those researchers who have studied the subject have taken as their starting point the view that *berserkir* genuinely went berserk and achieved a state of mind that was different from that of other warriors. None has considered that *berserkir* may not have gone berserk, and none have considered that shield-biting and howling might be a means of achieving an altered state of consciousness rather than symptoms of it.¹⁵⁴

3.2.1 The use of mushrooms to induce *berserksgangr*

The first person to undertake a formal study of *berserksgangr* was Samuel Ödmann, a Swedish theologian, in 1784.¹⁵⁵ He concluded that *berserkir* may have eaten fly agaric mushrooms (*amanita muscaria*) based on his study of the

jarlsskálds, Valla-Ljóts saga, Sneglu-Halla þátr Þorgríms þátr Hallasonar, ed. by Jonás Kristjánsson, Íslensk fornrit, 9 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), pp. 142-43.

¹⁵³ See 4.3.4 and 4.3.5.

¹⁵⁴ See chapter 4 for further discussion of this point.

¹⁵⁵ Samuel Ödmann, 'Försök, at utur Naturens Historia förklara de nordiska gamla Kämpars Berserka-gång', reprinted in *Samuel Ödmanns skrifter och brev med levnadsteckning och kommentar*, ed. by Henning Wijkmark, 2 vols (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonstyrelses Bokförlag, 1925), I, 177-83.

shamanic practices of Siberian tribespeople. Siberian shamans, like many others across the world, use substances like this to induce trance or frenzy, and apparent animal transformation. In Siberia *amanita muscaria* is also used for orgiastic intoxication more generally.¹⁵⁶ The symptoms resulting from the ingestion of *amanita muscaria* appear to have been an ecstatic trance and a pale face, although a flushed face is also recorded, as is trembling.¹⁵⁷ The pale face is reminiscent of Ljótr inn bleiki (Ljótr the pale) in *Egils saga* and *Svarfdæla saga*.¹⁵⁸ Trembling in the limbs superficially resembles descriptions of *berserkir* like Þrum-Ketill in *Fljótsdæla saga*.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, it might be thought that *berserkir* used the mushroom to induce *berserksgangr*.

¹⁵⁶ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 89; and Howard Fabing, 'On Going Berserk: A Neurochemical Enquiry', *The Scientific Monthly*, 83.5 (1956), 232-37 (pp. 232-34).

¹⁵⁷ Fabing, 'On Going Berserk', pp. 232-34

¹⁵⁸ Íf, 2, p. 201; and Íf, 9, p. 135.

¹⁵⁹ *Austfirðinga sögur: Þorsteins saga hvíta, Vápnfirðinga saga, Þorsteins þátr stangarhöggs, Qlkofra þátr, Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, Droplaugarsona saga, Brandkrossa þátr, Gunnars þátr Þiðrandabana, Fljótsdæla saga, Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar, Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar, Þorsteins þátr austfirðings, Þorsteins þátr sögufróða, Gull-Ásu-Þorðar þátr*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk fornrit, 11 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1950), p. 220.

In 1885, Schübeler came to much the same conclusion as Ödmann.¹⁶⁰ Schübeler was a physician and botanist, who believed that the symptoms of the *berserksgangr* were clearly indicative of intoxication. Looking to his own field of expertise for an answer, he decided that *berserkir* must have taken *amanita muscaria* to induce *berserksgangr*. He argued against an alcohol-induced state because alcohol produces quite different effects in people, while other drugs like opium and cannabis were not known in Scandinavia at this time.

This theory gained favour and was not challenged until 1928, when the Norwegian historian of Norse medicine Fredrik Grøn published an article in which he disagreed with Ödmann's and Schübeler's hypothesis.¹⁶¹ He believed that *berserksgangr* was a self-induced ecstatic fury, enhanced and brought on by the activities of a group of aggressive, psychopathic personalities. He was supported in this by Treichel and von Thielen.¹⁶² Breen records that the publication of this article led to some controversy in the Norwegian press of

¹⁶⁰ F. C. Schübeler, *Viridarium Norvegicum: Norges Væxtrige. Et bidrag til Nord-Europas Natur- og Culturhistorie*, 3 vols (Kristiania: Fabritius, 1885-1889), I (1885), 224-26; F. C. Schübeler, *Die Pflanzenwelt Norwegens: Ein Beitrag zur natur- und Culturgeschichte Nord-Europas* (Christiania: A. W. Brögger, 1873-75), pp. 99-101.

¹⁶¹ Fredrik Grøn, 'Berserksgangens vesen og årsaksforhold: en medisinsk-historisk studie', *Det Kongelige Norske Videnskabers Selskab Forhandlinger og Skrifter*, 4 (1929), pp. 27-34; see also 3.2.4.1.

¹⁶² A. Treichel and Friedrich von Thielen referred from Grøn, 'Berserksgangens vesen', pp. 31 and 65, notes 65 and 66.

the time between Grøn and Nordhagen, a Norwegian botanist, who supported the theory that *berserkir* used mushrooms to induce the frenzy.¹⁶³ He also suggests that this debate may have led to a temporary reduction in the popularity of the theory.

The theory re-emerged once more in 1956, when Fabing undertook experiments on convicts at Ohio State Penitentiary to assess the effects of *amanita muscaria*.¹⁶⁴ His goal was to determine whether that might have been the means by which *berserkir* went berserk. Fabing had isolated bufotenine as the active agent in *amanita muscaria* that might cause the *berserksgangr*, so he injected the convicts with varying doses of the drug to test their reaction to it. At low levels the drug resulted in a general feeling of well-being and lassitude. Physically, it resulted in the face taking on a slightly red tint. Higher concentrations of the drug led to feelings of restlessness and nausea. Fabing concluded from his trials that:

observations on the intravenous injection of bufotenine in man disclose that it is a hallucinogen and that its psychophysiological effects bear a resemblance to the *Berserksgang* of the Norsemen in the time of the *Sagas*. These observations appear to offer support to the Ødman [sic] - Schübeler contention that the famed fury of the Berserks was what we would call a model psychosis today.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 87.

¹⁶⁴ Fabing, 'On Going Berserk', pp. 232-37.

¹⁶⁵ Fabing, 'On Going Berserk', p. 237.

However, it seems unclear how this might have been the case because, while the convicts on the higher doses might have felt restless and more inclined to move around, they were also stricken with nausea to the extent that they would have been virtually incapacitated in battle. Fabing's research, while interesting and potentially unethical (no mention is made in the article of whether the prisoners were volunteers or not), really only highlights his lack of understanding of the source material and his lack of a critical approach to that same source material.

There are no examples of the consumption of *amanita muscaria* in the Old Norse source material. Schübeler believed that this was because *berserkr* did not consume the mushrooms in public.¹⁶⁶ If such an act were a ritual activity for a cult group, then this is quite possible, and it is unlikely that outsiders would know about it. Given the lack of primary evidence for this practice, the theory is only supported by comparative studies in other cultures, such as Ödmann's own work on Siberian shamanic practice. Although largely dismissive of the theory that *berserkr* used mushrooms, Breen does note two examples of soldiers using mushrooms in battle that might support it.¹⁶⁷ In 1814, Swedish troops used mushrooms to steel themselves for battle with effects that resembled the symptoms of *berserksgangr* as described in *Ynglinga*

¹⁶⁶ F. C. Schübeler, *Viridarium Norvegicum*, I (1885), 26

¹⁶⁷ Breen, 'The Berserkr', pp. 89-90.

saga: frothing at the mouth, biting and generally wild behaviour.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, towards the end of the Second World War some Soviet soldiers used mushrooms to induce battle rage as they advanced through Hungary.¹⁶⁹ Again the symptoms were similar to *berserksgangr*, with the addition of a note that those soldiers who had consumed *amanita muscaria* became extremely tired and fell asleep when the effects wore off. The problem with these examples is that they are isolated examples and the evidence for the Swedish example is anecdotal. Therefore they may not be relied upon and it is entirely possible in the Swedish case that ingestion of the mushrooms, if it occurred at all, was influenced by Ödmann's theory in the first place.

Although the symptoms particular to the ingestion of *amanita muscaria* resemble some descriptions of *berserksgangr* in the sagas, they do not resemble all descriptions of *berserkir*, and, as Breen has shown, those *berserkir* that do have a fit resembling intoxication with *amanita muscaria* are atypical *berserkir*.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, the effects of intoxication take time to appear, yet Old Norse literature reports spontaneous occurrences of *berserksgangr* at times of great stress or physical exertion, such as overcomes

¹⁶⁸ C. Th. Mörner, 'Några erfarenhetsrön om de högre svamparna: Kritiskt öfversikt', *Upsala läkareförenings förhandlingar*, n.s. 24.1-2 (1918-19), 1-57 (p. 20 n.1), referred from Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 90.

¹⁶⁹ Stella Kuylenstierna-Andrassy, *Pustan brinner* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1948), p. 93, referred from Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 90.

¹⁷⁰ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 91.

Angantýr during the battle at Sámsey.¹⁷¹ Such descriptions do not accord with the premeditated nature of any drug-based fit, suggesting that *amanita muscaria* was not at the root of *berserksgangr*. Taken together with the results of Fabing's research and the lack of direct evidence the theory that *berserkir* used *amanita muscaria* to induce *berserksgangr* remains largely unsubstantiated and also seems unlikely on the grounds of the physiological effects of intoxication by *amanita muscaria*. Thus some people may have used *amanati muscaria* for recreational or ritual purposes during the Viking Age, but the evidence does not support the view that there was any systematic usage by *berserkir* to induce *berserksgangr* before or during battle.

3.2.2 Alcohol as a trigger for *berserksgangr*

The use of alcohol to induce *berserksgangr* was first suggested in the late eighteenth century by Hans Jacob Wille, a Norwegian theologian and priest, who suggested that *berserksgangr* was the same as *ølkveis*, a *Nynorsk* word that nowadays means 'hangover', but seems to have also included running amok while drunk as an older meaning: 'Ølqveisa er formodentlig de Gamles Berserker gang, og bestaaer i Rasenhet, efterat man har været drukken af heedgaet Øl' (Ølqveisa is presumably the ancients' berserk fit and consists of fury, after one has become drunk on strong beer).¹⁷² He goes on to add that it

¹⁷¹ *Fsn*, II, 251.

¹⁷² Hans Jacob Wille, *Beskrivelse over Sillejords Præstegjeld i Øvre-Telemarken i Norge: tilligemed et geographisk Chart over samme* (København: Gyldendal, 1786), pp. 273-74.

can be cured by drinking olive oil or wormwood extract, although these cures are not known for *berserksgangr* from the sagas.

A century later, Poestion, the Austrian scholar and Scandinavianist, also promoted the idea that alcohol was at the root of *berserksgangr*.¹⁷³ Following Poestion, a number of other scholars, including Bugge, Grøn and Winge came to the same conclusion.¹⁷⁴ This might seem like a reasonable theory, because alcohol is perceived to be at the root of much violence in modern society, but there is a lack of incidents in the sagas describing *berserkir* using alcohol.¹⁷⁵ Where alcohol is used, it is generally in a social context, such as in the case of Þórir þomb and Qgmundr illi in chapter 19 of *Grettis saga*, and its consumption appears to be from thirst or an aspect of everyday social life, not as part of a cultic ritual. The author of *Grettis saga* comments that the *berserkir* drink enough to get tired, not that they drink until

¹⁷³ Josef Calasanz Poestion, ‘Berserker’, in *Aus Hellas, Rom und Thule: Cultur- und Literaturbilder*, 2nd edn (Leipzig: Friedrich, 1884), pp. 129-48.

¹⁷⁴ Alexander Bugge et al., *Norges historie fremstillet for det norske folk*, 12 vols (Christiania: Aschehoug [Nygaard], 1908-17), I.2, Alexander Bugge (1909-10), p. 113; Grøn, ‘Berserksgangens vesen’, p. 18; Paul Winge, *Den norske sindssygelovgivning: Forelæsninger* (Christiania: Brøgger, 1901), p. 24.

¹⁷⁵ Anne Fox, ‘Sociocultural Factors that Foster or Inhibit Alcohol-related Violence’ in *Alcohol and violence: exploring patterns and responses* (Washington, D.C.: International Centre for Alcohol Policies, 2008), pp. 1-28; Kenneth E. Leonard, ‘The Role of Drinking Patterns and Acute Intoxication in Violent Interpersonal Behaviors’, in *Alcohol and violence*, pp. 29-55.

berserksgangr comes upon them: ‘Þá sér Grettir, at þeir gerask mœddir nokkut af drykknum’ (Then Grettir saw that they were becoming rather tired from the drinking).¹⁷⁶ The fact that they drink until they are tired without undergoing *berserksgangr* indicates that the alcohol was not considered to be a direct cause of *berserksgangr* by the author of *Grettis saga*.

As with the *amanita muscaria* theory, the main problem with this theory is a lack of evidence within the available source material. Given that the sagas make no mention of alcohol causing *berserksgangr*, even though *berserkr* are described drinking it, there is little reason to believe that it actually did.

3.2.3 *Berserksgangr* as a type of physical illness

Epilepsy, Paget’s disease and rabies have all been suggested as potential causes of *berserksgangr* as is discussed below. Some descriptions of *berserksgangr* show that the Icelanders considered it to be an illness that could be controlled or cured, as in the example of Þórir Ingimundarson. Chapter 37 of *Vatnsdæla saga* introduces Þórir and his brothers and, in a discussion about which of them is foremost, Þórir states that he is the least of them because ‘á mik kemr berserksgangr jafnan, þá er ek vilda sízt’ (the *berserkr*’s fit comes over me even when I least want it).¹⁷⁷ The fit is unwelcome to Þórir, so he bargains with his brother Þorsteinn to have it removed, because Þorsteinn

¹⁷⁶ Íf, 7, p. 66.

¹⁷⁷ Íf, 8, p. 97; he is also mentioned as suffering from *berserksgangr* in *Landnámabók*, p. 223.

thinks he knows a way: ‘Nú vil ek heita á þann, er sólina hefir skapat, því at ek trúi hann máttkastan, at sjá ótími hverfi af þér; [...] en berserksgangr kom aldri síðan á Þóri’ (Now I will call on the one that shaped the sun, because I believe him to be the strongest, to ensure the fit leaves you; and the *berserkr*’s fit never afterwards came over Þórir).¹⁷⁸ Thus, the illness is charmed out of Þórir with divine aid. This shows that *berserksgangr* was thought to be curable in some instances, and suggests that *berserksgangr* was used more generally to describe illnesses with physical symptoms that resembled the pre-battle activities of a *berserkr*.

3.2.3.1 Epilepsy

The idea that epilepsy might be the cause of some cases of *berserksgangr* was first mooted by Faye: ‘Den saakaldte Bersærksgang opfattes oftere i Sagaerne som en slem Sygdom. Stundom maa man, forekommer det mig, ved Beskrivelsen af saadanne Tilfælde nærmest tenke paa en Form af maniakal Epilepsi’ (The so-called *berserksgangr* is found more often in the sagas as a nasty illness. Sometimes one must, it seems to me, really think of a form of manic epilepsy based on the description of such events).¹⁷⁹ Although he identified it as a form of epilepsy, he also stated that this identification did not fit all examples of *berserksgangr* and that he thought that poisoning by fly

¹⁷⁸ Íf, 8, pp. 97-8.

¹⁷⁹ Anton Ludvig Faye, *Oplysninger om Forhold og Skikke vedrørende Svangerskab og Fødsel hos de gamle Nordboere: Aftryk fra N. Mag. F. Lægeev. 15 B. 10-12 H.* (Kristiania: Det Steenske Bogtrykkeri, 1886), pp. 84-85, n. 5.

agaric mushrooms was probably the cause of the other episodes found in Old Norse literature. Following Faye, Grøn and Winge also considered the idea of epilepsy as a root cause and found it plausible.¹⁸⁰

This theory is based on similarities between the symptoms of psychomotor epilepsy and *berserksgangr*. Such epileptic fits can include frothing at the mouth, impaired speech that might be construed as howling, rage and loss of motor control. However, epileptic fits are not sufficiently reliable that one might control their appearance and effect. They are also too often debilitating; a *berserkr* would not be able to function properly while undergoing a fit. Furthermore, an examination of Old Norse shows that words already exist within the lexicon for epilepsy, such as ON *brotfall* (an epileptic fit).¹⁸¹ The *Ældre Borgarþings-Christenret* legislates for epilepsy and in a much less stringent fashion than *Grágas* does for *berserksgangr*. This could be accounted for by the fact that the former is a Norwegian law code, while the latter is Icelandic, but it could also demonstrate recognition of differences between epilepsy and *berserksgangr*.¹⁸² *Brotfall* occurs in Old Norse literature too, so it seems likely that a difference was recognised between epilepsy and

¹⁸⁰ Winge, *Den norske sindssygelovgivning*, p. 24; and Grøn, ‘Berserksgangens vesen’, p. 48-49.

¹⁸¹ CV and ONP s.v. *brot-fall*.

¹⁸² *Norges Gamle Love indtil 1387*, ed. by R. Keyser and P. A. Munch, 5 vols (Christiania: Grondahl, 1846-1895) IV, ed. by Gustav Storm (1885), 68; *Grágás: Konungsbók genoptrykt efter Vilhjálmur Finsens udgave 1852*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1974), p. 23.

berserksgangr and that epilepsy was not thought to be a cause.¹⁸³ Taking all this into consideration, epilepsy is unsatisfactory as a general explanation for the cause of *berserksgangr*.

3.2.3.2 Paget's Disease

In 1995, Byock suggested that Egill Skallagrímsson suffered from Paget's disease.¹⁸⁴ This disease causes thick bone growth, headaches and loss of hearing. Byock's argument that Egil suffered from this disease hinges on descriptions of him within his saga, which differ from the norm and indicate these symptoms. Egil appears to have been physiologically similar to his father and grandfather before him, who were both *berserkir*.¹⁸⁵ However, Byock makes no claim that this disease might be the cause of *berserksgangr*, although some, particularly on the internet, quote it as doing so: 'U.S. professor Jesse L. Byock claims (in *Scientific American*, 1995) that berserker rage could have

¹⁸³ CV s.v. *brotfall*; for examples, see *Biskupa sögur II: Hungrvaka, Þorláks saga byskups in elzta, Jarleinabók Þorláks byskups in forna, Þorláks saga byskups yngri, Jarleinabók Þorláks byskups önnur, Þorláks saga byskups C, Þorláks saga byskups E, Páls saga byskups, Ísleifs þátrr byskups, Latínubrot um Þorlák byskup*, ed. by Ásdis Egilsdóttir, *Íslensk fornrit*, 16 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), pp. 94, 98, 208 and 269.

¹⁸⁴ Jesse Byock, 'Egil's Bones', *Scientific American*, 272 (January 1995), pp. 82-87.

¹⁸⁵ Íf, 2, pp. 5 and 80.

been a symptom of Paget's disease'.¹⁸⁶ This is an incorrect interpretation of what Byock describes, and it seems highly unlikely that Paget's disease was sufficiently widespread throughout Scandinavia to have been the cause of *berserksgangr* in every *berserkr*.

3.2.3.3 Rabies

Breen discussed the similarities between rabies and *berserksgangr* in detail.¹⁸⁷ He shows that Saxo used *rabies* as one of the Latin terms for *berserksgangr* and also that Snorri described rabies in similar terms to the ones he used to describe *berserksgangr*. The similarity between the symptoms of the two is quite striking with foaming at the mouth, wild convulsions, howling and gnashing of the teeth being cited as common to both. In *Magnúss saga blinda ok Haralds gilla* there is a description of rabid dogs, and, as Breen shows, the description of these rabid dogs is stylistically similar to the descriptions of *berserkir* in the sagas.¹⁸⁸ The fact that *berserkir* are described as 'galnir sem hundar' (mad as dogs) in *Eyrbyggja saga* suggests that this stylistic parallel

¹⁸⁶ This quotation is not attributed and is propagated on a number of websites including <<http://en.allexperts.com/e/b/be/berserker.htm>> [Accessed 21 October 2009]

¹⁸⁷ Breen, 'The Berserkr', pp. 95-96.

¹⁸⁸ Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla III*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit, 28, 3rd edn (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2002), p. 289.

was not restricted to Snorri's work alone.¹⁸⁹ Reichborn-Kjennerud and Grön picked up on the descriptions of *berserkir* as mad dogs, and mooted the idea that rabies and *berserksgangr* were related, particularly because of the outbreak of rabies during the reign of Haraldr gilli.¹⁹⁰ However, after consideration neither concluded that this was actually the case. The relationship between rabid dogs and *berserkir* seems to have been a metaphorical rather than a physical one, and it is unlikely that any *berserkir* actually underwent *berserksgangr* directly as a result of contracting rabies.

3.2.3.4 Conclusions regarding physical illness as a cause of *berserksgangr*

None of the illnesses discussed above has been convincingly promoted as a general cause of *berserksgangr*. Each of them might apply under certain circumstances, but it seems unlikely that a *berserkr* could induce an epileptic fit to order, or that there were sufficient sufferers of Paget's disease in Scandinavia to supply the need of all the jarls and kings for *berserkir*.

¹⁸⁹ *Eyrbyggja saga: Brands þátr orva. Eiriks saga rauða. Grænendinga saga. Grænendinga þátr*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þorðarson, Íslenzk fornrit, 4 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1985), p. 61.

¹⁹⁰ I. Reichborn-Kjennerud, 'Vår eldste medisin til middelalderens slutt', in *Medisinens Historie i Norge*, I. Reichborn-Kjennerud, Fr. Grøn and I. Kobro (Oslo: Grøndahl, 1936; repr. Oslo: Kildeforlaget, 1985), p. 36; Dr F. Grön, *Altnordische Heilkunde* (Haarlem: Bohn, 1908), pp. 102-03.

Therefore, it is probable that, while isolated incidences of people showing symptoms that appear similar to *berserksgangr* may have occurred, a physical explanation as a cause of *berserksgangr* is not applicable in the majority of cases. Instead, *berserksgangr* was used not just of the actions of *berserkir*, but also as a catch-all term to describe the symptoms of people with illnesses that were similar to *berserksgangr*.

3.2.4 The psychology of *berserksgangr*

In addition to physical illnesses, psychological causes of *berserksgangr* have been sought, although fewer researchers have studied this aspect of it.

Shamanism has been included here as a psychological cause, because it relates to an alternative state of mind, which people can achieve through trance or the use of drugs.

3.2.4.1 Sociopathy and psychotic episodes as causes of *berserksgangr*

Research into the psychology of *berserkir* was first undertaken in the early twentieth century by Güntert, Grøn and Reichborn-Kjennerud.¹⁹¹ Grøn, writing in 1908, addressed the issue when he wrote that *berserksgangr* was an outward expression of a criminally violent psychotic personality such as would have

¹⁹¹ Grøn, *Altnordische Heilkunde*, pp. 122-24; Hermann Güntert, *Über altisländische Berserker-Geschichten* (Heidelberg: Hörning, 1912), p. 27;

Grøn, 'Berserksgangens vesen', pp. 43-58; Reichborn-Kjennerud, 'Vår eldste medisin', p. 55.

been created by the violence of the Viking Age.¹⁹² He emphasised that this was a function of temperament rather than mania, but also pointed out that descriptions of chieftains as well as *berserkir* indicate such a temperament in both groups.¹⁹³ However, in the case of *berserkir*, Grøn goes further and states that the state of mind achieved by *berserkir* was a psychosis that has much in common with Malays that run amok, a conclusion that he does not make of the chieftains: ‘Wenn wir unbefangen die Berichte von dem „berserksgangr” genauer analysieren, lässt sich der Zustand kaum anders erklären als eine eigenartige acute Psychose, die gewisse Berührungspunkte mit dem Amoklaufen der Malayen darbietet’ (If we impartially analyze the reports of *berserksgangr* more precisely, the state can hardly be explained, except as a peculiarly acute psychosis that shows certain similarities with the amok of the Malays).¹⁹⁴ He suggested that it was not a single psychological disorder, but rather several similar ones with varying triggers such as stress, physical exertion or the sight of blood, but all resulting in the same outcome.¹⁹⁵ Like Grøn, Güntert suggested that the attitudes that led to *berserksgangr* were an integral part of the time and that this explained the strength and fury of *berserkir*, much like Samson in the Old Testament.¹⁹⁶ This theory may be

¹⁹² Grøn, *Altnordische Heilkunde*, pp.122-24.

¹⁹³ Grøn, *Altnordische Heilkunde*, p. 124.

¹⁹⁴ Grøn, *Altnordische Heilkunde*, p.124; Grøn, ‘Berserksgangens vesen’, pp. 40-41.

¹⁹⁵ Grøn, *Altnordische Heilkunde*, p.124.

¹⁹⁶ Güntert, *Über altisländische Berserker-Geschichten*, p. 27.

reinforced by Wills' recent research, which suggests that living conditions and the quest for status in Scandinavia during the Viking Age may have induced greater levels of testosterone in people, which would have resulted in a more violent society.¹⁹⁷ This is particularly relevant for *berserkir*, who are depicted as conscious of their status and always willing to fight to maintain or advance it, as, for example, those *berserkir* that return at Yuletide and go around the hall challenging everyone.¹⁹⁸

One interesting area of research that could shed light on how sociopathic or psychotic episodes worked is research undertaken on street gangs in Glasgow in the 1960s.¹⁹⁹ Essentially, if Grøn was right then some groups of *berserkir* may have functioned a lot like a sociopathic gang. In such a gang, the most psychotically irrational person, the one that is most willing to take excesses of irrational behaviour to an extreme, will be dominant. The gang members followed suit as best they could, creating a situation where each eggs the others on to the same extremes. In this way the entire group would exceed the normal bounds of civilised behaviour. Griffith has suggested that this may account for tales of outlaw groups of *berserkir* where Old Norse literature uses the term synonymously with ON *vikingr*.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Tarrin Wills, 'Testosterone, Aggression and Status in Early Northern Literature', *Northern Studies*, 44 (2013), 60-79.

¹⁹⁸ See 4.4.2.

¹⁹⁹ James Patrick, *A Glasgow Gang Observed* (London: Methuen, 1973).

²⁰⁰ Griffith, *Viking Art of War*, pp. 135-36; see 4.4.4.

Following World War One Grøn developed his theory further by incorporating psychological advances made as a result of that war.²⁰¹ He deduced from these studies that *berserksgangr* was a derangement resulting from stress, aggression and fear. This mix of fear and aggression, when examined in modern subjects, can result in symptoms that resemble those of *berserksgangr* and Breen suggests that the egging on (ON *eggja*) of *berserkir* may have heightened that state.²⁰² Given the state of mind of the *berserkir* to start with, it seems likely that they would quickly achieve *berserksgangr*, when subjected to such encouragement, if this were indeed its cause. As Ellis Davidson notes, while drink or drugs could have affected the state of mind of *berserkir*, it is not that hard to ‘stir up a band of tough and highly-trained youths into a state of murderous rage and fearless confidence’.²⁰³

3.2.4.2 Shamanism

A shaman is a person that is believed to have direct access to, or influence in, the spirit world.²⁰⁴ This person achieves this access through a trance state, which can occasionally be induced by the ingestion of psychoactive substances.²⁰⁵ As Breen notes, shamans undergo trance states that can include

²⁰¹ Grøn, ‘Berserksgangens vesen’, p. 52.

²⁰² Breen, ‘The Berserkr’, p. 100.

²⁰³ H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), pp. 87-88.

²⁰⁴ *OED Online* s.v. ‘shaman’.

²⁰⁵ See 3.2.1.

crying like animals, shaking and the ability to walk on hot coals without harm, among other effects.²⁰⁶ The symptoms of the trance are similar to the effects of *berserksgangr* as described in Old Norse literature, and so it might be thought that *berserkir* were a type of shaman or used shamanistic practices to achieve their ends, especially when one considers that ecstatic trances can affect large groups of people simultaneously.²⁰⁷ However, Old Norse literature does not describe any such practices beyond *berserksgangr* and does not record an overt religious role for *berserkir*, although Snorri does refer to them as Óðinn's men, implying that they have a special connection with the deity. For this reason, Eliade omitted *berserkir* from his study of world shamanism; he believed that their role was primarily military and not religious.²⁰⁸ Höfler and Peuckert both viewed *berserksgangr* as an exclusively ecstatic practice, 'a manifestation of shamanism or initiatory ecstasy', as Breen notes.²⁰⁹ Although he does not go as far as to state that *berserkir* were shamans, he does consider shamanism to be 'of taxonomic value when analysing berserksgangr' but he also states

²⁰⁶ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 99; Otto Höfler, 'Über germanische Verwandlungskulte', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 73 (1936), 109-15 (p. 115) p. 115; Will-Erich Peuckert, *Geheimkulte* (München: Wilhelm Heyne, 1988), pp. 88-100.

²⁰⁷ Hallvard Lie, 'Jorvikferden: Et vendepunkt i Egil Skallagrímssons liv', *Edda*, 46 (1947), 145-248.

²⁰⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (London: Arkana, 1989), p. 385.

²⁰⁹ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 99.

definitively that *berserksgangr* was an ecstatic practice and that *berserkir* achieved an ecstatic state. Descriptions in the sagas might superficially support this view, but it is probably making the case too strongly, and, as with other researchers' work, it is predicated on the idea that *berserkir* actually did achieve a state of mind that was different in some manner from other warriors in their society.

3.2.4.3 *Berserksgangr* as combat stress or post-traumatic stress disorder

Berserk fury has been little examined in modern clinical studies. Simón argued for a new psychological disorder called berserker/ blind rage syndrome in 1987.²¹⁰ He defined it as a dissociative disorder that involved episodes of loss of control and extreme violence. He also stated that it was probably the basis for 'the famous Berserker Vikings'.²¹¹

Shay, a psychiatrist working with American combat veterans of the Vietnam War, identified berserk fits among his patients and related those to *berserkir*.²¹² These berserk fits were triggered by betrayal, sudden bereavement, a sense of being trapped or overrun, or when faced with apparent certain death, and they resulted in a state of mind where the individual felt they

²¹⁰ Armando Simón, 'The berserker/blind rage syndrome as a potentially new diagnostic category for the DSM-III', *Psychological Reports*, 60 (1987), 131-135.

²¹¹ Simón, 'berserker/blind rage syndrome', p. 131

²¹² Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character* (London: Scribner, 2003), pp. 77-99.

had nothing left to lose, so they just attacked and killed until there was nothing left to kill or they were dead.²¹³ As one veteran whom Shay recorded put it: ‘I really loved fucking killing, couldn’t get enough. For every one that I killed I felt better. Made some of the hurt went away’.²¹⁴ He also records that one veteran who went berserk had to be tied up by his own men and carried to the rear, because he was so far out of control. In the berserk state the soldiers became like animals in their own estimation, as one veteran declared: ‘I became a fucking animal. I started fucking putting fucking heads on poles. Leaving notes for the motherfuckers. Digging up fucking graves. I didn’t give a fuck anymore’.²¹⁵ They also felt powerful, like gods, and they became disconnected from the rest of humanity, not caring if their colleagues were hurt as a result of their actions, provided that they could take the fight to the enemy as fast as possible. The berserk soldiers even divested themselves of anything that impeded them, such as their helmets and flak jackets, much like *berserkir* who were supposed to throw off their armour before battle. Shay suggests that the symptoms of the berserk soldier may come from adrenaline and neurochemical changes in the brain caused by the release of opiate-like substances, but that this cannot yet be proved because it would require blood samples from a soldier in the berserk state.²¹⁶ The release of these chemicals into the body can also cause permanent physiological changes, such that once a

²¹³ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, pp. 77-81.

²¹⁴ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, p. 78.

²¹⁵ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, p. 83.

²¹⁶ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, pp. 91-92.

soldier has once gone berserk, they are more prone to further berserk fits in stressful situations. Shay concluded that ‘on the basis of my work with Vietnam veterans ... the berserk state is ruinous, leading to the soldier’s maiming or death in battle – which is the most frequent outcome – and to lifelong psychological and physiological injury if he survives’.²¹⁷ The damage to the survivors was a form of PTSD that resulted in more than 40% of them becoming excessively violent and enacting that violence at a rate five times that of the civilian population. Superficially, these descriptions resemble *berserkir* in Old Norse literature. *Berserkir* were fierce and could not be controlled. They did not respond well to being challenged and became violent if this happened. They were supposed to throw off their armour before battle and they were supposed to keep attacking until no one was left standing around them. However, the symptoms described are those of people who ‘go berserk’ and the parallels between Shay’s definition and *berserksgangr* in Old Norse literature are not strong, when *berserksgangr* is properly analysed.²¹⁸ That said, it is not improbable that some warriors went berserk in the stress of battle. Likewise, combat trauma might account for some examples of the hall-challenger motif or the *hólmqongumaðr*.²¹⁹ Yet, even when such a high percentage of modern soldiers suffer permanent violent episodes for the rest of their life as a result of combat stress, it is not certain that Viking Age society would engender the same reaction in warriors, because it emphasised and

²¹⁷ Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, p. 98

²¹⁸ See 4.3.

²¹⁹ See 4.4.2 and 4.4.3.

embraced different values resulting in a different type of support network for warriors in the warband. Therefore, it seems unlikely and too simplistic an explanation that warriors suffering from PTSD were the model for *berserkir*.

3.2.4.4 Conclusions regarding psychological causes of *berserksgangr*

Research into the possible psychological causes of *berserksgangr* has explored a more limited range of possibilities than research that examines possible physical causes. Such causes are chiefly related to aberrant behaviour and presuppose that the behaviour of *berserkir* was aberrant. This may be the case by modern standards, but, as Grøn and Güntert have suggested, their behaviour was probably shaped by the society of which they were a part.²²⁰ The suggestion that their behaviour resulted from a particularly aggressive Nordic temperament may explain why such behaviour is not noted in contemporaneous European societies. It is interesting to note that Grøn also associated this aggressive behaviour with chieftains as well as *berserkir*. Wills' theory suggests that this behaviour was a result of increased testosterone among the warrior classes due to competition for status. Social and cultural explanations for *berserksgangr* appear to be the most likely for the reasons just cited. Therefore, it is possible that *berserkir* were the most aggressive men among the warrior class, and their behaviour was governed by the need to maintain their status within a pagan warband.

²²⁰ Grøn, *Altnordische Heilkunde*, p.124; Güntert, *Über altisländische Berserker-Geschichten*, p. 27.

The evidence for shamanistic interpretations of *berserksgangr* is rather thin on the other hand, and is all comparative, much like the suggestions for physical causes of *berserksgangr*. Old Norse literature relates that *berserkir* were immune to fire and could not be hurt by steel.²²¹ Some shamans can certainly walk on hot coals without harm, thus being immune to fire and they are ascribed other attributes that are similar to *berserkir*, such as howling, but there the resemblance appears to end, endorsing Eliade's view that their martial nature precludes a more formal religious, shamanistic role.

While the psychological explanation appears most convincing as a cause of *berserksgangr* and the shamanic explanation is much less convincing, these theories all still rely on the presupposition that *berserksgangr* was a state of mind that had a cause, rather than it being a means to achieve a proper state of mind preparatory to battle.

3.2.5 Conclusions regarding causes of *berserksgangr*

None of the causes discussed above is completely convincing when the evidence is examined. Grøn's approach to *berserksgangr* as a form of sociopathy or psychotic episode is most convincing, but it still assumes that *berserkir* achieved or lived in a state of mind that was different from the other warriors within their society and that might be termed aberrant.

All of the scholars discussed above have presumed that howling, shield-biting and the other iconic elements of *berserksgangr* are symptoms. None appears to have considered that these apparent symptoms are *berserksgangr*,

²²¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 17.

and that *berserksgangr* is a means to work up aggression before a battle. Modern athletes use many techniques to prepare themselves for their events and there is little reason to suppose that *berserkr* might not have done the same. Therefore, howling and shield-biting might well have been a means of instilling confidence and aggression in themselves rather than a symptom of that confidence and aggression, much like the All Blacks (New Zealand's rugby team), who perform a *haka*, or Maori dance, at the start of each rugby match. When Snækollr began howling and chewing his shield in *Grettis saga*, while still mounted on his horse, he was not ready for battle, because Grettir was able to catch him by surprise, attacking before he was ready, thus demonstrating that Snækollr was only preparing for battle at this point.²²² As such, it seems likely that scholars are confusing cause and effect. The fact that no scholars have examined the etymology and meaning of *berserksgangr* in detail is likely to have enhanced this confusion. Neither of the elements of *berserksgangr* indicates frenzy or fury. Such an interpretation derives from Snorri's *Heimskringla* and from the interpretation of howling and shield-biting as a berserk fit, but *berserksgangr* could simply mean the 'way of the *berserkr*' or the 'movements of the *berserkr*', being simply a set of pre-battle activities that they undertook.²²³ With this in mind, howling, shield-chewing and other similar activities may not be aberrant behaviour at all, being a means to

²²² Íf, 7, pp. 135-36.

²²³ See 4.3.4 and 4.3.5.

prepare the *berserkr* for battle instead, while simultaneously encouraging his companions and discouraging his enemies.²²⁴

3.3 The *berserkr* as initiator and cultic warrior

Certain episodes within Old Norse literature describe events that might be construed as initiation rituals. These episodes have been linked to archaeological finds, such as the Torslunda matrices from Öland, Sweden, which appear to depict a warrior at various stages of his progress within society, and to descriptions of Germanic tribes from the first century to the Viking Age.²²⁵ Some scholars have seen in these three a related continuum of ideas about initiation that were remembered but only partially, if at all, comprehended by the Christian authors of Old Norse literature.

Related to this is the theory that *berserkr* were cultic warriors, with their own rituals and rites of passage. If *berserkr* are involved in initiation rituals then it is not a long step to take to relate those initiation rituals to cultic activity. Therefore, this section considers the idea of the *berserkr* as initiator and cultic warrior, and whether this idea is substantive and useful.

Most societies have rituals by which a young person is inducted into, and becomes a full member of, that society.²²⁶ These involve to varying degrees rites of separation, transition and incorporation, where the initiate

²²⁴ See chapters 4 and 5 for further discussion.

²²⁵ See 5.2.1 and 5.4.3.

²²⁶ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual* (London: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 93-95.

moves from a pre-liminal state to a liminal state and then to a post-liminal state as part of the social change.²²⁷ Turner has demonstrated this structure in many aspects of ritual life in his studies of the Ndembu people of north-western Zambia, not least in the installation of a new chief.²²⁸ In this installation rite the chief-elect leaves his pre-liminal life to inhabit a hut away from the village. He takes nothing with him and undergoes ritual humiliation before being installed as chief with great pomp and ceremony.²²⁹ As discussed below, elements of saga narratives resemble this type of ritual.

Initiation rituals were first discussed in relation to Germanic *Männerbünde* by Schurtz in 1902.²³⁰ Blaney notes that, in 1910, Axel Olrik was one of the first to consider the possibility that the sagas contained remnant information about Scandinavian initiation rituals: ‘Already Axel Olrik realized that the sagas, even unhistorical ones, contained much information about early Germanic customs’.²³¹ Blaney states that this explanation sheds light on a number of puzzling passages that appear to make little sense otherwise. He cites Weiser’s and Höfler’s examination of chapters 6 to 8 of *Völsunga saga* in

²²⁷ Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 10-11.

²²⁸ Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and anti-structure* (New York: De Gruyter, 1995), pp. 94-106.

²²⁹ Turner, *Ritual Process*, pp. 100-02.

²³⁰ Heinrich Schurtz, *Altersklassen und Männerbünde: Eine Darstellung der Grundformen der Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Reimel, 1902), pp. 355-56.

²³¹ Blaney, ‘Berserkr’, p. 93.

this regard.²³² In the 1920s and 1930s, Weiser and Höfler determined that *Männerbünde* were likely to have existed, although their work must be treated carefully because it fits within the wider agenda of German nationalism at that time.²³³ Weiser examined the information available about Germanic tribes and compared it with anthropological work on initiation rites among tribal societies. Through comparison with the Icelandic sagas, she concluded that *berserkir* were originally cultic warriors of a type that would have been found in the Germanic *Männerbünde*. Höfler took Weiser's work as his starting point and used archaeological evidence to broaden the scope of the research. As a result of this research, they concluded that *berserkir*, as cultic warriors, probably had initiation rituals that would have remained secret from the rest of society. The general populace may have been aware of these rituals, but would have known little about them with the result that, once *berserkir* were no longer a part of society, their rites and rituals would have been lost. Despite this, Höfler and Weiser found clues regarding initiation rituals in Viking Age Scandinavia within the sagas themselves. Although not described specifically as initiation rituals these episodes were structured in the format outlined by van

²³² Blaney, 'Berserkr', pp. 94-96; Lilly Weiser, *Altgermanische Jünglingsweihen und Männerbünde: Ein Beitrag zur deutschen und nordischen Altertums- und Volkskunde* (Bühl: Konkordia, 1927), pp. 70-71; and Otto Höfler, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (Frankfurt: Moritz Diesterweg, 1934), pp. 190-201.

²³³ Weiser, *Altgermanische Jünglingsweihen*, pp. 80-82; Höfler, *Kultische Geheimbünde*, pp. 340-41.

Gennep with young men travelling from home, being treated poorly and then being accepted after defeating a monster or *berserkr*. Their analysis of chapters 6 to 8 of *Völsunga saga* shows the elements of an initiation ritual where the candidate is first tested. Once he passes the test he is taken into isolation where he is taught what he needs to know, before undergoing a ritual death and rebirth, at which point he is a fully-fledged warrior. In this episode, Signý seeks someone to take revenge for the deaths of her father and all but one of her brothers. She sends her oldest son to Sigmundr, her lone surviving brother, for testing when he is ten, but the boy fails the test and is killed on Signý's advice as is her second son.²³⁴ The youngest, Sinfjötli, is the third and last son to be sent to his uncle (and father) for testing. He passes the tests and lives in the forest with Sigmundr, putting on wolfskin cloaks that turn them into wolves and learning the arts of war in the form of a wolf. At one point he angers his uncle, who bites him in the throat, but then heals him with a magic leaf. After this they take off the wolfskins and are able to take revenge for Signý. The deaths of the first two candidates may be an indication of how serious the testing could be, or it might be an occurrence of folkloric threefold repetition.

In 1945, Danielli identified the *berserkr* as a key figure in an initiation ritual.²³⁵ Like Weiser and Höfler before her, she saw the role of the *berserkr* as being to test the young men and make them prove themselves. She examined a

²³⁴ *Fsn*, I, 120-24.

²³⁵ Mary Danielli, 'Initiation Ceremonial from Norse Literature', *Folklore*, 56.2 (June 1945), 229-245.

group of three stories, two from *Víga-Glúms saga* and one from *Grettis saga*. The two episodes from *Víga-Glúms saga* follow the same pattern as described above. In chapters 2 to 4, Eyjólfur is treated poorly by his hosts until he kills a bear and then the *berserkr*, Ásgautr, while, in chapter 6, Glúmr travels to Norway and is treated poorly by his relatives until he proves himself by driving the *berserkr* Björn járnhauss, from the hall.²³⁶ The episodes from chapters 18, 19 and 21 of *Grettis saga* are rather different, in that Grettir fights first a *haugbúi* (a mound-dweller or type of undead being), then a troop of *berserkir* and finally a bear.²³⁷ Danielli believes that these three fights are equivalent to the fights in *Víga-Glúms saga*. In each case that Danielli examined it was the family's heir that was tested and the testing took place during the winter, with Yuletide being specified in some cases. Wearing a fur or shaggy cloak (ON *feldr* or *loðkápa*) is a feature of these narratives. Eyjólfur wears one when Ívarr returns home and begins to taunt him, Glúmr wears one, and Grettir must retrieve his from the bear he fights. The wearing of a fur cloak is significant, because it is mentioned where the garb of others is not. Blaney notes that these cloaks are a link between the *berserkir* and the candidate that is being tested, with both being clad similarly.²³⁸ Finally, in the cases of Glúmr and Grettir each receives a sword once he has succeeded at his trials. Danielli believed that this was an indication that they have now passed the tests and achieved their majority. The correspondences between these episodes are such

²³⁶ Íf, 9, pp. 6-13 and 16-19.

²³⁷ Íf, 7, pp. 57-71 and 73-78.

²³⁸ Blaney, 'Berserkr', p. 100.

that they could be memories of an ancient tradition and Danielli certainly believed that this was the case. She maintained that the initiation ritual was not a general test, but a test of those of higher birth, who were due to inherit the family estate, because no mention is made of more general testing in this manner. This fits the elite nature of the warband as the top of the social tree in pre-Christian Germanic societies. There would be a tendency for those of higher birth to be accepted into such an organisation with family ties being important for acceptance, but tests still needing to be passed.

Beck's systematic analysis of the Torslunda matrices concluded that they depicted a process of initiation into a warband, thus providing archaeological evidence to support the later literary evidence.²³⁹ These matrices are of sixth- or seventh-century date and were used to make bronze plates that were fitted to helmets as decoration, and perhaps as marks of status because they have only been found in wealthy graves.²⁴⁰ The fourth matrix in the series creates the link to *berserkr* and *ulfheðnar* because it depicts a warrior wearing a full wolfskin together with a one-eyed warrior that has been interpreted as Óðinn.²⁴¹ Blaney wrote that it is unlikely to be a coincidence that artefacts with wolf-warrior motifs have been found across that same broad area

²³⁹ Heinrich Beck, 'Die Stanzen von Torslunda und die literarische Überlieferung', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 2 (1968), 237-50.

²⁴⁰ See 5.2.4, 5.2.5 and 5.2.7 for the Sutton Hoo, Valsgärde and Vendel helmets, which feature helmet plates with designs like those on the Torslunda matrices.

²⁴¹ Blaney, 'Berserkr', pp. 66-67. See also 5.2.1.

of north-western Europe where the names *Wolfhetan* and *Ulfheðinn* occurred most commonly during the eighth and ninth centuries.²⁴² From this he concluded that the link is made between these artefacts and *ulfheðnar*, and through *ulfheðnar* to *berserkir* by association. Although the link is by no means certain, it is convincing, even though there are no extant depictions of warriors in bear skins. The geographic spread of these motifs demonstrates an iconography that must have been common to Germanic peoples in north-western Europe during the sixth and seventh centuries, which also argues for a greater cultural homogeneity than might otherwise be expected.²⁴³

Beck's discussion of the Torslunda matrices identified an ordered thematic progression in them:²⁴⁴

1. The hero in conflict with a wild animal;
2. The hero in conflict with a monster;
3. The hero taking his place in the line of battle; and
4. The hero following his god into battle.

Following this ordering of the motifs, Beck suggested that the warrior must first prove himself against animals and monsters (matrices 1 and 2) before he may stand beside his fellow warriors in the shieldwall (matrix 3), in a position where they would have to fully trust him. This sequence resembles the

²⁴² Blaney, 'Berserkr', p. 69.

²⁴³ See 5.2.

²⁴⁴ See Figure 5.2.

descriptions in the sagas described above: Grettir fights a bear and an undead monster, in addition to a troop of *berserkir*, before he is accepted.²⁴⁵

The fourth matrix is of most interest, because it has been interpreted as one of the *ulfheðnar*, and, as discussed above, the horned figure is likely to be Óðinn. Detailed examination of the matrix has shown that the horned figure has only one eye, which also supports this conclusion.²⁴⁶ The horned figure is in motion and may be interpreted as dancing, although it could also be running into battle. Related to the apparently dancing god on the Toroslunda matrix, is the idea that Óðinn leads the warriors in the weapon dance, by which might be meant either a ritual at the start of battle or the battle itself. Beck relates how the sixth-century author Jordanes described Gothic sacrifices to the war god Mars in his *Getica* (Chapter V), by whom Beck understood Jordanes to mean Óðinn.²⁴⁷ The description of the sacrifices to Mars included weapon sacrifice by hanging them from trees, and the slaying of captives, because the god of war could only be appeased through the shedding of blood. Procopius wrote about how the Goths favoured Ares (Óðinn) and how they considered the best sacrifice to him to be the first captive they had taken in battle, whom they

²⁴⁵ Íf, 7, pp. 57-71 and 73-78.

²⁴⁶ Blaney, 'Berserkr', p. 67.

²⁴⁷ Beck, 'Die Stanzen', pp. 248-49; Iordanis, *Getica*, ed. by Holder, p. 9;

Iordanis, *Getica*, ed. by Mommsen, p. 64.

either hanged or threw among thorns to kill them.²⁴⁸ Beck saw in this connection to Ares a link to the weapon dances of the *Iliad* and also echoes of the epithet 'dancer' that was given to the Indian war-god, Indra.²⁴⁹ He concluded that *ulfheðnar* were especially bound to Óðinn, whose job it was to lead the warriors in the dance or battle, a conclusion that intimately links *berserkir* to Óðinn. Based on this interpretation of the matrices, *ulfheðnar* and *berserkir* may have been members of a cult of Óðinn with a ritual function within the warband in addition to their role as warriors. This ritual function may have included inducting young warriors into the warband and performing pre-battle rituals to ensure the favour of Óðinn.

Pluskowski discussed *ulfheðnar* when writing about the use of animal disguise (wearing animal pelts) as a central part of the ecstatic practices of the Germanic warrior cults / societies.²⁵⁰ He asserted that *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* were one and the same, so his discussion of *ulfheðnar* applies equally to *berserkir*, and concluded that most cases of humans transforming into wolves in Scandinavia can be linked to *ulfheðnar*.²⁵¹ In examining the transformation of the person into an animal, Pluskowski noted that an animal pelt is usually

²⁴⁸ Procopius, *History of the Wars Books V – VI. 15*, ed. by Jeffrey Henderson, trans. by H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, 107, 5 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919; repr. 2006), III, 420-21.

²⁴⁹ Beck, 'Die Stanzen', p. 249.

²⁵⁰ Aleksander Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006), pp. 180-84.

²⁵¹ Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness*, pp. 179-85.

required, as when Sigmundr and Sinfjötli don wolfskins and roam in the form of wolves through the woods in *Völsunga saga*.²⁵² He agreed with Danielli that these episodes in the sagas represent memories of initiation rituals into warrior societies, but commented that there may also have been a shamanic element to the wearing of the pelt, with the animal functioning as a shamanic guardian.²⁵³ The individual could then harness the powers of the animal and use them in a positive social context, such as protecting the kingdom.

Breen addressed the issue of the warrior cult and concluded that it involves such a loose definition of a cult as to be largely useless.²⁵⁴ He identified a problem with the definition of a cult, how it might apply to *berserkr* and also in the circumstances under which the cultic warrior theory was first examined. Breen noted that the term is generally used without any indication of what is actually meant by it. However, he then failed to define a cult himself. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers two definitions that may be appropriate: ‘A relatively small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister’ and ‘A particular form or system of religious worship; *esp.* in reference to its external rites and

²⁵² Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness*, p. 181; ‘Völsunga saga’ in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson 4 vols (Reykjavík: Íslendignasagnaútgáfan, 1959), I, 107-218 (123-24).

²⁵³ Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness*, p. 182.

²⁵⁴ Breen, ‘The Berserkr’, pp. 113-16.

ceremonies'.²⁵⁵ This is a broad definition in its own right, so Breen's criticism stands to some extent.

The next question is whether *berserkir* fit the definition of a cult, based on the descriptions available. *Berserkir* do tend to appear in smaller groups or alone, leaving aside those instances where, as Breen notes it, 'stylistic elephantiasis' occurs and entire armies of them are described, reflecting the inflation of numbers that might be expected of romances as opposed to semi-historical sources.²⁵⁶ They are also regarded as existing on the margins of society, being feared even when part of a king's warband. Their religious beliefs are not expanded upon in Old Norse literature, so it is difficult to test that part of the definition, although Snorri does state that they were Óðinn's men, which implies that he thought they had a religious connection to Óðinn.²⁵⁷

Finally, Breen states that researchers that favoured the cultic approach frequently achieved their ends by 'magnifying, compressing, distorting, altering, and even ignoring evidence as critics saw fit', and he notes that the cultic approach gained favour at a time when interest in glorifying Germanic male prowess was at its height.²⁵⁸ Thus, theories were shaped by the political and social situation in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century, rather than by an objective analysis of the evidence.

²⁵⁵ *OED Online* s.v. 'cult'.

²⁵⁶ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 113.

²⁵⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 17; see also 5.2.

²⁵⁸ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 115.

The main issue that arises when adopting the cultic approach is that it does not fit all depictions of *berserkir* in the sagas. Breen identifies several roles for *berserkir* that he considers to be mutually exclusive.²⁵⁹ Thus *berserkir* in a royal warband such as that of Haraldr hárfagri cannot also be sea-roving Viking *berserkir* or hall-challenging *berserkir*, according to Breen, yet the royal *berserkir* of Hrólfr kraki are also hall-challengers as described above.²⁶⁰ These roles are not as clearly defined or as mutually exclusive as Breen suggests. Although most *berserkir* in the sagas have a single role, that does not mean that they could not have other roles that are not relevant to the needs of the narrative, and are therefore not described. Breen's argument also fails to allow for changes in the meaning of *berserkr* through time, or changes in the understanding of what *berserkir* were. Nevertheless, it does have some validity. Viking Age *berserkir* may have been cultic warriors and the fact that they were linked to Óðinn and appear as small esoteric groups supports this view. However, the use of the term 'cult' does not inform our understanding of them in any particularly useful manner without being more closely defined.

There are certainly problems in identifying initiation rituals from descriptions in Old Norse literature. These descriptions were written down in a Christian context some two hundred years and more after the rituals might have taken place. They are never specifically identified as initiations and are type-scenes within the sagas. They often involve young men travelling abroad to earn their reputations and so are essentially literary topoi designed to

²⁵⁹ Breen, 'The Berserkr', pp. 103-158.

²⁶⁰ See 3.3.

advance the narrative rather than a retelling of ancient rites. However, when examining episodes like the acceptance of Böðvarr bjarki and Hötrr into the warband of Hrólfr kraki, there appears to be sufficient extraneous detail to support the concept of the initiation, because it is more detailed than other similar scenes and that detail is not a literary necessity for the events that follow, as Schjødt notes.²⁶¹ Therefore, this passage appears to retain authentic memories of initiation rituals despite being preserved only in much later manuscripts. Given that initiation rituals are common to most societies, it should not be surprising that pre-Christian Scandinavia had its own rituals, and that select groups of people, in this case *berserkir*, should be involved with those rituals. Their apparent connection to Óðinn suggests that they may have formed groups that had a selection of roles related to the spheres governed by Óðinn.²⁶² One of those roles appears to have been the initiation of some individuals. The problem with this interpretation lies not in the presence of cultic groups within pre-Christian Scandinavian society, but rather in determining to what extent these were initiation rituals rather than coming of age ceremonies, and in linking the iconographic evidence to the literary evidence.²⁶³

²⁶¹ Jens Peter Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and symbolism in pre-Christian Scandinavian religion*, trans. by Victor Hansen, The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilisation, 17 ([n.p.]: The University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008), pp. 52-58.

²⁶² See 4.4.2, 5.2.16 and 5.4.

²⁶³ See 5.2.16.

3.4 The roles of *berserkir* in medieval literature and in society

There have been few studies solely of the role of *berserkir* within Viking Age society. Where this issue has been addressed, it has generally been tangential to the main study as with Danielli's work on initiation ritual.²⁶⁴ Beard and Blaney did focus on the role of the *berserkr*.²⁶⁵ Beard's analysis identified seven roles for *berserkir* in Old Norse literature:²⁶⁶

1. The primitive Germanic or Celtic frenzied fighter;
2. The king's *berserkr* and defender of the realm;
3. The king's *berserkr* but arrogant and unruly;
4. The *hólmǫngumaðr*;
5. The *hólmǫngumaðr* but with a measure of invulnerability;
6. The 'Viking' *berserkr*; and
7. The semi-magical *berserkr*.

These roles involve the *berserkr* living on the edge of or outside general society, even when ostensibly protecting it, as in cases 2 and 3 above. As part of his analysis, Beard identified fifty-one traits that *berserkir* could have,

²⁶⁴ Danielli, 'Initiation Ceremonial', pp. 229-245; see also 3.3.

²⁶⁵ D. J. Beard, 'The *Berserkir* in Icelandic Literature', in *Approaches to Oral Tradition*, ed. by Robin Thelwall, Occasional Papers in Linguistics and Learning, 4 ([n.p.]: New University of Ulster, 1978; repr. 1980), pp. 99-114; Benjamin Blaney, 'The Berserk Suitor: The Literary Application of a Stereotyped Theme', *Scandinavian Studies*, 54 (1982), 279-94.

²⁶⁶ Beard, 'The *Berserkir* in Icelandic Literature', pp. 101-02.

which included this exclusion from mainstream society, as well as holding no property, and being both arrogant and unruly. He then compared these traits with those that saga heroes had, and noted that both heroes and *berserkir* had many similarities, although the ultimate effect upon society of the hero's actions was positive while *berserkir* had a wholly negative effect on society.²⁶⁷ Apart from their effect upon society, the chief point of difference was the animalistic nature and appearance of *berserkir*. Beard suggested that some of the dislike for *berserkir* may have arisen because their uncontrollable fury was the sin of ire, one of the seven deadly sins.²⁶⁸ Having catalogued and noted these differences and similarities, Beard concluded that *berserkir* lived a liminal existence during the Viking Age, and that they were feared and mistrusted even before the advent of Christianity.

Many of the roles that Beard ascribed to *berserkir* are similar, and Blaney provided an alternative type series comprising three roles:²⁶⁹

1. The heathen demon whose sole function is to be defeated by the Christian missionary;
2. the king's bodyguard; and
3. the unwelcome suitor.

Blaney identified this last role as the most common one in the sagas, and it is certainly in this role that most *berserkir* are killed to prove the hero's credentials. Blaney concluded from a limited study of four sagas that the

²⁶⁷ Beard, 'The *Berserkir* in Icelandic Literature', pp. 101-02.

²⁶⁸ Beard, 'The *Berserkir* in Icelandic Literature', p. 104.

²⁶⁹ Blaney, 'The Berserk Suitor', 279-94.

berserk suitor motif served not only to demonstrate the strength and prowess of the hero, but also to provide him with a wife, to foreshadow future events within the saga and occasionally to act as a comic interlude. His work focused solely on the literary *berserkir*, and, unlike Beard, he did not consider what this might mean for understanding the Viking Age *berserkr*.

Breen's systematic examination of the literary roles of *berserkir* identified the same categories that Beard had identified.²⁷⁰ Breen also expanded his analysis to include the more fantastical creatures that were given the same role as *berserkir* in Old Norse literature, such as the *blámaðr* (blue or black man), *haugbúi* (a mound-dweller or type of undead being), troll and giant. While Breen analyses the roles that *berserkir* were given, his focus is on the chronological development of the *berserkr* in Old Norse literature, and in resolving the apparent contradictions that occur when ON *berserkr* can be used positively of the Christian Josaphat, while contemporaneously being used of the *holmgongumaðr* Ljótr inn bleiki in *Egils saga*.²⁷¹ In this he sees a diachronic development of ON *berserkr*, where the negative aspects are transferred to monsters, while the positive aspects may be applied to heroes.²⁷² At the same time, he recognises that the variety of roles encompassed within Old Norse literature precludes a single, simple definition, which he ascribes to 'the tendency of unfettered literary fantasy to engender an ongoing

²⁷⁰ Breen, 'The Berserkr', pp. 103-158.

²⁷¹ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 153; *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga*, p. 185; Íf, 2, p. 201.

²⁷² Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 152-57.

multiplication of [the *berserkr*'s] narrative roles'.²⁷³ While it is possible that the variety of roles performed by *berserkir* in sagas are a result of authorial intervention in the narrative, Breen fails to note that medieval comprehension of the term may well have been more complex and nuanced than he allows for.²⁷⁴

Although these studies define the main patterns evident within the sagas, they do not examine *berserkir* themselves in great detail, and, with the exception of Breen, they do not consider what the variety of roles means in terms of understanding medieval concepts of the *berserkr*. This understanding is valuable as the first step in engaging with *berserkir* as an element of popular culture, and Section 4.4 further expands upon the work discussed here.

3.5 Parallels to the *berserkr* in other cultures

In attempting to understand *berserkir*, scholars have sought similar characters in other cultures. Using these they have sought to construct models for the activities, social status and apparel of the *berserkr*.²⁷⁵ As noted earlier, Ödmann identified *berserksgangr* with the practices of Siberian shamans.²⁷⁶ He also noted the apparent similarity between Malay amoks and *berserkir* under the effects of *berserksgangr*, a similarity that the translator and

²⁷³ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 158.

²⁷⁴ See 4.4.

²⁷⁵ See 5.4 for a discussion of a selection of groups that have been seen as parallels to *berserkir*.

²⁷⁶ See 3.2.1.

Scandinavianist Dasent also pointed out in the nineteenth century.²⁷⁷ These early commentators were less interested in finding models for the practices of *berserkir* than they were on finding out how they went berserk. As the potential source material for parallels is huge, I shall focus primarily on recent studies by Kershaw and Speidel that explicitly explore parallels to *berserkir*, because these studies incorporate the essential elements of such research and provide a full range of such parallels for further reference.²⁷⁸

Kershaw's work seeks to trace the development of *ulfheðnar* and *berserkir* from Indo-European origins to the Viking Age, with a view to explaining some of the mysteries of Óðinn.²⁷⁹ She identified in Óðinn the leader of a band of ecstatic warriors and an army of the dead (the *einherjar*) and found parallels between the practice of sending the young men away from the tribe to prove themselves and the initiation rituals that Danielli identified in

²⁷⁷ Ödmann, 'Försök', p. 179; George Webbe Dasent, *The Story of Burnt Njal* (London: Norroena Society, 1907) p. xix.

²⁷⁸ Kris Kershaw, *The One-eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-) Germanic Männerbünde*, *Journal of Indo-European Studies Monograph*, 36 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of Man, 2000); Michael P. Speidel, 'Berserks: A History of Indo-European "Mad Warriors"', *Journal of World History*, 13.2 (Fall 2002), pp. 253-290; Michael P. Speidel, *Ancient Germanic Warriors: Warrior styles from Trajan's column to Icelandic sagas* (London: Routledge, 2004).

²⁷⁹ See 5.4.1 and 5.4.2 for discussion of the Indo-European *Männerbünde*.

Old Norse literature.²⁸⁰ Kershaw's research identified many examples of societies where the young men took on wolf or dog personae, such as the *cynocephali* of the Lombards, but no bear cults, and it covered a broad geographical and temporal area.²⁸¹ Many of these examples appear to have rights of rapine or pillage and to have had to live without property until they had achieved a particular feat, such as the death of an enemy.²⁸² Kershaw has drawn together many themes related to *berserkir* and created a chronological development of their practices. She uses this to explain the development of Óðinn as a god with particular reference to his missing eye, which she explains as being a symbol for the well from which wisdom may be drawn.²⁸³

Speidel's approach is less esoteric but draws on a wider range of sources. His earlier article took as its basic definition of *berserkir* Snorri's description from *Ynglinga saga*, stating that 'any troops fighting madly or showing off recklessly, but not both, may be called merely berserk-like' and that 'true berserks ... are both naked and mad at the same time'.²⁸⁴ Using this definition, Speidel identified parallels to *berserkir* as early as the Bronze Age and as far afield as Mesopotamia. King Tukulti-Ninurta of Assyria had an epic commissioned to commemorate his campaign against the Hittites.²⁸⁵ The

²⁸⁰ Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, pp. 59-62; see also 3.3.

²⁸¹ See 5.2.1 and 5.2.14 for further discussion of *cynocephali*.

²⁸² Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, pp. 114-17 and 129-130.

²⁸³ Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, p. 274.

²⁸⁴ Speidel, 'Berserks: A History', pp. 253-54.

²⁸⁵ Speidel, 'Berserks: A History', p. 255.

portion of the poem cited by Speidel in translation describes warriors charging furiously into battle without their armour or clothes, while also stating that the gods struck Tukulti-Ninurta's enemies blind and made them terrified. From this Speidel deduced that there were *berserkr*-like warriors present on the campaign, and that they were probably foreign Indo-Europeans, although he made no mention of the possibility of hyperbole and a standardised warrior depiction in the cited epic. Speidel drew parallels with Celtic warriors and the battle rage of Cú Chulainn to show that they too fought as *berserkir*, being naked in battle and attacking recklessly, and also found depictions of Danish, Mycenaean and Sardinian naked warriors, who may have been *berserkir*.²⁸⁶ He stated that these depictions had greater verisimilitude than the Greek art images of naked warriors, because the Greeks were portraying an idealised body, while depictions like the statue of a Celtic warrior from Hirschlanden or the statuette of a Danish warrior from Grevenswænge showed how warriors actually fought in battle.²⁸⁷ In a similar vein, Speidel identified *berserkir* from Greece, Macedonia, Italy, and among the Germanic warriors on Trajan's column which was erected in AD 113 to commemorate Trajan's victory in the Dacian Wars. He does not claim an unbroken tradition of *berserkir* from the earliest times to the Viking Age, but he does seek to show that examples of such behaviour have occurred throughout history. He identifies the berserk style of fighting as an attribute of tribal societies worldwide, where single

²⁸⁶ Speidel, 'Berserks: A History', pp. 259-65; see 5.4.4 for discussion of Celtic battle rage.

²⁸⁷ Speidel, 'Berserks: A History', p. 262.

combat can benefit from this particular mind-set. However, although he discusses *berserkr* as depicted in Old Norse literature, taking them as the model for his examples, at no point does he question Snorri's definition, which he cites at the start. Nor does Speidel consider that warfare had changed by the Viking Age and was no longer tribal. As Hedenstierna-Jonson notes, 'behaviour of this kind would have been counterproductive in the line of battle, where self-control and presence of mind were vital' and this level of self-control was a requirement of the more organised warfare of the Viking Age.²⁸⁸ Thus, using the *berserkr* as an archetype of a 'mad warrior' fails to consider the nature of warfare during the Viking Age in addition to the already tenuous links between *berserkr* and the warrior types that Speidel identifies.

The same criticism that may be levelled at 'Berserks: A History of Indo-European "Mad Warriors"' may also be levelled at Speidel's *Ancient Germanic Warriors*. In this book, he studied only Germanic warriors and identified twenty different warrior styles in eight categories with a view to proving an unbroken warrior tradition that included customs and beliefs as well as a fighting style. The majority of the archetypes were identified from images on Trajan's column which includes depictions of Germanic warriors

²⁸⁸ Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, 'A Brotherhood of Feasting and Campaigning: The success of the northern warrior', in *From Ephesos to Dalecarlia: Reflections on body, space and time in medieval and early modern Europe*, ed. by E. Regner, C. von Heijne, L. Kitzler Áhfeldt and A. Kjellström, Stockholm Studies in Archaeology, 48 (Stockholm: The Museum of National Antiquities, 2009), pp. 43-56 (pp. 49-50).

apparently wearing wolf- and bearskins.²⁸⁹ Speidel identified warriors with theriophoric names, including ‘bear’ names, like the Frankish warrior Ursio, and took these to show that earlier analogues of the *berserkr* were known to the Germanic peoples.²⁹⁰ He also discussed how ferocity and courage were traits valued by the Germanic peoples, as would be expected given the heroic ethos of those societies. However, he presumes that being a *berserkr* meant fighting in a berserk frenzy, and that all of the warrior styles that he identifies fought in this manner.

The identification of parallels to *berserkir* is comparatively easy if one considers them to have fought in a berserk frenzy.²⁹¹ The language of heroic combat almost requires warriors to be depicted thus, as Speidel’s examples show. However, the extent to which they may be used as models for *berserkir* in the Viking Age is limited, because bestial, martial behaviour does not necessarily have to form a coherent unbroken tradition. It is probable that it did in fact occur in many different societies without influence from other societies where it evolved as a warrior paradigm. This is proven by the fact that Aztec *quachics*, to take just one example, resembled *berserkir* because they danced naked and were to be found in the most dangerous part of the battle, as well as being considered mad. Despite their superficial resemblance to the surviving descriptions of *berserkir*, they could not have been influenced by Germanic

²⁸⁹ Speidel, *Ancient Germanic Warriors*, p. 18.

²⁹⁰ Speidel, *Ancient Germanic Warriors*, pp. 43-44.

²⁹¹ See 5.4 for examples.

culture because their geographical and temporal distance from *berserkir* precludes that influence.²⁹²

3.6 The *berserkr* as shapeshifter

Berserkir and *ulfheðnar* are sometimes associated with the ability to transform into animals, as is assumed of Kveld-Ulfr in *Egils saga*, because he was ‘mjök hamrammr’ (literally ‘very shape-shifty’ but possibly best translated as ‘a great shape-shifter’).²⁹³ Both are animal warriors and both are closely associated with the vocabulary of shape-shifting, which has led some to consider that they were werewolves.

In 1856, Maurer published a discussion about *berserkir*, which emphasised their connection to shape-shifters.²⁹⁴ The basis for his relating *berserkir* to shape-shifters was the presence in Old Norse of words like *hamrammr* (able to change shape), *hamremi* (the state of being *hamrammr*), *eigi einhamr* (not of one skin) and *at hamast* (to assume the shape of an animal). These expressions refer to the ability of a person to adopt an animal persona, and Maurer believed that, although the Old Norse examples involved the ability *at skipta hqumum* (change skins), this did not mean that *ulfheðnar*

²⁹² Speidel, ‘Berserks: A History’, pp. 275 and 285.

²⁹³ Íf, 2, p. 4.

²⁹⁴ Konrad Maurer, *Die Bekehrung des Norwegischen Stammes zum Christentume in ihrem geschichtlichen Verlaufe quellenmässig geschildert*, 2 vols (München: Christian Kaiser, 1855-56), II (1856), 101-119.

were werewolves.²⁹⁵ While he did not believe that they should be confused with each other, he did believe that they were related through the terms used to describe them. Maurer maintained that there had been a semantic weakening of words like ON *hamrammr*. Where originally such words were used of an actual physical change, he thought that they had come to mean merely a psychological change to the authors of the sagas, and thus indicated a lessening of belief in shape-shifters.

Baring-Gould, a cleric and antiquarian, devoted two chapters in *The Book of Were-Wolves* to the Scandinavian werewolf.²⁹⁶ He states that a person who is *eigi einhamr*, might do this either by putting on the pelt of another creature, or by leaving their body and entering the new shape. The former is how Sigmundr and Sinfjötli changed into wolves, while the latter is how Böðvarr bjarki initially took part as a bear in his final battle.²⁹⁷ Having laid out examples of shape-changing in chapter 2, Baring-Gould then addressed the issue of wearing animal pelts in chapter 3. His discussion makes it plain that he did not believe that *ulfheðnar* and *berserkir* were werewolves or werebears, and that they merely took on a semblance of the beasts, whose pelts they

²⁹⁵ Maurer, *Die Bekehrung*, II, 109-10.

²⁹⁶ Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Book of Werewolves: Being an account of a terrible superstition* (London:Smith, Elder and Co., 1865), pp. 15-52

²⁹⁷ *Fsn*, I, 123-24; ‘Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans’, in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1959), I, 1-105 (pp. 99 and 101).

wore.²⁹⁸ By making themselves appear more animalistic, they appeared more fearsome to their foes. He also noted that ON *hamrammr* referred not to a physical change of shape but to a ‘fit of diabolical possession’.²⁹⁹ Baring-Gould concluded that ON *at hamast* was originally used of those warriors that adopted an animal persona by wearing the animal’s pelt, but that superstition ascribed to those warriors the ability to literally change into the animal, and *at hamast* changed its meaning accordingly. Later, as a result of semantic weakening, it came to be used of those that suffered fits, those that were ‘afflicted with paroxysms of madness or demoniacal possession’.³⁰⁰

Golther stated that belief in shape-shifting resulted from a belief in transference of the soul to a different body, based on the concept of ON *fylgja* (an attendant spirit in animal form) or ON *hamingja* (guardian spirit).³⁰¹ In these cases, as was the case with Böðvarr bjarki, the soul left the sleeping body and occupied the body of an animal.³⁰² Like Baring-Gould and Maurer, he did not accept that *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* were werewolves.

²⁹⁸ Baring-Gould, *The Book of Werewolves*, p. 39.

²⁹⁹ Baring-Gould, *The Book of Werewolves*, p. 43.

³⁰⁰ Baring-Gould, *The Book of Werewolves*, p. 47.

³⁰¹ Wolfgang Golther, *Handbuch der Germanischen Mythologie* (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1895), pp. 100-103.

³⁰² *Fsn*, I, 99.

Mogk discussed werewolves and *berserkir* together, and considered both to be mythical.³⁰³ He stated that the narratives about *berserkir* were just an extension of the werewolf myth, and cited contemporary examples to support his case. Gering appears to have believed that the *berserkr* was a shapeshifter and that he was therefore an embodiment of the werewolf myth too.³⁰⁴ Lid and Müller-Bergström also agree that *berserkr* and *ulfhedinn* are both synonyms for werewolf, thus consigning them firmly to the realms of myth.³⁰⁵

More recently, Blaney's discussion of how werewolves relate to *berserkir* concluded that ON *vargulfr* (werewolf) was a neologism of the translator of the *Strengleikar*, because it occurs only once in the entire corpus

³⁰³ E. Mogk, 'Mythologie' in *Grundriß der germanischen Philologie*, ed. by Hermann Paul, 2nd edn, 3 vols (Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1900-09), I (1900), 1018-19, III (1900), 272-73.

³⁰⁴ Hugo Gering, *Über Weissagung und Zauber im nordischen Altertum: Rede zum Antritt des Rektorats der Christian Albrechts Universität zu Kiel am 5. März 1902* (Kiel: Lipsius & Tischer, 1902), p. 13.

³⁰⁵ Nils Lid, 'Til varulvens historia', in Nils Lid, *Trolldom: Nordiska studiar* (Oslo: Cammermeyers Boghandel, 1950), 82-108; Walther Müller-Bergström, 'Berserker', in *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, ed. by H. Bächtold-Stäubli, 10 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1927-1942), I (1927), cols 1093-94.

of Old Norse material and is used to translate OFr *garwulf*.³⁰⁶ He points out that there is no single word actually meaning ‘werewolf’ in Old Norse, which indicates that *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* were not considered to be shapechangers in the same sense that werewolves are. Blaney’s discussion of the vocabulary of shape-changing, such as ON *eigi einhamr* (not of one shape) and ON *hamrammr* (able to change shape), states that the incidence of individuals described in these terms, but who do not physically change shape, is indicative of a decrease in belief in shape-changing.³⁰⁷ He states that originally these terms meant that the person literally changed into a beast, but, by the thirteenth century, those terms that were used exclusively of *berserkir* were then indicative merely of great strength or speed, while ON *at hamast* meant ‘to become angry’.

Grundy identifies shape-shifting with *berserksgangr*, and suggests that the donning of an animal-skin might be intended to induce it.³⁰⁸ He does not identify it with werewolfism, and considers that the full transformation to an animal lies only within the province of the gods and legend, while the psychological transformation of a historical Icелander is a spiritual transformation, where he adopts mentally the attributes of his ‘animal-

³⁰⁶ Blaney, ‘Berserkr’, p. 17; ONP, s.v. *vargulfr*; *Old French-English Dictionary*, ed. by Alan Hindley, Frederick W. Langley and Brian J. Levy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), s.v. *garol* and *garwulf*.

³⁰⁷ Blaney, ‘Berserkr’, pp. 39 and 63a.

³⁰⁸ Stephan Grundy, ‘Shapeshifting and Berserkergang’, *Disputatio*, 3 (1998), 104-22 (p. 115.)

hamr'.³⁰⁹ In doing so, Grundy states that the individual may be able to access *berserksgangr* at this time.

Breen undertook a similar analysis to Blaney on the vocabulary of shape-shifting. He noted that there are few examples of actual metamorphosis into bears or wolves, while there are also few examples of warriors donning bear or wolf pelts.³¹⁰ Instead, he states that the animal attributes are more probably related to their behaviour than their outward physical appearance. The range of meanings he identifies are primarily related to supernatural abilities, rage or strength, with metamorphosis not being a significant meaning of the various *-ham* compounds.³¹¹ Breen also identifies two Scandinavian phrases that relate anger to wearing a wolf pelt: ON *taka á sig vargham* (to wear a wolf's skin, meaning to become wild); and ON *sýna úlfs ham* (to appear in a wolf's skin, meaning to appear savagely).³¹² These expressions emphasise the animalistic nature of those that wear animal pelts, although the meaning could also be purely metaphorical. Breen's analysis shows that examples of actual animal metamorphosis are rare, and that animal mummification is more likely as an explanation of the Old Norse *berserkr* and *ulfheðnar*.³¹³

³⁰⁹ Grundy, 'Shapeshifting', p. 118.

³¹⁰ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 33.

³¹¹ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 37.

³¹² Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 38.

³¹³ Breen, 'The Berserkr', pp. 48-49.

Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir devoted part of her discussion of werewolves to *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar*.³¹⁴ She suggests that examples such as Böðvarr bjarki's appearance on the battlefield may be an example of shamanism in practice, rather than werewolfism.³¹⁵ In her estimation, the narratives about *berserkir* are probably remnants of a belief in shape-shifting, much as Blaney thought.³¹⁶ However, she also equated all examples of shapechanging with werewolfism which does not accord with the definition of a werewolf as a person who changes into a wolf at specific intervals.

Samson cites Müller, who stated that the name Kveld-Ulfr followed a werewolf-naming tradition, and states that it was part of a custom of elite warriors adopting animal names.³¹⁷ While he recognised that the description of Kveld-Ulfr has elements that evoke European werewolf traditions, Samson considered that actual examples of shape-changing in Old Norse literature are a function of narrative requirement. Names like Kveld-Ulfr were a product of the warrior's need to adopt and give expression to the animalistic elements of their personality that would permit them to succeed and survive in battle. Thus,

³¹⁴ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 106.3 (July 2007), pp. 277-303.

³¹⁵ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf', p. 282.

³¹⁶ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf', p. 289.

³¹⁷ Samson, *Les Berserkir*, pp. 165-66.

shape-changing traditions were a product of mimetic activities and not of physical metamorphosis.³¹⁸

It is doubtful that *berserkr* were considered to have physically transformed into animals when they underwent *berserksgangr* based on their literary manifestations, and thus they were not werewolves. Instead, the transformation undertaken by *berserkr* was psychological, and was portrayed as resulting in them running amok like wild animals. Thus, *berserksgangr* may be better considered as a form of mimesis. Wearing an animal pelt may have provided a psychological edge when performing *berserksgangr* and may have given the *berserkr* a better ability to access their animal soul, in addition to any ritual significance the animal pelt may have had.³¹⁹

3.7 Discussion

Previous research into *berserkr* has largely focused on the etymology of ON *berserkr*, and the nature of *berserksgangr*. It has occasionally engendered vigorous debate and disagreement, such as that between Grøn and Nordhagen in the Norwegian press in the 1920s.³²⁰ The debate regarding the nature and existence of *berserkr* has been fraught and bitterly fought. On the one hand,

³¹⁸ Samson, *Les Berserkr*, p. 173

³¹⁹ Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), pp. 37-38, 43-45, 64-66 and 70-76; Eliade, *Shamanism*, pp. 380-81.

³²⁰ Cited from Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 87 n.15.

Ödmann and Schübeler seem to have taken it for granted that *berserkir* existed and that they went berserk.³²¹ Their research into *berserksgangr* was predicated on this premise. They, like most after them, do not seem to have considered the possibility that *berserkir* did not undergo a berserk fit. On the other hand, some scholars, such as Liberman, have stated that the body of available evidence is too small to permit valid research, an approach that is not at all constructive and ignores the potential for multi-disciplinary research.³²² Both viewpoints have their own failings with the former being insufficiently critical of the initial premise on which the research is based, while the latter precludes the possibility of any legitimate research. A more balanced approach needs to be pursued without falling into the same traps as the camps at the extreme ends of the spectrum. While research has been undertaken in this field, it has not been so thoroughly investigated as might have been expected. Partially this is due to a paucity of reliable sources, but also it stems from the fact that most researchers have focused closely on their own specialism and have not incorporated detailed data from other fields into their findings, with the notable exceptions of Blaney, Breen and Samson.

Regarding the meaning and etymology of ON *berserkr*, it seems most likely that the meaning of ‘wearing a bearskin shirt’ or ‘wearing bearskin armour’ is to be preferred when discussing the Viking Age, because the lexical

³²¹ Ödmann, ‘Försök’, I, 177-83; Schübeler, *Viridarium Norvegicum*, I, 224-26.

³²² Anatoly Liberman, ‘*Berserkir*: A Double Legend’, *Brathair*, 4.2 (2004), 97-101.

symmetry of its construction with that of *ulfhedinn* indicates a coherent linguistic basis for the construction and a parallel development of the two types of warrior. Grammatically, this construction is also more probable in Old Norse because formation of compound nouns from two substantives is more common.³²³ However, temporal variations in understanding of ON *berserkr* exist. As discussed above, Snorri thought that they fought without armour, when writing some 200 years after *berserkr* were no longer a significant part of society. His understanding of ON *berserkr* appears to have been rooted in his understanding of the Old Icelandic language of the thirteenth century. Given that language and usage changes with time and given the nature of this study, it will be as important to understand what individuals, like Snorri, meant or understood by ON *berserkr* at the time and in the place that they were writing, as much as it is important to understand what it might originally have meant. The following chapters on the *berserkr* in literature will review how changing interpretations have affected the depiction of *berserkr*.

The causes of *berserksgangr* have excited as much interest as the etymology and meaning of ON *berserkr* have, and a multiplicity of potential causes has been proposed ranging from physical to psychological abnormalities.³²⁴ All of these proposals presuppose the presence of a single cause and that *berserksgangr* is a result of that cause rather than a premeditated act. *Berserksgangr* is depicted variously as howling like a beast, shield-biting and even frothing at the mouth. However, none of the proposed

³²³ See 3.1.2.

³²⁴ See 3.2.

causes is completely convincing when the evidence is examined, and they all presume that *berserkir* achieved a state of mind that was significantly different from that of other warriors in their society, a conclusion that requires detailed examination of the differences between Scandinavian society and other societies that might have caused such a class to have arisen within that society.

None of the scholars that have researched *berserksgangr* have considered that the howling and shield-biting might not have been a symptom of berserk frenzy. Modern athletes use many techniques to prepare themselves for events, and it is entirely possible that *berserkir* did the same. Howling and biting their shields might have been techniques by which they instilled confidence and aggression in themselves and the other warriors in their warband or army, while simultaneously seeking to cow the enemy.³²⁵ Thus, in examining *berserksgangr* it is possible that scholars have confused cause and effect.

Previous research has shown that *berserkir* may have been integral to the process of inducting new members into a warband. Old Norse literature features episodes that can be interpreted as inductions, such as that of Höttir in *Hrólfs saga*, where the structure of the narrative closely follows van Gennep's model of initiations.³²⁶ These episodes feature a pre-liminal phase where the protagonist is at home, a liminal phase where they are treated poorly by their future peers usually while abroad, and a post-liminal phase where they have defeated a threat and are now accepted. Although these episodes may in

³²⁵ See 4.3.4 and 4.3.5.

³²⁶ *Fsn*, I, 64-71; van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, pp. 10-11.

themselves be literary topoi, it seems unlikely that this repeated motif was cut from whole cloth as part of writing sagas down in the medieval period. Thus it may represent a remembered process of induction. This role appears to have been one element of their special relationship with Óðinn and a function of the warrior cult. While the term cult is rather too broad to be useful for analysing *berserkir*, it does convey an appropriate idea of the small, esoteric groups of which *berserkir* appear to have been members. It also conveys an element of the religious nature of the *berserkr*. While *berserkir* were not shamans, they appear to have had a connection with Óðinn, as Snorri states, that was probably linked to their social status and function within society as elite warriors among the social elite.³²⁷

The picture that emerges from previous research is of a complex figure. The Viking Age *berserkr* was a valued member of the warband with roles beyond that of the simple warrior. They appear to have been central to the induction of new members into the king's retinue through a process of ritual challenge. They appear to have spearheaded the army, seeking to boost its morale and to cow the enemy in battle through ritual posturing. Their connection to the leader of the gods is an integral part of their identity and their role may have included ensuring that Óðinn sided with their warband.

³²⁷ See 5.2.16 for further analysis.

4 *Berserkir* in Old Norse literature to c. 1400 A.D.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines literature in Old Norse that is thought to have been written prior to the fifteenth century, because the literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries forms the basis of modern depictions and thus sets out the baseline data for Chapter 6. Literature in other languages, such as Latin and non-literary material, is covered in Chapter 5.

ON *berserkr* is used widely in Old Norse texts.³²⁸ The fact that *berserkir* feature in fourteen of the forty surviving *Íslendingasögur* alone demonstrates that their presence in the narrative was popular among the medieval audience. They are also a significant feature of other genres of Old Norse literature, being present in over ninety sagas and *þættir*, in both the *Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda*, in the Icelandic law code *Grágás*, and also being found in many Old Norse historical works.³²⁹ These texts are the earliest written sources for the attributes of *berserkir*, which can aid in understanding and interpreting the medieval conception of *berserkir* and also the historical reality of the Viking Age *berserkr*.³³⁰

The *berserkir* described in Old Norse literature have a varied range of attributes and are employed in a variety of roles. From this, it is clear that there were several traditions about *berserkir* extant in the period up to the end of the

³²⁸ See Appendix 2.

³²⁹ Inger M. Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature* (Munksgaard: Copenhagen, 1966), pp. 124-25.

³³⁰ See 2.3.

fourteenth century, and that ON *berserkr* had several different meanings, possibly as a result of dialectal or geographical variation, but probably because it was used to refer to different, related concepts. This chapter appraises the function of *berserkir* in Old Norse literature, examines how they were depicted and analyses each of the roles that *berserkir* had or played, to show how these inform our understanding of *berserkir* and their place in society. It reviews the powers ascribed to *berserkir* such as invulnerability and the ability to walk through fire, and seeks to place these powers into context, with a view to determining if they are defining attributes of the *berserkr*, or whether they are incidental, fantastical detail. Given that *berserkir* are usually stylised characters, it may be thought that it will prove difficult to extract information about their historical roles. However there is sufficient correlation between depictions and also sufficient variety to identify patterns and traditions as well as determining those elements that deviate from the norm.³³¹

The following discussion focuses primarily on instances where a character is specifically called a *berserkr*, but it also considers figures that share the attributes of *berserkir* but are not identified specifically as such. It is possible that these figures were intended to be identified by the contemporary audience as *berserkir* without the author specifically naming them as such. Any analysis of *berserkir* must address these issues, because they may illuminate aspects of the medieval concept of the *berserkr* and identify conventional motifs that could affect definitions and understanding of both the

³³¹ See 3.3 for previous research into initiatory rites as one area of their possible activities.

medieval literary *berserkr* and the Viking Age *berserkr*. The distinction between the two will be identified and maintained, because the former is a largely literary construct and is an early form of popular culture. The latter can only be defined in terms of probable reality, but is likely to have differed in significant aspects from the former.

4.2 The earliest references to *berserkir*

The earliest known source for *berserkir* is *Haraldskvæði*, which was probably composed in the late ninth or early tenth century, although it only survives in later written sources.³³² Shortly after the battle of Hafrsfjörðr, Þórbjörn hornklofi composed this poem to celebrate the victory of Haraldr hárfagri, and he mentions the king's *berserkir*, who fought at the battle and are also known from *Heimskringla* and *Grettis saga*.³³³ *Haraldskvæði* makes the connection between these *berserkir* and the *ulfheðnar*, which is important when linking *berserkir* to the archaeological record, because it states that the king's *berserkir* were called *ulfheðnar*.³³⁴ The fact that this old source makes the connection is important, because it indicates a strong probability that the connection is genuine and not a result of authorial intervention in the narrative.

³³² See Appendix 1 for the relevant strophes; see 2.3.1 for dating.

³³³ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 100; Íf, 7, p. 5.

³³⁴ See 3.1 for the links between *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar*, and 5.2 for discussion of the archaeological record.

Haraldskvæði states that both *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* howled (ON *grenjuðu* and *emjuðu*).³³⁵ It also relates that they were reliable warriors in whom the king might trust, and that they carried bloody shields in battle, as well as reddening their spears there.³³⁶ Price identified them as drinking blood, from the line ‘*bergir hræssævar*’ (drinkers of the corpse-sea), but it is not certain that this is meant literally, and Finlay has suggested that the expression is a kenning for a raven and thus a form of address to the raven, whom the Valkyrie is questioning, in this context.³³⁷ Price states that this detail is ‘graphic beyond the normal conventions of skaldic poetry’, but it is as likely to be a hyperbolic representation of the ferocity of *berserkir* as it is to be literally true, so it is not possible to identify a specific trait in this line.³³⁸

A *lausavísa* dated to c. 983 and composed by Viga-Styrr Þorgrímsson makes reference to the *berserkir* that he has just killed and buried:

hér hefr bilgrönduðr brandi
berserkjum stað merkðan.³³⁹

³³⁵ ‘Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)’, ed. by Fulk, p. 102.

³³⁶ ‘Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)’, ed. by Fulk, p. 114.

³³⁷ Neil S. Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and war in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, 2002), pp. 366-67; Alison Finlay, *Fagrskinna, a Catalogue of the Kings of Norway: A translation with introduction and notes* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 46.

³³⁸ Price, *The Viking Way*, p. 366.

³³⁹ Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldedigtning*, B I (1912), 111; Íf, 4, p. 75 has this but with the first line of the quotation reading ‘nu hefr bilgrönduðr brandi’.

(Here has he who does not fail to hurt with a sword
marked out a place for *berserkir*)

This verse indicates that they were dangerous, but does not describe their attributes or highlight what sort of warriors they were.³⁴⁰ It is left to the prose elements of *Eyrbyggja saga* to expand on the characteristics of the dead *berserkir*, Halli and Leiknir.³⁴¹

Although much Eddic poetry is thought to be of Viking Age date, ON *berserkr* only occurs in two Eddic poems: *Hárbarðsljóð* (37) and *Hyndluljóð* (24).³⁴² *Hárbarðsljóð* may date from the late ninth or tenth century, which would mean it was composed when historical *berserkir* could have been present in society.³⁴³ It describes a flyting between Óðinn and Þórr, in the course of which Þórr states that he fought the ‘brúðir berserkia’ (brides of *berserkir*) on Hlésey.³⁴⁴ McKinnell has suggested that they were giantesses, and that this is a kenning for ‘stormy waves’, thus linking *berserkir* to giants.³⁴⁵ Even if the expression is intended as a kenning, *Hárbarðsljóð*

³⁴⁰ See 4.4.1 and 4.6 for additional discussion of the *berserkir* in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

³⁴¹ Íf, 4, pp. 61-66 and 70-75.

³⁴² *Edda*, I, 84 and 292.

³⁴³ Fidjestøl, *Dating of Eddic Poetry*, pp. 106 and 183.

³⁴⁴ *Edda*, I, 84.

³⁴⁵ John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), p. 110.

maintains the impression of dangerousness that seems to surround *berserkir* by relating them to the forces that opposed the gods and men.

Hyndluljóð is of even less certain date than *Hárbarðsljóð* with Finnur Jónsson concluding that it dates from the mid-tenth century and de Vries stating that it dates from the late twelfth century.³⁴⁶ *Hyndluljóð* describes the hero Óttarr's lineage, in a bid to help him recover his inheritance from Angantýr, which is the name of a *berserkr*, and known from *Hervarar saga*, *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Hversu Noregr byggðist*.³⁴⁷ Angantýr in these sagas is a son of Arngrímr, to whose sons Óttarr is related.³⁴⁸ Therefore, Óttarr is descended from a line of *berserkir*, which may explain the reference to 'brœcon berserkia' (the din of *berserkir*).³⁴⁹ This reference to *berserkir* being noisy is a feature of their depictions.³⁵⁰ As with *Haraldskvæði*, *berserkir* are shown to have howling or shouting as one of their defining attributes, although *Hyndluljóð* adds little more to this.

From these early poems, it is possible to construct an initial image of *berserkir*. They were excellent warriors, who fought in the shieldwall, as

³⁴⁶ Fidjestøl, *Dating of Eddic Poetry*, pp. 106 and 184.

³⁴⁷ 'Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks', 'Örvar-Odds saga' and 'Hversu Noregr byggðist' in *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1959), II, 1-71 (pp. 2-4 and 6-7), 75-87 (p. 81) and 199-363 (pp. 251-52 and 255-57).

³⁴⁸ *Edda*, I, 292.

³⁴⁹ *Edda*, I, 292.

³⁵⁰ See 4.3.4.

Haraldskvæði states. Their presence in the shieldwall, fighting shoulder to shoulder, suggests that they were more disciplined than a berserk frenzy would permit. They were known for being violent and dangerous, as indicated by *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Haraldskvæði*, and they were also known for their howling and shouting as *Haraldskvæði* and *Hyndluljóð* show. The fact that this was seen as a defining attribute suggests that it was over and above the normal din of battle. For the rest of their attributes, it is necessary to examine other areas of Old Norse literature, such as the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*.

4.3 The attributes of *berserkir*

Various powers are attributed to *berserkir* in the sagas. These attributes include invulnerability to fire and iron, biting their shields before battle and howling. Some *berserkir* are even said to foam at the mouth. It is likely that *berserkir* were not always identified directly and that their attributes informed the audience of their status. Therefore, identification of the defining attributes of a *berserkir* is important for identifying characters that might be *berserkir*, and thus can contribute to a broader understanding of *berserkir* both in medieval literature and as a historical reality in the Viking Age.

4.3.1 Walking through fire

As discussed earlier, Snorri wrote that *berserkir* could not be harmed by iron or fire: ‘Þeir drápu mannfólkit, en hvártki eldr né járn orti á þá’ (They killed men, but neither fire nor iron told on them).³⁵¹ This view is reflected in many

³⁵¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 17.

other depictions of them. For example, in *Njáls saga* the *berserkr* Ótryggr ‘hræddisk hvárki eld né egg’ (feared neither flame nor blade).³⁵² Despite this, he is beaten and his invulnerability fails him when he refuses to cross a fire that has been consecrated by the Christian missionary Þangbrandr, and is subsequently slain. In a similar episode in *Vatnsdæla saga*, two *berserkir* ‘óðu eld brennanda berum fótum’ (waded through burning flames in bare feet).³⁵³ Such episodes demonstrate that the authors of the *Íslendingasögur* believed that *berserkir* could walk through fire without being harmed, in a similar fashion to Indian yogis, and Araucanian, Manchu and Fijian shamans, who can walk on hot coals without getting burnt.³⁵⁴ Assuming that *berserkir* walked through fire like Indian yogis, it is possible to speculate that their fire-wading required concentration and that the consecration of the fire may have disturbed their composure. As a result of losing concentration, they were hurt by the fire. However, this interpretation probably reads too much into such episodes, because it fails to take account of the stylised nature of these descriptions. In the cited examples, the descriptions are Christian conversion stories intended to show that the Christian missionary is more powerful than the fearsome *berserkir*. The fact that these are conversion narratives suggests that

³⁵² Íf, 12, p. 267.

³⁵³ Íf, 8, p. 124.

³⁵⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The mysteries of birth and rebirth*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), p. 100; Eliade, *Shamanism*, pp. 54, 112 and 372.

the inability to walk through a consecrated fire is not a long-standing tradition about *berserkir*.

In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, Hrólfr swears to flee neither fire nor iron, and must deal with being close to a hot fire in the hall of Aðils. As the fire is built up, it becomes intolerable, until he and his men must flee or burn. Hrólfr declares ‘eigi fýr sá eldinn, sem yfir hleypr’ (he does not flee the fire, who jumps over it).³⁵⁵ He and his twelve champions jump over the fire and are able to escape it that way, while demonstrating their bravery at the same time. The vow that Hrólfr has made is similar to the concept of invulnerability to iron and fire that *berserkir* are supposed to have and crossing the fire resembles those episodes in other narratives where *berserkir* wade through fire. Eliade writes that mastery over fire is an essential part of the ecstatic experience and is ‘equivalent to an initiation’.³⁵⁶ The *Hrólfs saga* episode may then be interpreted as a test. By sitting as long as possible beside the hot flames before jumping over them to prove his mastery of fire, Hrólfr is proving that he does not fear fire, and thus is equal to his *berserkir* and champions.

The difference of two hundred years between the Viking Age and the time when the *Íslendingasögur* were written down is significant when considering how *berserkir* were remembered and how their actions and attributes were interpreted. In the cases of *Njáls saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga* it is possible that *berserkir* had a tradition of leaping across fires or even of walking on hot coals, and that this tradition was subverted as part of the

³⁵⁵ *Fsn*, I, 82.

³⁵⁶ Eliade, *Shamanism*, p. 206.

conversion narrative. The fire-leaping in *Hrólfs saga* may be another indication of this tradition, although presented in a different context. Breen has noted that this practice may have been an ‘early act of religious ecstasy; later it became an initiatory practice among warriors; finally it descended into a cheap trick to intimidate onlookers and martial opponents’.³⁵⁷ As Breen suggests, it is possible that walking or jumping through fire, or walking on hot coals was part of the ritual life of the warband that later developed into demonstrations of courage. Perhaps by making a vow to fear neither fire nor iron and then being tested by both, *berserkr* hoped to gain invulnerability to them, or perhaps they sought only to prove their bravery, and such vows were a part of the warriors’ boasting.

4.3.2 Invulnerability

The other main power that *berserkr* regularly have is invulnerability to edged weapons, which leads to many a *berserkr* being clubbed to death. This is related to the ability to walk through fire insofar as it is an indication of their supernatural ability to avoid harm from certain sources.

The majority of episodes that feature this are *riddarasögur*, such as *Adonias saga*, in which Berad slays three *berserkr* with an iron-spiked club.³⁵⁸ This invulnerability is also attributed to *blámenn* in some sagas, indicating that they are considered to be similar to *berserkr*. In *Sigurður saga þogla*, Sigurðr plans to have thirty of his men fall on Sarodaces’ *blámenn* with iron-spiked

³⁵⁷ Breen, ‘The Berserkr’, p. 76.

³⁵⁸ *LMIR*, III, 104.

clubs while they are asleep because they cannot be hurt with blades: ‘Skulu þeir .iij. tigur er gaddakylfur hafa ganga j moti blaamonnum er eckj bijta jarn aa ...’ (those thirty men that have iron-spiked clubs should go against the black men, whom iron does not cut).³⁵⁹ These *blámenn* share Sarodaces’ tent with *berserkir*, whose powers are not mentioned.³⁶⁰

Clubbing episodes feature in two *Íslendingasögur*: *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Svarfdæla saga*. The episode in *Vatnsdæla saga* strongly resembles that mentioned above in *Njáls saga*. Two *berserkir*, both called Haukr, have arrived in Iceland with a reputation for challenging people to give up their wealth and women. Upon their approach, bishop Friðrekr advises that three fires should be lit in the hall and that ‘Nu skal skipa bekkina af mǫnnum þeim, er bestir eru áráðis, með stóra lurka, því at þá bíta eigi járn, ok skal svá berja þá til bana’ (Now we shall fill the benches with our most courageous men armed with large clubs, because iron will not cut them [the *berserkir*], and so shall we beat them to death).³⁶¹ The fires halt the *berserkir* and the men beat them to death just as Friðrekr proposed, which results in those present agreeing to convert to Christianity. In *Svarfdæla saga*, we learn of Ljótr inn bleiki ‘at hann bíti eigi vápn’ (that weapons may not cut him).³⁶² In the fight that ensues with Ljótr,

³⁵⁹ *LMIR*, II, 253.

³⁶⁰ See 4.7 for discussion of *blámenn* as a type of literary *berserkr*.

³⁶¹ *Íf*, 8, p. 125.

³⁶² *Íf*, 9, p. 135.

Þorsteinn throws aside his axe and picks up the stump of a beam, with which to fight, and kills Ljótr by beating him to death.³⁶³

The *Heimskringla* version of Snorri Sturluson's *Óláfs saga helga* includes a section in which Óláfr is unable to wound Þórir hundr, on those parts of his body where he is wearing a reindeer skin, although he is able to wound Þórir on his hands where he is not covered by the skin: '... ok beit ekki sverð konungs, þar er hreinbjálbinn var fyrir, en þó varð Þórir sárr á hendi' (... and the king's sword did not cut, where the reindeer hide was in the way, even though Þórir was wounded in the hands).³⁶⁴ Óláfr orders his marshal, Björn, to deal with Þórir and he attempts to do so by reversing his axe and using the hammer on it instead, thus mirroring the attacks previously described. *The Legendary Saga of St Olaf* relates that Björn digri rather than Óláfr fought Þórir from the outset.³⁶⁵ Although one of the protagonists is different, the end result is the same. Þórir is present at this battle as part of a group of twelve men, all clad in reindeer skins obtained from the Finns (Sámi), which bears some resemblance to the groups of twelve *berserkir* that are encountered, especially when considered together with their apparent invulnerability. As

³⁶³ Íf, 9, pp. 138-39

³⁶⁴ Íf, 27, pp. 383-84; see also *Den store saga om Olav den Hellige*, I, pp. 573-74.

³⁶⁵ *Olafs Saga Hins Helga: Die „Legendarische Saga“ über Olaf den Heiligen* (Hs. Delagard. Saml. Nr. 8^{II}), ed. by Anne Heinrichs, Doris Janshen, Elke Radick and Hartmut Röhn (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1982) pp. 194-96; Ks, I, p. 360.

such it is hard not to compare the two and query whether this description of a fight indicates more closely the true reason for the invulnerability of the *berserkr*: animal-skin armour that is sufficiently thick to turn a sword blade. Such a material is still flexible, so weapons that rely on blunt force trauma would be able to cause significant damage.

4.3.3 Sword-blunting gaze

Related to the concept of invulnerability is the idea that some *berserkir* could blunt swords merely by looking at them as is described in *Droplaugarsona saga*: ‘Grímr hafði tvau sverð, því at Gauss kunni at deyfa eggjar’ (Grímr had two swords because Gauss could blunt blades).³⁶⁶ The motif of the hero carrying two blades is comparatively common and occurs in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* among others, where the viking and robber Þórormr is credited with the ability to blunt blades.³⁶⁷ Breen, citing Johan Turi, discussed the need to carry a second weapon in relation to Sámi hunting practice.³⁶⁸ The Sámi hunter carries a spear hidden under his arm when hunting bear. He only reveals the spear at the moment before the kill, in a striking parallel to the need to only reveal the sword at the last moment before striking the *berserkr* lest it be blunted by his gaze. Breen argues for a logical connection between hunting bears and hunting *berserkir*, who are bear-warriors, citing also Grettir’s bear-

³⁶⁶ Íf, 11, p. 179.

³⁶⁷ Íf, 3, p. 73; for other examples see Íf, 9, p. 146; *Fsn*, III, 166 and 271; and LMIR, I, 99.

³⁶⁸ Breen, ‘The Berserkr’, p. 59.

hunting technique, where he uses two swords in battle against a bear.³⁶⁹ There are some similarities between the two techniques and Sámi influence on Norse culture is certainly possible, but there appears to be no direct causal connection for these similarities based on the evidence available. Also, in the example of Grettir's bear hunt, he makes no attempt to conceal his second blade, which hangs from his arm on a cord, because he felt that he needed his hands free. Thus the parallel is not sufficiently precise to support that interpretation.³⁷⁰

It is possible that the perceived ability to blunt blades derives from the supposed invulnerability of the *berserkr* discussed above, and may be a means for a particular saga author to explain this invulnerability. However, it should also be noted that the ability to blunt blades is one of Óðinn's attributes, as described in *Hávamál*:

‘eggjar ec deyfī minna andscota,
 bítaþ þeim vápn né velir.’³⁷¹
 (I blunt my enemies' blades,
 neither weapon nor club bites for them)

This association of the power to blunt weapons reinforces the connection between Óðinn and the *berserkr*, lending credence to the idea that they had a special relationship with him, or, at least, that medieval saga authors thought they did.

³⁶⁹ Íf, 7, p. 76-77.

³⁷⁰ See 5.4.5 for further discussion of Sámi bear-hunting practice.

³⁷¹ *Edda*, I, 42.

4.3.4 Shield-biting

In addition to their possibly supernatural powers, *berserkir* are also known for their behaviour, specifically chewing on the rims of their shields, howling and fighting without armour. These activities are generally construed as symptoms of *berserksgangr*, and thus of an altered state of mind: of going berserk.³⁷²

Snorri describes them in *Ynglinga saga* in a clear and coherent form, but they feature widely throughout Old Norse literature.³⁷³

In *Grettis saga*, Snækollr begins biting his shield and howling even before dismounting from his horse, as he readies himself for battle with Grettir.³⁷⁴ Shield-biting occurs at the start of combat, as the case of Snækollr in *Grettis saga* shows, and there are few variations in the usage of this motif.³⁷⁵

Essentially, the *berserkr* raises the shield to his mouth and bites on the rim as the sons of Arngrímr do in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*: ‘Þá brugðu Arngríms synir sverðum ok bitu í skjaldarrendr, ok kom á þá berserksgangr’ (Then the sons of Arngrímr drew their swords and bit their shield rims, and began the berserk’s movement).³⁷⁶

Given that it only occurs at the start of combat, and not during the battle, it seems likely that shield-biting was a form of posturing intended to help the *berserkr* motivate himself for battle, while also intimidating his

³⁷² See 3.2.

³⁷³ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 17.

³⁷⁴ Íf, 7, pp. 135-36.

³⁷⁵ For other examples see: Íf, 2, pp. 202-03; Íf, 9, pp. 142-43; Íf, 8, p. 124.

³⁷⁶ *Fsn*, II, p. 4.

foes.³⁷⁷ Therefore, it was probably not a symptom of *berserksgangr*, if *berserksgangr* is accepted as ‘going berserk’, because biting on a shield is not the sort of action that someone seeking to kill as many of the enemy as possible will undertake. Based on this analysis, *berserksgangr* was a preliminary activity rather than an end result, and it seems likely that shield-biting and howling are directly linked elements of the same activity. For this reason, it is probable that ON *berserksgangr* and PDE ‘going berserk’ are two separate but semantically-related concepts, with the latter deriving from aspects of the former.³⁷⁸

4.3.5 Howling

In Old Norse literature, howling is usually a part of *berserksgangr*. It features in Þorbjörn hornklofi’s *Haraldskvæði*, where ON *grenja* is used of the *berserkir* and ON *emja* of the *ulfheðnar*.³⁷⁹ CV states that both mean ‘to howl’, while also citing ‘to bellow’ as an alternative meaning for ON *grenja*. *Grenja* most often occurs in the expression ‘grenja sem hundr’ (howl like a dog), as in *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Grettis saga*, among others.³⁸⁰ Thus, although ‘bellow’ is given as one of its modern English meanings, ‘howl’ may be considered a more apt translation. Similar usage of ON *emja* is found in *Atlamál* and

³⁷⁷ For an alternative interpretation of shield-biting and howling see 4.3.5.

³⁷⁸ See also 3.2.5 and 4.9.

³⁷⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 116; ‘Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)’, ed. by Fulk, p. 102.

³⁸⁰ Íf, 8, p. 124; Íf, 7, p. 67.

Völsunga saga, although in those cases the comparison is with wolves rather than dogs.³⁸¹ Given the essentially canine tones used for comparison, the two words seem to be complementary and used to express the cacophonous nature of the shouting and yelling of men in battle. As such, they appear to have been used largely synonymously in the late ninth century, when Þorbjörn hornklofi composed *Haraldskvæði*.

ON *grenja* is the most common word used of the howling of *berserkir*. It appears thirteen times in eight *Íslendingasögur*, although it is not exclusively related to *berserkir* in every instance.³⁸² For example, in *Kormáks saga* ON *grenja* is used to describe the noise made by a sword that is drawn unwillingly from its sheath.³⁸³ In *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* the giant Glámr began to howl like a wolfhound (‘*grenjaði upp sem varghundr*’) when he was hit in the face with a knucklebone, although he is not described as a *berserkr*.³⁸⁴ In *Kjalnesinga saga* it is a *blámaðr* that howls in this fashion as he is held by four men and also as he charges to attack.³⁸⁵ This *blámaðr* appears to be like a *berserkr* in his frenzied attack on Búi and he might fit the mould insofar as he

³⁸¹ *Edda*, I, 251; *Fsn*, I, 203.

³⁸² Íf, 2, p. 202; Íf, 6, p. 105; Íf, 7, pp. 67, 75, 136; Íf, 8, pp. 124, 235-36; Íf, 13, p. 153-54; and Íf, 14, pp. 36 and 370; see also *Orðstöðulykill* and *ONP* s.v. *grenja* for quantification of occurrences.

³⁸³ Íf, 8, pp. 235-36

³⁸⁴ Íf, 13, pp. 153-4.

³⁸⁵ Íf, 14, p. 36; for *blámenn* as *berserkir* see 4.7.1.

appears to be the king's champion in this episode. His frenzy and strength also seem to match Snorri's description of *berserkir*. However, he does not chew on his shield and he is not described as invulnerable. He has to be held back by four men, because he is so strong and so eager to attack, like a ravening beast at the mercy of its passions and not like a reasoning human being, which implies that his nature is more animal-like than human.

Grenja is also used in the *fornaldarsögur*, as in *Ásmundar saga kappabana* (Ch. 9), where it is not used of *berserkir*, but rather of the noise made by Hildibrand's sword breaking in similar fashion. This usage resembles that in *Kormáks saga* where his sword is unwilling to be drawn.³⁸⁶ In *Örvar-Odds saga*, it is used to describe the howls of *berserkir*: 'ok kemr nú á þá berserksgangr, ok fara grenjandi' (and now the *berserkr*'s fit comes upon them and they go about howling).³⁸⁷ Based on its usage and ubiquity, *grenja* appears to be a more general term for howling, lacking any significant meaning or weight, although possibly indicating a canine tone.

Where *grenja* is a common term, *emja* is much rarer. It does not occur in the *Íslendingasögur* at all, occurs only once in Eddic poetry and only rarely appears elsewhere, as is discussed below. Where it occurs in poetry, *emja* is mostly paired with *grenja* as in *Örvar-Odds saga*:

Þá var mér ótti
einu sinni,
er þeir grenjandi

³⁸⁶ *Fsn*, I, 405-06.

³⁸⁷ *Fsn*, II, p. 251.

gengu af öskum
 ok emjandi í ey stigu.³⁸⁸
 (Then I was fearful
 one time,
 when they disembarked bellowing
 from the ships
 and screaming
 went onto the island.)

It is used in the same fashion by Þorbjörn hornklofi in *Haraldskvæði*, and in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.³⁸⁹ The way the two words are paired in this manner suggests that this was a stock pairing used by poets. This is further reinforced by its usage in prose texts like *Ágrip*: ‘Hann fór svá grenjandi ok emjandi ok ruddi svá at hann hjó á báðar hendr’ (He advanced both bellowing and howling, and cleared a path by hewing to both sides).³⁹⁰ Its usage in Eddic poetry is restricted to *Atlamál*, where it is used of wolves howling, as is also the case in *Völsunga saga*.³⁹¹ This accords well with the use of *emja* to describe the howls of the *ulfheðnar* in *Haraldskvæði*.

A range of other words representing the noises of animals are also used to describe the noises made by *berserkir*. In *Örvar-Odds saga*, Oddr says upon hearing the howling of the *berserkir* that it sounds like a virtual barnyard of

³⁸⁸ *Fsn*, II, p. 253.

³⁸⁹ ‘Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)’, ed. by Fulk, p. 102; *Fsn*, II, 5.

³⁹⁰ *Íf*, 29, p. 11.

³⁹¹ *Edda*, I, 251; *Fsn*, I, 203.

bulls and dogs making a noise: ‘Mér þykkir stundum sem griðungar gelli eða hundar ýli, en stundum er því líkt sem grenjat sé’ (It seems to me at times as if bulls are roaring or hounds howling, but sometimes it is as if they may have bellowed).³⁹² The sound of the *berserkir* is thus additionally described using the Old Norse verbs *gjalla* and *ýla*, which CV translates as ‘to yell, to scream, shriek’ and ‘to howl, yelp, of dogs or wolves’ respectively. ON *ýla* is used of the howling or shrieking of the *skrælingar* in Vinland in *Eiríks saga rauða*, where we simultaneously find *gjalla* used of the noise made by the bull that scared them.³⁹³ Elsewhere, ON *gjalla* is also used of bulls bellowing, for example, in *Eyrbyggja saga* where it is used synonymously with ON *belja*, when the saga describes how the young calf, Glæsir, makes a noise like a bull: ‘hann ... beljaði hátt, sem griðungr gylli’ (he bellowed loudly like a bull).³⁹⁴ In *Grænlandinga saga*, ON *gjalla* is used to describe the noise of a bull in the same episode described in *Eiríks saga rauða*, where the *skrælingar* in Vinland are frightened by it: ‘en graðungr tók at belja ok gjalla ákafliga hátt’ (a bull began to bellow and bawl horribly loudly).³⁹⁵ Given the barnyard associations of these words, it seems clear that they are used to provide comic effect in the episode in *Örvar-Odds saga*, showing that Oddr is not afraid of the *berserkir* and that he is quite happy to poke fun at them by comparing them with animals. In the example above from *Eiríks saga rauða* ON *gjalla* is paired with

³⁹² *Fsn*, II, 252.

³⁹³ Íf, 4, p. 429.

³⁹⁴ Íf, 4, p. 172.

³⁹⁵ Íf, 4, p. 261.

ON *belja* in a manner that suggests the two words are either related or synonymous.

ON *belja* is another word that is only used of animals in the *Íslendingasögur* but is used of the howling of *berserkir* in other genres from the same period. CV gives the meaning ‘to bellow’, and indicates that it should be construed as an animal noise. In the same episodes cited above from *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Grænlandinga saga*, it is used to describe the bull’s bellowing, which supports this idea.³⁹⁶ Its usage for *berserkir* is limited but does occur in several instances, such as *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*: ‘Dró hann þá slóðina eftir sér ok hljóp beljandi upp í fylking Eireks konungs’ (Then he dragged this bundle behind him and ran bellowing into king Eirek’s battle-line), which describes how Röndólfr has his buttocks chopped off and runs yelling back into his king’s ranks.³⁹⁷ In this case the bellowing is not rage but rather pain and appears to be a humorous episode. Based on these cases, it would appear that ON *belja* is not actually used of the howling that was supposed to have accompanied *berserksgangr*, but, like ON *gjalla* and *ýla*, is used to make light of *berserkir*.

One other word that is occasionally used of the howling of *berserkir* is ON *qskra*. It is usually translated as ‘to bellow’ as cited in CV. Grímr ægir in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* ‘öskraði svá hátt, at hans hljóð barst yfir allt herópit’ (bellowed so loudly that his cry could be heard above all the war-cries).³⁹⁸ It is

³⁹⁶ Íf, 4, pp. 172 and 261. See also Íf, 7, p. 115; and Íf, 11, p. 48.

³⁹⁷ *Fsn*, III, 245.

³⁹⁸ *Fsn*, III, 257.

used to describe the noise made by Röndólfr earlier in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* immediately after getting his hands chopped off: ‘hann veifaði stúfunum ok öskraði sem griðungr’ (he waved his stumps and bellowed like a bull).³⁹⁹ While the former usage is clearly howling related to *berserksgangr*, it seems more likely that the latter usage was actually intended as an expression of anger and possibly also pain but not *berserksgangr*, because he does not go berserk. Instead, he retreats into his own lines in a panic shortly after this incident. Given that the normal and most common usages of the various words for howling relate to animal noises, and that the usage of any but *grenja* for *berserkir* is rare, it seems more likely that the authors of the sagas in which they appear are using them to indicate the animalistic nature of *berserkir* or to permit the heroes to mock *berserkir* as was the case with *Örvar-Odds saga*.

ON *eiskra* is also often translated as ‘to howl’. Breen has identified from it and the other words discussed above a recognisable scale of noises made by *berserkir*.⁴⁰⁰ Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson note that ON *eiskra* is synonymous with ON *grenja* and can be translated into modern Icelandic as ‘æpa af reiði’ (to scream with rage).⁴⁰¹ CV gives the meaning ‘to roar or foam, rage’ for ON *eiskra* while ONP offers ‘rage, bellow’.⁴⁰² This word is used only in a small number of cases but it clearly indicates extreme anger or berserk

³⁹⁹ *Fsn*, III, 245.

⁴⁰⁰ Breen, ‘The Berserkr’, pp. 66-67.

⁴⁰¹ Íf, 3, p. 277n.

⁴⁰² CV and ONP s.v. *eiskra*.

fury in the modern sense of the word.⁴⁰³ As CV notes ‘in mod. usage, það ískrar í honum, it roars within him, of suppressed rage’.⁴⁰⁴ Therefore, this word indicates the sort of rage that modern perceptions of *berserksgangr* would expect, although its usage also refers to the rage of other people. In *Heiðarviga saga*, Þuriðr ‘gekk ... útan ok innar eptir gólfinu eiskrandi’ (paced backwards and forwards across the floor raging).⁴⁰⁵ Hildibrandr, a *berserkr* in *Ásmundarsaga kappabana*, is also described using this term: ‘En er Hildibrandr spyr þetta, eiskraði hann mjök’ (And when Hildibrandr finds this out, he raged greatly).⁴⁰⁶ Similarly in *Hamðismál*, the brothers Hamðir and Sqrli, who are both immune to edged weapons and thus share characteristics with *berserkir*, depart on their way in a state of rage:

Gengo ór garði
 gqrvir at eiskra.
 Liðo þá yfir, ungir
 úrig fiqll,
 mqrrom húnlenzkom,
 morðz at hefna.⁴⁰⁷

(The young men left the farm, made enraged,

⁴⁰³ *ONP* only cites three examples of this word’s usage.

⁴⁰⁴ CV s.v. *eiskra*.

⁴⁰⁵ Íf, 3, p. 277.

⁴⁰⁶ *Fsn*, I, 403.

⁴⁰⁷ *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Ursula Dronke, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969-2011), I, 163.

and then went over the wet mountain
 on Hunnish mares to avenge the murder)

Once more *eiskra* is used to describe this state. Larrington translated ‘gorvir at eiskra’ as ‘roaring with rage’, while Dronke suggested ‘in rising fury’.⁴⁰⁸ From the context and other usages as cited, it is clear that ON *eiskra* refers more to actual anger than it does to berserk howling and Larrington’s ‘roaring with rage’ must be taken metaphorically. Likewise, in Rafn’s edition of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* it says of Ángantýr and his *berserkir* that ‘Við þessi atvik eyskraði sút í berserkjunum’ (At this assault grief raged in the *berserkir*).⁴⁰⁹ These examples show that ON *eiskra* does not mean literally ‘to howl’ and is thus not a variation on ON *grenja*, but rather that its meaning is metaphorical and indicative of extreme, berserk anger. Therefore analysis of the howling of *berserkir* may exclude *eiskra* from consideration. Even excluding *eiskra*, a wide range of vocabulary is used for howling outwith the genre of *Íslendingasögur*. This may have been a function of the translation and composition process, or it may indicate that the authors and translators of these sagas felt free to use a wider range of vocabulary.

⁴⁰⁸ *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Carolayne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 239; *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Dronke, I, 163.

⁴⁰⁹ *Fornaldar sögur norðrlanda eptir gömlum handritum*, ed. by C. C. Rafn, 3 vols (Copenhagen: Enni Poppsku Prentsmiðju, 1829-30), I (1829), 409-512 (p. 425).

Much earlier than the Viking Age, Tacitus records Germanic warriors as having war songs or chants and war cries.⁴¹⁰ Their chanting (Lat *baritus* or *barritus*) at the start of battles was designed to enhance their own courage and Tacitus records that they raised their shields to their mouths to use them as sounding boards that might amplify and deepen the tone of their chanting. They are described as seeking to achieve a hoarse and harsh tone in doing so. It is possible that this practice developed into fully-fledged shield-biting and howling, or that the differentiation and separation of the two is a misunderstanding of what actually happened that occurred after the practice had ceased to be done. It seems more likely that *berserkir* would have used their shields in the same manner as the Germanic warriors that Tacitus describes, to amplify and modulate the tone of their howling rather than actually biting on them. In support of this stanza 156 of *Hávamál* states ‘undir randir ec gel’ (I chant under shields).⁴¹¹ This line is of interest because it suggests an alternative to shield-biting, namely chanting from behind the shield. This would presumably involve holding the shield in front of the face like Tacitus’ warriors. The stanza refers to the ability to send men into battle strong so that they enter it whole and return safely afterwards. This part of *Hávamál* comprises a list of Óðinn’s abilities. Relating this to the connection that *berserkir* have with Óðinn suggests that they may not have been biting their shields, but rather chanting behind them. ON *gala* means ‘to crow’ like a

⁴¹⁰ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, pp. 134-35.

⁴¹¹ *Edda*, I, 43.

cockerel or like a crow, but it also meant ‘to sing or chant’.⁴¹² The inference in this usage appears to be that the chanting is magical in nature as in *Hávamál* 152: ‘þann kann ec galdr at gala’ (I can chant that spell).⁴¹³ As such, it is possible that *berserkir* were actually chanting spells to enhance their own courage and that of the men in their army.

Some have also seen in the bellowing of the Rus warriors evidence of Scandinavian warriors making loud noises similar to those of *berserkir*.⁴¹⁴ The barbarian howls of Svyatoslav the Great’s Rus, as described by Leo the Deacon, are taken to be a continuation or extension of Scandinavian tradition:

ita tamen, ut Russi, innutrita feritate atque iracundia ducti, temere
Romanos assilirent, fanaticorum ritu rugientes;

(The Rus, who were directed by their habitual ferocity and passion,
attacked the Romans with a charge, bellowing as if possessed ...)⁴¹⁵

Allowing for the difficulties of relating the Rus directly to Scandinavian tradition, because of their separate evolution as a society and probable Slavic influence, such war cries could have been related to the howling of *berserkir*, and, as a common element of Viking Age warfare, might have been remembered and included in Old Norse literature. The ferocity of the Rus in the campaigns of the Byzantine emperor against them in 971 as described in

⁴¹² CV s.v. *gala*.

⁴¹³ *Edda*, I, 42.

⁴¹⁴ E.g. Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols*, p. 78.

⁴¹⁵ Leo Diaconus Caloensis, *Historiae*, cols 635-926 (862); *The History of Leo the Deacon*, trans. by Talbot and Sullivan, pp. 185-86.

Books VIII and IX of the *History* of Leo the Deacon may be a relict of the ferocity of Scandinavian warriors in general.⁴¹⁶

Given the available evidence, it is certain that *berserkir* howled or bellowed before and during battle. The Old Norse sources generally describe *berserkir* beginning to howl as part of *berserksgangr*, but this happens before the battle and not during, as one would expect if it were a berserk fit that comes over them while under stress. This suggests that *berserksgangr* is part of a ritual activity that precedes a duel or battle. Howling was intended to intimidate the enemy in the same way as the Germanic tribesmen that Tacitus describes intended their chanting to scare the enemy, and the howling of *berserkir* may have been an actual feature of warfare generally, rather than just being a literary motif. It may have had a mystical function, perhaps being part of a spell to enhance courage or protect a warrior as is suggested by stanza 156 of *Hávamál*, but at its root its primary effect would have been to prepare the *berserkr* mentally for battle.

While chanting of spells is not proven, although it does seem probable, what is clear is that howling is a primary attribute of *berserkir*. It is a bestial noise and the bestial nature of *berserkir* is emphasised by Snorri's comparison of *berserkir* with animals. Their strength is compared to that of bulls, while their attack is likened to a wolf or dog, and their howling, where not being mocked, is generally described as being similar to that of dogs or wolves.⁴¹⁷ With these comparisons in mind, the image constructed by the descriptions is

⁴¹⁶ Leo Diaconus Caloensis, *Historiae*, cols 842-886.

⁴¹⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 17.

animalistic and may well be purely literary. Its usage would have dehumanised *berserkir* in the eyes of the saga audience and emphasised their separation from society, creating an enemy that the audience would have been pleased to see killed.

4.3.6 Foaming at the mouth

Berserkir are also known to foam at the mouth in a very few cases, although examples of this are much rarer in the literature than any other manifestation of *berserksgangr*. When *Ángantýr* and his *berserkir* in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* become enraged at the death of *Hjörvarðr*, they ‘gnöguðu í skjaldar rendrnar, en froða gaus úr kjapti þeim’ (gnawed on their shield rims, and froth gushed from their mouths).⁴¹⁸ The paucity of references to this attribute does not suggest a more general concept of the frothing *berserkr*, so these depictions appear to be literary elaborations on the idea of the mad warrior, likening them perhaps to rabid dogs. As such, they must represent authorial embellishment of narratives rather than an older tradition.

4.3.7 Conclusions regarding the attributes of *berserkir*

The invulnerability of *berserkir* to fire and iron are sufficiently consistent within Old Norse literature that they may have been elements of *berserkir*’s historical reality. The former may have been part of a religious ritual as Breen suggested or it may have been an element of the braggadocio of the young warrior. It is possibly related to the induction of warriors into a band of

⁴¹⁸ *Fornaldar sögur norðrlanda*, ed. by Rafn, I, 425.

berserker even if it later became an intimidating display with little religious meaning. It was subverted in later texts as a means to prove Christianity's superiority to the Norse religion. In this light, the conversion episodes in *Njáls saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga* become formal contests between the old religion and the new, indicating that walking through fire unhurt was an element of the pagan panoply of skills.

Invulnerability to iron, or more correctly to sharp weapons may have been a function of the animal-skins that *berserker* probably wore. As discussed, a wolf- or bearskin could have proven effective against edged weapons, but, being flexible, it would have provided little protection against blunt force trauma, hence the descriptions of *berserker* being beaten by clubs. The need to have a spare sword that a *berserkr* could not blunt with his gaze may have been an extension or different depiction of the 'invulnerability to iron' motif. Breen's argument that it reflects Sámi bear-hunting practice because of a logical connection between bears and *berserker* is tempting but not sufficiently well supported by the evidence.

Shield-biting and howling are linked. Most *berserker* that bite their shields also howl. These actions occur before the start of combat, which indicates that they are more likely to be pre-battle posturing rather than symptoms of a berserk frenzy. It is certain that *berserker* howled, bellowed or shouted, and it is probable that it was intended to bolster the warrior's confidence while intimidating his enemy. The howling may have been intended to emulate the totem animal of the *berserkr*, be it a wolf or a bear, an act of mimesis that would enhance their ferocity. It is also possible that what has been recorded as howling was chanting of spells from behind the shield,

although animal mimesis and spell chanting are not mutually exclusive interpretations. By placing the shield in front of his face, the *berserkr* could be acting like the Germanic warriors of Tacitus' day who apparently used their shields as sounding boards to make their voices sound more frightening. This may also have given rise to the idea that *berserkir* bit their shields, such biting being a metaphorical description rather than a physical reality. Within Old Norse literature, howling may have had the intended function of making the *berserkr* appear more animalistic and distancing him from the audience so that they would cheer on the hero to his victory over the *berserkr*. At the same time it could still represent an enduring image of ferocity among a people that would have known how medieval warfare was carried out, and be a remembered attribute of a group of warriors that adopted animal attributes or identities, an act of animal mimesis consistent with the adoption of the wolf or bear identity that ON *berserkr* and *ulfhedinn* suggest.

4.4 The roles of *berserkir*

Berserkir have a number of different roles in Old Norse literature. They are often only present in the narrative as an opponent against whom the hero may prove their worth or character. This corresponds largely to the role of *hólmqongumaðr* or duellist that Beard and Blaney describe, although the king's *berserkir* are often seen to test young men too.⁴¹⁹ Examples of this sort of testing may be found in *Grettis saga* where Grettir overcomes *berserkir* in two conflicts (Chapters 19 and 40) and in *Egils saga* where Egill slays two

⁴¹⁹ See 3.4 for a description of Beard's and Blaney's work on this.

berserkr in single combat (Chapters 64 and 65).⁴²⁰ However, this is not their only role. Beard identified seven roles that *berserkr* fulfil within the sagas, which included the *hólmqongumaðr* described above, as well as being members of a king's warband and being vikings.⁴²¹ By classifying them in this manner, Beard seeks to subdivide the roles according to type and strength or troublemaking ability. From a functional perspective, this seems unnecessarily complex. Whether a *berserkr* is just an ordinary *berserkr* or a super-*berserkr* is not as important as the function that *berserkr* is fulfilling within the individual narrative. For this reason, I have limited my categorisation to four broader types based on Beard's analysis and have added a fifth that he did not cover:

1. King's *berserkr*;
2. Hall-challenging *berserkr*;
3. *Hólmqongumaðr*;
4. Viking *berserkr*; and
5. Christian *berserkr*.

Beard did not include in his analysis the Christian *berserkr*. This character features in a small selection of translations of foreign works and is presented as a fifth category, which can inform the full range of meanings of ON *berserkr* by analysis of which words are translated as ON *berserkr*. I have excluded the primitive Germanic warrior category from immediate consideration here, because Old Norse literature does not depict this sort of character.⁴²²

⁴²⁰ Íf, 7, pp. 63-69 and 135-36. ; Íf, 2, pp. 201-05 and 207-10.

⁴²¹ See 3.4.

⁴²² See 3.4 and 5.4.3.

The chosen categories cover the main activities of *berserkir* in Old Norse literature, although some *berserkir* cross the boundaries between two or more of these. For example, the *berserkir* in *Hrólfs saga kraka* fall into different categories at various times in the saga. They are said to be away raiding (category 4) but then they return to the hall and challenge everyone there (category 2), while still being part of Hrólfr's personal retinue (category 1).⁴²³ Their raiding appears to be sanctioned by the king, and their challenges in the hall are tolerated as being part of the status quo, a ritual activity that they undertake upon their return to establish their place in the pecking order of the hall, while their role as king's *berserkir* is important for the kingdom, because they are part of its defence system.

While these categories feature regularly in Old Norse literature, there are other descriptions of characters within Old Norse literature that indicate the presence of a *berserkr*-like figure but do not explicitly call that character a *berserkr*. As with my analysis of the attributes of the *berserkr*, there are many figures with names that indicate a predilection for *hólmanga*, or whose actions indicate that they are fulfilling the role of the *berserkr* within the narrative. When discussing the various roles, as with the attributes of the *berserkr*, I shall also consider those characters that fulfil the role of the *berserkr*, with a view to determining how the medieval audience might have received them.

⁴²³ *Fsn*, I, 68-71.

4.4.1 The king's *berserkr*

The king's *berserkr* is a member of the royal retinue. He appears to have been both valued and feared in equal measure, but is expected to be present at a pagan king's court and to fight on behalf of his king, possibly as a champion, but also as a member of his army. In addition to his role as retainer, he can also be a hall-challenging *berserkr* or a viking *berserkr*, but he does not appear to have been a *hólmqongumaðr* as depicted in the *Íslendingasögur*.⁴²⁴

The earliest Old Norse reference to *berserkir* is as members of Haraldr hárfagri's bodyguard.⁴²⁵ It seems likely that this role is of greater antiquity than many that feature in Old Norse literature, because it occurs in the earliest material and in semi-historical works such as *Gesta Danorum*.⁴²⁶ The king's *berserkir* are a feature of works such as *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*, as well as having a significant role to play in some sagas such as *Hrólfs saga kraka*.⁴²⁷ These *berserkir* are elite warriors. They occupy positions of honour and danger in the battle line, being placed where the fighting is likely to be fiercest. In *Heimskringla* we read that they were placed near the forecastle on Haraldr hárfagri's ship and that the men in the forecastle were the most courageous because they had the king's standard with them: 'Stafnbúar váru mest

⁴²⁴ See 4.4.2 - 4.4.4.

⁴²⁵ 'Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)', ed. by Fulk, pp. 102 and 113-114; See also Appendix 1.

⁴²⁶ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. by Friis-Jensen, trans. by Zeeberg, I, 166-69.

⁴²⁷ Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla I*, pp. 100 and 116; and Íf, 29, pp. 63-67.

vandaðir, því at þeir höfðu merki konungs. Aþr frá stafnrúmi til austrúms þat var kallat á rausn. Var þar skipat berserkjum' (The men in the prow were the most courageous, because they carried the king's standard. Between the prow area and the bilge was the area called the forecastle. That area was manned by the *berserkir*).⁴²⁸ This shows that Snorri believed that the *berserkir* were among the foremost warriors in Harald's warband. Their location just aft of the prow would place them at the lowest part of the gunwales and thus where the enemy would be most likely to assault initially, which area would require particularly brave warriors to defend. Such a place in the battle-line would have conferred significant status upon those that occupied it, yet we also read that *berserkir* could be hired out, as Snorri describes in *Skáldskaparmál*: King Hrólfr hires his *berserkir* out to King Aðils for a fee, when he himself cannot go to Aðils' aid.⁴²⁹ This might indicate that they are of lesser status because the *berserkir* are treated like mercenaries for hire rather than members of the court. However, the terms of service and the nature of Viking Age Scandinavian society at this time suggests that a king might seek additional income from selling the services of his warriors, and that those warriors would be bound to obey. Given the nature of a warband-based economy and its need for external sources of income to pay or reward the warriors, hiring out some of the warriors would be a convenient means of ensuring that the warriors are

⁴²⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 108.

⁴²⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. by Magnús Finnbogason (Bókaverzlun Sigurðar Kristjánssonar: Reykjavík, 1952), p. 171.

rewarded, while not expending wealth from the domestic coffers. Thus it does not necessarily reflect on their social status.

One episode that does indicate potentially lower status is found in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where Vermundr inn mjóvi obtains two Swedish *berserkir*, Halli and Leiknir, from Hákon Sigurðarson when he is in Norway.⁴³⁰ He is only able to do so with their permission, but the fact that Hákon is able to give them away like this bespeaks a lack of status that is not readily evident when reading the semi-historical sources. Furthermore, Hákon had received these *berserkir* as a gift from Eiríkr inn sigræli of Sweden, another indication that the author of this saga believed that *berserkir* had low social status for themselves, and could be given away. However, while they are treated almost as chattel to be disposed of at will, they also appear to confer social status upon their lord, a point which Halli makes to Styrr when asking for his daughter Ásdis' hand in marriage, and which he says will more than make up for his penury.⁴³¹ The lack of money reinforces the perception of their low social status, as does Styrr's refusal, because he has little to gain from the marriage. This leads to further difficulties and eventually the death of the *berserkir*.⁴³² Killing the *berserkir* is not difficult in this instance because they are exhausted from their travails, unarmed and unprepared for the assault. Nevertheless there is no apparent censure for killing them in this way; the *berserkir* appear to have no more status than a mad dog and killing them is a service to society.

⁴³⁰ Íf, 4, pp. 61-64 and 70-74.

⁴³¹ Íf, 4, pp. 70-71.

⁴³² Íf, 4, p. 74.

The apparent low social status of *berserkir* is not supported by depictions of the royal retinue in other sources. The *berserkir* in the hall of Hrólfr kraki have high places at table which bespeaks higher social status than is indicated for *berserkir* in the *Íslendingasögur*, although this is almost certainly a result of these latter being transplanted to Iceland rather than being part of a royal retinue. It seems likely that these royal retainers had high social status, because of their elite warrior status and their special connection to Óðinn. This view is reinforced by the fact that they are clearly part of one of the top tiers of society at this time. Perhaps the lower apparent social status in *Eyrbyggja saga* reflects later developments, when *berserkir* were no longer accepted as a part of society because they represented the powers of the old gods rather than the power of Christianity. This may also be a reason for the depiction of *berserkir* as troublemakers.⁴³³ As highly trained and aggressive warriors, who have found themselves either having to convert or live on the margins of society as a result of the advent of Christianity, they may well have resorted to pseudo-legal or even illegal means to maintain themselves. It is also likely that there would be jostling for position among a group of highly competitive, aggressive young men within any warband, who are unlikely to require much encouragement to start a fight. Therefore, it is no surprise at all that they might be depicted as challenging each other to sort out their pecking order.

⁴³³ Blaney, 'Berserkr', pp.178-79; see also 4.4.3 and 4.4.4.

4.4.2 The hall-challenging *berserkr*

Some *berserkr* are trouble-makers and occur in three main forms: the hall challenger, the *hólmqongumaðr* and the viking. This section and the following two cover these trouble-making *berserkr*.

The hall-challenging *berserkr* usually arrives at Yuletide as an uninvited intruder. He enters the hall either alone or as part of a group and proceeds to make the lives of those present a misery. As an example of such behaviour, he might go around everyone in the hall challenging them to state that they are better than him, with the obvious implication that he will attack them if they do. The hero is usually in the hall and has been treated poorly up to this point. He is also likely to be untested, possibly with a reputation for being a bit of a layabout, a *kolbítr* (coal-eater, an idle person) in the Old Norse idiom. When the *berserkr* challenges the hero, the hero demonstrates his ability, defeats the *berserkr* and is finally accepted and given his due respect. There are variations in this process, but the end result is the same; the hero shows his mettle and becomes accepted.

Such behaviour is evident in full form in *Hrólfs saga kraka* where Hötrr is bombarded with bones by the warriors in the hall until Böðvarr helps him stand up to them.⁴³⁴ Similar episodes may be found in *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Svarfdæla saga*. In the former, Björn járnhauss arrives at the Yuletide feast and challenges all present, finishing his challenge with Glúmr, who is lying on a bench with a cloak (ON *feldr*) over him, having been treated poorly by all present. Glúmr attacks Björn with a firebrand and drives him from the hall,

⁴³⁴ *Fsn*, I, 64.

which results in his death. Glúmr is then acknowledged as a kinsman and offered the succession.⁴³⁵ In the latter, the whole process is considerably more formalised.⁴³⁶ There is the usual dismay in the hall, before the arrival of Moldi, who is described as a ‘víkingr eða hálfberserkr’ (viking or half-berserker).⁴³⁷ In this case, the dismay is because he wishes to marry jarl Herrǫðr’s daughter. Despite, or possibly because of, this fear and dislike of Moldi, he is still accommodated and room is made for him and his followers by means of sending twelve men from the hall. Only Þorsteinn dares to oppose Moldi, when he challenges people in the hall and they agree to single combat. A lacuna in the text at the point of the duel prevents us from knowing what actually happened, but Þorsteinn survives, so we must assume that Moldi has been defeated.⁴³⁸ This saga uses juxtaposition of the *hólmǫngumaðr* and the hall-challenger and shows that there is not necessarily a huge gulf between the two, but it also follows the classic pattern outlined above.

Breen records that the challenge is a fairly common medieval literary motif although he considers that its Old Norse form presents difficulties when the reasons for its presence are analysed.⁴³⁹ As noted in Chapter 3, Danielli and others had identified an initiation sequence in these episodes.⁴⁴⁰ It is Breen’s

⁴³⁵ Íf, 9, pp. 16-19.

⁴³⁶ Íf, 9, pp. 142-48.

⁴³⁷ Íf, 9, p. 142.

⁴³⁸ Íf, 9, p. 147-8.

⁴³⁹ Breen, ‘The Berserkr’, p. 118.

⁴⁴⁰ See 3.3.

contention that their application of this idea to the hall-challenger sequence is too rigid and that not all hall-challenger episodes support this. In particular, Breen cites Danielli's requirement for reconciliation after the testing, as happens in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, to be the exception rather than the norm, and therefore a case for stating that 'its various manifestations should not be manipulated to reconstruct a hypothetical, prototypical pattern'.⁴⁴¹ However, this seems unnecessarily restrictive. While Breen is correct to state that there are significant variations in the episodes as described, and that this does not wholly support the initiation theory, his argument fails because he refers to the narrative function of the hall-challenge and relies solely upon that to refute it. Certainly there is inconsistency within the narratives, but these have been written long after the end of such rituals, if they existed. The dramatic nature of the narratives could be construed as requiring a greater sense of conflict than an initiation ceremony with a mock fight which would give the author an incentive to expand upon the basic sequence of events. Therefore, while Breen is correct purely in terms of the narrative structure of such episodes, he fails to take account of social, cultural, linguistic and literary changes that affected how a narrative might be altered during the transmission process.

4.4.3 The *hólmǫngumaðr*

The *hólmǫngumaðr* is one of the most common types of encounter with a *berserkr* in the *Íslendingasögur*.⁴⁴² *Hólmǫngumenn* are warriors, who

⁴⁴¹ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 119.

⁴⁴² Blaney, 'The Berserk Suitor', p. 279.

challenge weaker farmers to duels for their farms, female relatives or both. It is never clear what the farmer stands to gain from taking part in the duel, apart from retaining his life if he lives, or what the pretext for the challenge is, but it rarely comes to the worst for the farmer anyway because the hero of the saga steps in as the farmer's champion. The hero defeats the *berserkr* and gains a wife and property in the typical pattern of this episode.⁴⁴³ Similar to the duellist is the viking *berserkr*, whom I discuss below.⁴⁴⁴

The *hólmǫngumaðr* may be found in, for example, *Egils saga*, where Egill encounters Ljótr inn bleiki, who is a 'berserkr ok hólmǫngumaðr mikill' (a *berserkr* and great duellist).⁴⁴⁵ In this episode, which takes place in Norway, Egill defends his host Friðgeirr and his host's family from Ljótr by fighting a duel against him as Friðgeirr's champion. However, rather than marry the girl as the form would normally require, he asks Friðgeirr to lay claim to Ljótr's wealth on his behalf before going on his way. This example shows that the form is not fixed, and, indeed, Breen has argued against Dehmer's concept of a six-stage full form with deviant variations on the basis that even Dehmer could not actually identify many examples that demonstrated the complete form of the type scene.⁴⁴⁶ Given that the motif of the *hólmǫngumaðr* is repeated with limited variation in many sagas, and sometimes even in the same saga, it seems

⁴⁴³ Heinz Dehmer, *Primitives Erzählungsgut in den Íslendinga-Sögur*, Von Deutscher Poeterey, 2 (Leipzig: J. J. Weber, 1927), p. 86.

⁴⁴⁴ See 4.3.4.

⁴⁴⁵ Íf, 2, p. 201.

⁴⁴⁶ Breen, 'The Berserkr', pp. 121-22.

sensible to conclude, as Breen does, that a basic outline, like that discussed at the start of this section, applies to all these episodes but that there is no fully defined form on which these are based.

While it is often *berserkir* that are engaged in *hólmganga*, this is not always the case. *Hólmganga* had legal standing in Norway and is mentioned in a Norwegian law propounded by Magnús Hákonarson lagabætir under the term *holmfærr* (in a position to undertake *hólmganga*).⁴⁴⁷ This section deals with inheritance laws. However, *hólmganga* is not mentioned at all in *Grágás* so its status in Iceland remains unresolved. In addition to this legal reference, *hólmganga* was thought to have been a problem in the early eleventh century because, when *Grettis saga* was written in the late fourteenth century, it states that *hólmganga* was legislated against in Norway by Eiríkr jarl:

Þótti monnum þat mikill ósiðr í landinu, at úthlaupsmenn eða berserkir skoruðu á hólm gofga menn til fjár eða kvenna; skyldu hvárir ógildir falla, sem fellu fyrir oðrum. Fengu margir af þessu smán ok fjármissu, en sumir líftjón með öllu, ok því tók Eiríkr jarl af allar hólmgongur í Nóregi; hann gerði ok útlaga alla ránsmenn ok berserki, þá sem með óspekðir fóru.⁴⁴⁸

(It seemed a great disgrace to men in the land, that raiders or *berserkir* challenged noble men to duels for their money or women; each one, who fell before the other, should die

⁴⁴⁷ *NGL*, II, 90 n11.

⁴⁴⁸ Íf, 7, p. 61.

without compensation. Many got disgrace and loss of valuables from this and some loss of life along with the rest, and for this reason Eiríkr jarl abolished all duels in Norway; he also made outlaws of all those bandits and *berserkir*, who made trouble.)

This is the only surviving reference to any attempt to ban *hólmganga* in Norway at this time, so it needs to be considered in context rather than being taken literally. The event is a foreshadowing and trigger of Grettir's fight with the *berserkir* Þórir þomb and Ógmundr illi, which follows almost immediately after. Thus, this episode may not actually represent remembered historical legislation, and could be fabrication designed to further the narrative of the saga. What is important here is the concept of the *berserkr* that it shows us, because this demonstrates one aspect of how a late medieval saga author thought about *berserkir*. Given the prevalence of *hólmganga* in the sagas and its legal status, the medieval saga authors believed that *berserkir* were intimately connected to this practice, which suggests that they believed that duelling was a part of the usual duties of a *berserkr*.

Another consideration when discussing *hólmgöngumenn* also relates to the legal aspect of their duels, because *hólmganga* was a legal method for resolving disagreements.⁴⁴⁹ *Egils saga* states that everyone had the right to challenge another to *hólmganga* if they were not satisfied with the usual

⁴⁴⁹ Marlene Ciklamini, 'The Old Icelandic Duel', *Scandinavian Studies*, 35.3 (1963), 175-94 (pp175-76).

process of law.⁴⁵⁰ In this regard it was a form of trial by combat and could involve anyone that was unhappy with or did not wish to follow other legal processes. Not everybody that fought duels was a *berserkr* and not every *hólmganga* will have involved *berserkir*, even though duelling was almost certainly one duty of the historical *berserkr*.⁴⁵¹ The *hólmgongumaðr* also lives within society and may hold property, hence his desire to take and hold the property of weaker men. Thus, he is not an outlaw, just a troublemaker using dubious legal means for personal gain.

Beyond the *Íslendingasögur* this motif is easily applied to other genres of saga. The challenger can be a *blámaðr*, a foreign prince or a giant, but the style of the motif remains the same, while the opponent varies according to the needs of the genre.⁴⁵² Thus it is a flexible motif and some care must be taken in deciding whether the hero's opponent really qualifies as a *berserkr*. In this regard, the attributes discussed earlier in Section 4.3 may be compared to the challenger to classify them appropriately.

As was mentioned earlier, the challenge to *hólmganga* is usually related to the desire on the part of the *berserkr* to take ownership of his victim's wife or daughter, and property. Eliade, drawing on the work of Höfler, Weiser and Dumézil, suggests that *berserkir*, like other primitive warrior societies, may have had a 'right of rapine' and that they may have terrorised

⁴⁵⁰ Íf, 2, p. 208.

⁴⁵¹ See 4.4.5 and 5.3 for discussion of other aspects of duelling.

⁴⁵² See 4.7.

the uninitiated with impunity.⁴⁵³ This presupposes that they were originally a warrior society with their own initiatory rites.⁴⁵⁴ However, it also requires the society in which they lived to be similar to those tribal societies in which warriors might have such a free hand. Breen proposes Tacitus' *Germania* as evidence of warrior societies that have special rights over the women in their tribe, but who may not marry.⁴⁵⁵ He also cites the law of the Jómsvíkingar which states that no women may be allowed in the camp, as evidence for *berserkir* having special marriage codes that ensured they remained bachelors. The problem with these is that Tacitus wrote his *Germania* seven hundred years before the start of the Viking Age, which immediately significantly distances his work from historical *berserkir*, while the Jómsvíkingar are not demonstrably *berserkir* at all. Closer to the right historical period is a passage from Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, which Breen cites as showing that Frotho's *berserkir* had special rights of adjudication over the activities of virgins.⁴⁵⁶ However, the passage does not specifically refer to *berserkir*. Rather it refers to Frotho's courtiers (Lat *contubernales*) and their increasing moral dissolution.⁴⁵⁷ The court may have included *berserkir*, but there is no evidence in this text that the whole court comprised *berserkir*. Thus, leaving aside Saxo's desire to show these courtiers' conduct in a bad light, the evidence for

⁴⁵³ Eliade, *Rites and Symbols*, p. 83.

⁴⁵⁴ See 3.3 and 5.2.16.

⁴⁵⁵ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 124.

⁴⁵⁶ Breen, 'The Berserkr', p. 127.

⁴⁵⁷ Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, I, 282-85.

berserkir having special rights over women seems equivocal at best. There may have been *berserkir* at the court of Frotho, but they are not specifically selected as behaving in this way, while Tacitus' writings, if we may accept them as being precisely correct in this instance, only show that an earlier society had a class of warriors who were not allowed to marry. It is rather too great a leap of faith to equate these with a 'right of rapine' for *berserkir* without more corroborating evidence.

The *hólmǫngumaðr* of the sagas primarily informs our understanding of medieval attitudes to and traditions about *berserkir*. This particular variant of the *berserkr* is a troublemaker, who needs to be controlled. His activities are aimed at personal advancement through the acquisition of wealth and presumed sexual gratification through the theft of other men's wives and daughters. His activities represent a threat to the order of society and are curbed by the hero's willingness to deal with the *berserkr*. As such, he is a stock villain, providing appropriate elements of conflict within the sagas.

The most likely historical conclusion that may be drawn from episodes featuring *hólmǫngumenn* is that *berserkir* were intimately associated with duelling which points to a role as champions in the past and may thus be a link to *Lex Baiuvariorum* and *Lex Frisionum*.⁴⁵⁸ As champions, they could have fought on behalf of their king in duels too, so the role of the *hólmǫngumaðr* can be connected to the duties of *berserkir* as members of a king's warband.

⁴⁵⁸ *Lex Baiuvariorum*, ed. by Beyerle, pp. 138-40; *Friesische Rechtsquellen*, pp.76-78 (Ems. I) and 77-79 (Rüst. and Westerl.); see also 5.3.

4.4.4 The viking *berserkr*

The viking *berserkr* appears to have been particularly popular among the Icelandic consumers of *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* based on the number of episodes featuring this type of *berserkr*, as, for example, in *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and *Sigurðar saga þögla*.⁴⁵⁹

This incarnation of the *berserkr* usually occurs in groups rather than individually, although occasionally a *berserkr* may also be called a *víkingr* as well, as occurs with Surtr járnhaustr in *Flóamanna saga*.⁴⁶⁰ These groups vary in size and composition but all share the common attribute of marauding and pillaging for their own gain. As with the example of King Hrólfr's *berserkir*, viking *berserkir* can also be in service with a king and may supplement their income with additional booty gained in this manner.⁴⁶¹ Such gains might be shared with their king or lord upon their return and so travelling abroad to raid is likely to have been encouraged as a part of foreign policy. Given the fragmented nature of Viking Age Scandinavia, it is entirely possible that raiding abroad was not only for personal gain, which was needed to maintain the warband, but could also be used as a tool to weaken the power of opposing rulers, although it is never expressed in precisely this manner within Old Norse

⁴⁵⁹*Fsn*, II, 64-67; *Fsn*, III, 179-82; and *LMIR*, II, 165-72.

⁴⁶⁰ Íf, 13, pp. 260-61.

⁴⁶¹ *Snorra Edda*, p. 171.

literature.⁴⁶² In addition to the raiding retinues, free-booting or piratical *berserkir*, who have no affiliation to anyone outside their immediate group could exist and raid without concern for returning to a lord or king.

Breen has discussed the details of the viking *berserkr* on the basis of developing a typology that considers affiliation, preferred environment (sea or land) and mode of pillaging.⁴⁶³ Such a typology is not particularly useful in the analysis of viking *berserkir*, because they are better defined by the threat they pose to society, rather than by their primary zone of pillaging.

The viking *berserkr* has all the usual attributes of other *berserkir*. The main difference is in the scale of his depredations, compared to that of the *hólmqongumaðr*. Acting as groups these viking *berserkir* can cause much greater harm than individual *berserkir*, who challenge individuals. It is possible that groups of *berserkir* did cause significant problems for society, if *berserkir* were outlawed as described in *Grettis saga*, because it would make sense for them to band together for protection and to continue to maintain themselves through war. Such men could quickly become outlaws and live a liminal existence that the king's *berserkir* would not have, perhaps preferring such a lifestyle to having to convert to Christianity.

⁴⁶² See, for example, *Færeyinga saga: Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd Munk Snorrason*, Íslenzk fornrit, 25 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2006), pp. 45-47.

⁴⁶³ Breen, 'The Berserkr', pp. 110-13.

4.4.5 The Christian *berserkr*

One type of *berserkr* that Beard did not include in his categorisation is the Christian *berserkr*. This figure exists only in translations from other languages such as *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* and *Ívens saga*, and appears limited to Norwegian works, although the sample size is insufficiently large to draw any firm conclusions regarding geographical diversity of meaning.

At first glance, the concept of the Christian *berserkr* might be thought to be fundamentally contradictory and not in accord with the values of meekness, forgiveness and peacefulness that a modern Christian is supposed to uphold, because, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the sociopathic *berserkr* was a staple of the sagas and nearly always had a negative image.⁴⁶⁴ This figure is neither meek nor forgiving. A strong pagan connection existed within many narratives about *berserkir*, as Snorri makes explicit in *Heimskringla*, when he relates *berserkir* to Óðinn, which should indicate a strongly negative attitude towards *berserkir*, because they were not Christian.⁴⁶⁵ Despite this, not all *berserkir* were depicted negatively. *Haralds saga hárfagra* says of Berðlu-Kári, Egill Skalla-Grímsson's great grandfather, 'hann var berserkr mikill', 'he was a great *berserkr*'.⁴⁶⁶ No additional detail is added here or in the early chapters of *Egils saga*, where he also makes an

⁴⁶⁴ See 4.4.2 to 4.4.4.

⁴⁶⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 17.

⁴⁶⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 107.

appearance.⁴⁶⁷ With descriptions like this, it is unclear whether the term *berserkr* is intended pejoratively or not. However, the lack of accompanying descriptions of his misdeeds suggests that a more moderate character than that of the usual *berserkr* is meant and thus that conceptions beyond those previously discussed existed. Looking further afield descriptions exist that are not negative in the slightest. For example, in the mid-thirteenth-century *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* the Christian Antonius is referred to as a *berserkr* when he is beset by devils: ‘En iesus kristr glæymdi eigi holmgangu sins bersserks’ (But Jesus Christ did not forget the duel of his *berserkr*).⁴⁶⁸ This casts the *berserkr* in an explicitly Christian role with the hero fighting on behalf of, or in the name of, Jesus Christ. Thus Antonius is cast in the mould of a *miles Christi*.

The use of the term *hólmganga* recognises that the *berserkr* might fight duels for his god even as a Christian. Another Christian *berserkr* is mentioned in this saga, when the hero Josaphat is described as ‘hinn vngi berserkr guðs’ (God’s young *berserkr*).⁴⁶⁹ The saga is a Christianised version of the story of the Buddha, so he cannot be a warrior of Óðinn, but he is still God’s *berserkr*. Therefore, the author of this saga was comfortable with the view that a Christian hero might also be a *berserkr*, which suggests a different idea of what a *berserkr* was from the pagan archetype. This author has a definition in

⁴⁶⁷ Íf, 2, pp.3, 11 and 20.

⁴⁶⁸ *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga*, p. 46.

⁴⁶⁹ *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga*, p. 185.

mind that incorporates some elements of the heathen warrior but without the pagan stigma.

Returning to the use of *hólmganga* in *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga*, it should be noted that fighting duels was almost the stock-in-trade of the heathen *berserkr*, as discussed previously.⁴⁷⁰ This concept of duelling appears to be the key to understanding the Christian *berserkr*. *Ívens saga*, which was translated into Old Norwegian from Old French in the thirteenth century, includes a passage where Íven, accompanied by his lion, faces three foes. These men complain that his lion will fight as his *berserkr*. Íven promptly denies that he had ever intended for his lion to fight in this way: ‘Síra Íven svarar: “Eigi hafða ek león þetta hingat til þess at þat væri berserkr eða hefði einvígi ...”’ (Sir Iven replies, “I did not bring my lion here that it might be a *berserkr* or fight in single combat ...”).⁴⁷¹ When Chrétien de Troyes’ verse epic *Yvain* was translated from the French for Hákon Hákonarson, OFr *champion* was rendered as *berserkr*. The Old French word is cognate with PDE *champion*, and the context shows that it was intended to mean a person who fights in the stead of someone else, corresponding to one modern English definition. Thus, a *berserkr* was also a champion. This exact usage does not occur elsewhere in the *Íslendingasögur*, because the role of champion normally lies within the purview of the hero, who must defeat the *berserkr*. However, *berserkir* are members of kings’ warbands in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and in *Haralds saga*

⁴⁷⁰ See 4.4.3.

⁴⁷¹ NR, II, 80-81.

hárfagra.⁴⁷² Such warriors might well be expected to fight in the place of their lord in a duel. The concept of the *berserkr* as a Christian champion that fought single combats or duels on behalf of his Lord God or in defence of the weak is thus not so far-fetched. It suggests that a medieval conception of the *berserkr* as a, possibly knightly, champion existed alongside the older but still surviving archetype of the fearsome warrior of Óðinn.

The fact that these two uses of *berserkr* were contemporaneous may point to some level of cognitive polyphasia; the ability to assimilate and apply opposing meanings of the same word under different circumstances. It seems likely from the usages cited that more than one meaning of *berserkr* was current in medieval Scandinavia and Iceland, perhaps with geographical or dialectal variation being at the root of the variation. *Berserkir* were certainly thought of as heathen troublemakers, as evidenced by the usage in Snorri and their primary role in many sagas, but the term also appears to have denoted a great warrior, a champion in the full sense of the word. As such, the concept of the Christian *berserkr* seems to have existed simultaneously with that of the heathen *berserkr* and troublemaker, with only context showing which was applicable.

4.5 Onomastic patterns

It is sometimes asserted that the names given to *berserkir* in Old Norse literature are signifiers of a particular attribute or status, more so than the

⁴⁷² *Fsn*, I, 68-71; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 100.

names of characters that are not *berserkir*.⁴⁷³ One example of a naming pattern occurs in Saxo, where he describes a company of warriors with ursine names, whose activities mark them as particularly aggressive vikings: Gerbiorn, Gunbiorn, Arinbiorn, Stenbiorn, Esbiorn, Thorbiorn and Biorn.⁴⁷⁴ These warriors have been identified as *berserkir* and Ellis Davidson has proposed a theory of ursine name-taking upon joining a band of *berserkir*.⁴⁷⁵ Given the connection between *berserkir* and bears, from *berserkr* possibly meaning ‘wearing a bearskin shirt or armour’ to Böðvarr Bjarki’s fighting as a bear in *Hrólfs saga*, this appears to be a logical connection, but, as has been mentioned, it fails to consider if such a naming practice occurred in other families that were not *berserkir*.⁴⁷⁶

This section tests that theory by examining the onomastic patterns into which names of *berserkir* fit. The extent to which the names ascribed to *berserkir* were in common usage within the broader scope of Nordic society in the Viking Age and medieval period has been little analysed previously, so the discussion encompasses also names of individuals that are recorded in Old Norse literature, and Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian society. The analysis focuses on *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*, because these two

⁴⁷³ Gerard Breen, ‘Personal names and the re-creation of berserkir and úlfheðnar’, *Studia Anthroponymica Scandinavica*, 15 (1997), 5-38 (p. 6);

Breen, ‘The Berserkr’, pp. 22-32.

⁴⁷⁴ Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, I, 364-65.

⁴⁷⁵ *History of the Danes*, ed. by Ellis Davidson, II, 95.

⁴⁷⁶ *Fsn*, I, 99; see also 3.1.2.

genres are likely to represent more genuine historical naming traditions. *Riddarasögur* are not considered for this purpose because they are often translations from other languages and thus may not provide evidence for a genuine Scandinavian onomastic tradition.

4.5.1 The *Íslendingasögur*

Berserkir feature in fourteen of the forty surviving *Íslendingasögur*, all of which name some or all of the *berserkir* appearing in them. The thirty individuals identified are listed in Table 4.1 below.⁴⁷⁷

Name	Saga
Agnarr	<i>Gull-Þóris saga</i>
Ásgautr	<i>Víga-Glúms saga</i>
Atli inn skammi	<i>Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar</i>
Berðlu-Kári	<i>Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar</i>
Björn inn blakki	<i>Gísla saga Súrssonar</i>
Björn járnhauss	<i>Víga-Glúms saga</i>
Eysteinn berserkr	<i>Víga-Glúms saga</i>
Gautr berserkr	<i>Gull-Þóris saga</i>
Geirr inn gerzki	<i>Gull-Þóris saga</i>
Halli	<i>Eyrbyggja saga</i>
Haukr	<i>Vatnsdæla saga</i>

⁴⁷⁷ Table 4.1 lists names of *berserkir* compiled from my own analysis of the *Íslendingasögur*.

Name	Saga
Haukr	<i>Vatnsdæla saga</i>
Helgi Harðbeinsson	<i>Laxdæla saga</i>
Jökull	<i>Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls</i>
Klaufi	<i>Svarfdæla saga</i>
Kveld-Ulfr	<i>Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar</i>
Leiknir	<i>Eyrbyggja saga</i>
Ljótr inn bleiki	<i>Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar</i>
Moldi	<i>Svarfdæla saga</i>
Ótryggr	<i>Brennu-Njáls saga</i>
Skalla-Grímr	<i>Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar</i>
Snækollr	<i>Grettis saga</i>
Surtr járnhauss	<i>Flóamanna saga</i>
Svartr	<i>Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls</i>
Þórir haklangr	<i>Grettis saga</i>
Þórir Ingimundarson	<i>Vatnsdæla saga</i>
Þórir þomb	<i>Grettis saga</i>
Þórormr	<i>Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu</i>
Þorsteinn varastafr	<i>Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu</i>
Qgmundr illi	<i>Grettis saga</i>

Table 4-1 *Berserkir* in the *Íslendingasögur*

Where one might have expected to see theriophoric names with lupine or ursine elements relating to the possible animal mimesis of *berserkir*, and to support Ellis Davidson's theory, there are actually few examples of such

names in the *Íslendingasögur*: Kveld-Ulfr, Björn inn blakki and Björn járnhauss are the only three. This is, in itself, enlightening because theriophoric names and compounds of such names were among the most common names in the Viking Age and medieval period in both Norway and Iceland as examination of Lind's *Norsk-Isländska Dopnamn* shows.⁴⁷⁸ Such names are also particularly common on runestones in Sweden with Björn and Ulfr being the second and fourth most common names recorded.⁴⁷⁹ The presence of numerous compound forms of both Björn and Ulfr further demonstrates the popularity of these names among the general populace and shows their lack of significance as indicators of *berserkr* status, as examination of Peterson's frequency tables shows: Ulfr is the most common second element in deuterthemes, while Björn takes second place in this list.⁴⁸⁰ Given how common these names are, it is surprising to note the low incidence of such names in the *Íslendingasögur*.

The only significant pattern that might be adduced is that of Egill Skalla-Grímsson's family, where there is clearly a pattern of theriophoric naming within the saga.⁴⁸¹ Egill's grandfather, Kveld-Ulfr, has both werewolfish tendencies and a name that indicates his temperament. His parents were Brunda-Bjálfi and Hallbera, both of whom have ursine names, and his

⁴⁷⁸ Lind, *Norsk-Isländska Dopnamn*, cols 144-47 and 1054-1056.

⁴⁷⁹ Lena Peterson, *Nordiskt Runnamnslexikon*, 5th edn (Uppsala: Institutet för språk och folkminnen, 2007), pp. 44-45, 240-42 and 272.

⁴⁸⁰ Peterson, *Runnamnslexikon*, p. 284.

⁴⁸¹ Íf, 2, p. 3.

grandfather was Ulfr inn óargi (Ulfr the fearless), which is a lupine name. His uncle was Hallbjörn hálf troll, an ursine name that also links him to giants. Kveld-Ulfr had two sons, one named Þórólfr (a lupine name linked with Þórr) and Grímr, who was known as Skalla-Grímr, and whose name is a *heiti* for Óðinn, as well as being indicative of mask-wearing.⁴⁸² Skalla-Grímr had two sons, Egill and Þórólfr. Thus, it can be seen that lupine and ursine names are sufficiently common within Egill's family tree to suggest that the family felt a particular connection with these animals. With the male members of this family possibly being *berserkir*, it might be construed as evidence of a naming tradition among *berserkir* as well as a family tradition of being *berserkir*, supporting Ellis Davidson's theory of ursine name-taking.⁴⁸³ Of the other names listed, only Haukr (hawk) is theriophoric. The two *berserkir* called Haukr travel together and it may be speculated that they have taken the same name, because they are in partnership, but there is no evidence to support this.⁴⁸⁴ It is also worth noting that hawks are not associated with Óðinn or *berserkir*, where wolves and bears are.

Theophoric name elements are the most common with five examples: Þórir haklangr, Þórir þqmb, Þórir Ingimundarson, Þórormr and Þorsteinn varastafr. Þórr is not known as a patron of *berserkir* so it seems unlikely that these theophoric names were chosen to indicate their bearer's status as a *berserkr*, when these sagas were being compiled. This conclusion is reinforced

⁴⁸² See 5.2.11 for discussion of masks.

⁴⁸³ *History of the Danes*, ed. by Ellis Davidson, II, 95.

⁴⁸⁴ Íf, 8, p. 124.

by the evidence from runic inscriptions because Þórr is the second most common male name element, while Þorsteinn is the third most common personal name and Þórir is the sixth most common.⁴⁸⁵ Thus, these names are simply very common and have no special meaning for the *berserkir* that bear them.

Names denoting toughness or invulnerability occur only once: Helgi Harðbeinsson has the name Harðbeinn (hard-foot or hard-bone) from his father and passes it on to his son. This suggests that his family may have had a tradition of naming one of the sons for his grandfather: thus Harðbeinn, son of Helgi, son of Harðbeinn.⁴⁸⁶ A genealogy like this could indicate a tradition like that of Egill's family, where the family has adopted a particular identity and maintains it through a naming tradition.

Names conveying ugliness include Svartr which indicates darkness or dirtiness, and Ljótr inn bleiki whose name means 'ugly' and whose byname suggests that he is particularly pale. Linked to the concept of pallidity is Snækollr (snowy head) whose name may indicate that he is bald or particularly pale and thus ugly. The bynames provide additional examples of ugly traits. As already mentioned ON *bleiki* means 'pale' and may be considered an ugly trait. Skalla-Grímr has a byname prefixed to his first name that indicates that he was bald, and the byname *blakki* indicates darkness or dirtiness. All of these are negative physical traits and indicate that these *berserkir* were ugly.

⁴⁸⁵ Peterson, *Runnamnslexikon*, pp. 272 and 283.

⁴⁸⁶ Íf, 5, pp. 164 and 185.

Negative character traits are also expressed by some of the names.

Ótryggr indicates untrustworthiness, while the byname ‘illi’ (evil) shows that Ógmundr is a wicked person.

Some physical traits are more positive. The byname *járnhauss* (iron skull) occurs twice and probably indicates a specific extension to just the skull of the traditional invulnerability that *berserkir* are supposed to have had.

Finally, there are four *berserkir* in the list whose names are *heiti* for Óðinn: the two Björns, Gautr and Skalla-Grímr. Given the connection between *berserkir* and Óðinn, it is surprising not to see more, if the naming conventions of *berserkir* are indicative of an authorial intent to paint *berserkir* in a particular light.

If *berserkir* were a specific group within society, it would be unsurprising that a family might have a tradition of membership and that the members of that family might all have been given names that indicate this status. There are only two such families represented in this list, and only Egill’s family is given a sufficiently long genealogy to confirm that he was descended from a family with a strong tradition of theriophoric naming, even though his own name is not theriophoric. When looking for a broader pattern of theriophoric naming, there is insufficient evidence to support the hypothesis that such a pattern exists more generally. The range of names is too broad and their frequency of occurrence among other characters is too great to indicate a consistent pattern that shows conscious effort on the part of saga authors to follow a tradition of certain types of names. Thus, there is no special significance to names that represent *berserkir* as ugly or evil, for *berserkir* within the genre of *Íslendingasögur*, even though many do bear names or

bynames that are indicative of negative characteristics. This may indicate that those who wrote the *Íslendingasögur* down were largely following oral traditions regarding the names of the *berserkir* featured in them.

4.5.2 The *fornaldarsögur*

Examination of the *fornaldarsögur* immediately suggests that if onomastic patterns are present then the sheer number of *berserkir* named within those works will provide a suitably large sample for them to become evident.⁴⁸⁷ With nearly one hundred examples, it is interesting to note how little repetition of names there is. Grímr is the most common name, being used in three sources, while a small number of names (Agnarr, Angantýr, Haraldr, Ingjaldr, Kolr, Sóti and Ulfr) feature twice, but most names are unique within the list of named *berserkir*. Other examples of repetition are all references to the same *berserkr* but in different sources as Table 4.2 shows.⁴⁸⁸

Name	Saga
Agnarr	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i> <i>Þorskfirðinga saga</i>
Agnarr berserkr	<i>Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans</i>

⁴⁸⁷ See Table 4.2.

⁴⁸⁸ Table 4.2 has been compiled from my own analysis of the *fornaldarsögur*. It includes a small number of characters that resemble *berserkir* in their attributes but are not explicitly called *berserkir* in the text. These are marked with an asterisk.

Name	Saga
Álfr	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Ámon	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Angantýr	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i> <i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Angantýr berserkr	<i>Hversu Noregr byggðist</i>
Arngrímr berserkr	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i> <i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Ásmundr	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Barri	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i>
Bíldr	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Björn*	<i>Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans</i>
Björn blátönn*	<i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar</i>
Böðvarr bjarki*	<i>Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans</i>
Bölverkr	<i>Sörla saga sterka</i>
Börkr	<i>Sörla saga sterka</i>
Brámi	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i>
Brandr	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Brúsi beinserkr	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Brynjólfur	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Búi	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i>
Dagr Lífski	<i>Sögubrot af fornkonungum</i>
Eysöðull	<i>Sögubrot af fornkonungum</i>
Eyþjófr	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>

Name	Saga
Framarr*	<i>Ketils saga hængs</i>
Garðarr	<i>Sörla saga sterka</i>
Gautan*	<i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar</i>
Gautr berserkr	<i>Þorskfirðinga saga</i>
Geirr	<i>Sögubrot af fornkonungum</i>
Gellir	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Glammaðr	<i>Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana</i>
Grímr	<i>Sögubrot af fornkonungum</i>
Grímr ægir	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Grímr ór Grímsgörðum	<i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar</i>
Haddíngjar	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Haka berserkr	<i>Hversu Noregr bygðist</i>
Haki	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Hálfr berserkr	<i>Hversu Noregr bygðist</i>
Haraldr hilditönn*	<i>Sögubrot af fornkonungum Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i>
Haraldr Ólafsson	<i>Sögubrot af fornkonungum</i>
Hárekr	<i>Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar</i>
Hárekr járnhauss*	<i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar</i>
Hárr	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Héðinn mjófi	<i>Sögubrot af fornkonungum</i>

Name	Saga
Heiðrekr*	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i>
Herkir	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Hervarðr	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i> <i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Hesthöfði	<i>Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar</i>
Hjálmar	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Hjörvarðr	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Hólmsteinn	<i>Sögubrot af fornkonungum</i>
Hrærekr	<i>Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana</i>
Hrani	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i> <i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Hrólfr	<i>Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar</i>
Hrómundr berserkr	<i>Hversu Noregr byggðist</i>
Hrossþjófi	<i>Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar</i>
Ingjaldr	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Ingjaldr trana*	<i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar</i>
Ívarr þoggull	<i>Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar</i>
Járnhauss*	<i>Hálfðanar saga Brønuþóstra</i>
Jökull járnhrygg	<i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar</i>
Jólgeirr	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Kolr krappi*	<i>Sturlaugs saga starfsama</i>
Kolr kroppinbaki*	<i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar</i>

Name	Saga
Lífólfr	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Loðinn*	<i>Sörla saga sterka</i>
Loðmundr	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Ógautan*	<i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar</i>
Ögmundr*	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Örn enn heimski	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Ótryggr	<i>Gautreks saga</i>
Ötunfaxi*	<i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar</i>
Reifnir	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i>
Röndólfr	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Sæmingr	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i>
Siggeirr	<i>Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana</i>
Sigmundr*	<i>Völsunga saga</i>
Sinfjötli*	<i>Völsunga saga</i>
Skati Eiríksson	<i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar</i>
Sörkvér	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Sörkvir	<i>Gríms saga loðinkinna</i>
Sörli siðnefr	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Sóti	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Sóti	<i>Hálfðanar saga Brúnufóstra</i>
Styrr sterki	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Svipdagr*	<i>Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans</i>

Name	Saga
Tindr	<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i> <i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Tjösniir	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Tófi	<i>Sörla saga sterka</i>
Tóki	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Törfi	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Tryggvi	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Tyrfingr	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>
Ulfr	<i>Gautreks saga</i>
Ulfr	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Vazi	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Þórðr Hléseyjarskalli	<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>
Þróstr	<i>Gríms saga loðinkinna</i>

Table 4-2 *Berserkir* in the *fornaldarsögur* (* indicates those with characteristics of *berserkir* but not explicitly named as such)

As with the *Íslendingasögur*, examples of theriophoric names with ursine and lupine connections are still present: Björn blátönn, Björn, Böðvarr bjarki, Brynjólfr, Lífólfr, Røndólfr and Ulfr. As a percentage of the whole, though, these names are not dominant and it is once more clear that there is no obvious tradition of theriophoric naming to denote the status of *berserkr* despite the common nature of such names in more general usage. There also appears to be little significance to these names, except in the case of Böðvarr bjarki, whose bear ancestry and ursine metamorphosis in the final battle in

Hrólfs saga kraka are signified by his byname and is made clear in his personal history.⁴⁸⁹ There is no real evidence that he has taken this name because he comes from a family of *berserkir* or that it is a sign of his status as a *berserkr*.

Unlike with the *Íslendingasögur*, Grímr is a more common name element for *berserkir*, although only by a little. Related to ON *gríma* ‘a covering for the face or head’, this name could indicate mask-wearing or even mumming, and might convey a connection to Óðinn because it is one of his *heiti*. It is present in the forms Arngrímr and Grímr. Other Óðinn *heiti* present include Björn, Bölverkr, Gautr, Hrani, Sigmundur, but they do not constitute a majority of the names, so there is no overall association with Óðinn.

Loðinn and Héðinn may also indicate mask-wearing or mumming, because both are words for a fur cloak or a fur jacket and thus may be linked to *ulfheðnar*.⁴⁹⁰ However, lack of contextual significance for these names renders interpretation difficult. While *berserkir* may have worn a bear’s mask, and Byzantine sources suggest that animal mumming was practised by the Scandinavian people, there is no direct link between these names and *berserkir*.⁴⁹¹ Given the lack of a single overall pattern, examination of these names in *fornaldarsögur* suggests that there was no general literary tradition of giving *berserkir* theriophoric names. Some of these names may be intended to

⁴⁸⁹ *Fsn*, I, 48-51, 99.

⁴⁹⁰ See 3.1.1 for discussion of the etymology of ON *heðinn*.

⁴⁹¹ Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos, *De cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae*, ed. by J. J. Reiskius, 2 vols (Bonn: Weber, 1829), I, 381-82.

imply animalistic attributes, but they do not necessarily relate to the role of *berserkr* directly, and it is in the nature of warrior societies like those of the Viking Age in Scandinavia to give names to children that reflect the hoped-for attributes of that child.⁴⁹² As such, any child expected to grow up to be a warrior might have a theriophoric name that would convey strength or ferocity like Björn or Ulfr.

Names denoting invulnerability are present, including Járnhaus once more, this time as a personal name rather than a byname, although it is present as a byname in Hárekr járnhaus too. Jökull járnhryggr might be intended to denote invulnerability, although the byname járnhryggr could be an indicator of strength instead. Once more a lack of examples that denote these attributes renders interpretation difficult.

Names denoting darkness, possibly of features, are also found in the *fornaldarsögur*. *Berserkir* named Sóti appear in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and *Hálfðanar saga Brønufostra*, while Kólr occurs in *Sturlaug's saga starfsama* and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*. There can be no doubt that, at least in the case of Sóti in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* the name is intended to show his dark complexion: ‘Yfirlifit hans var eftir nafni hans’ (His complexion was the same as his name).⁴⁹³ These names indicate ugliness, but they are few and there is no general trend of such names.

There is one name, Gellir, which indicates yelling and may mean that the bearer thereof howled. Given the emphasis put upon howling as a part of

⁴⁹² Breen, ‘Personal names’, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁹³ *Fsn*, III, 208.

berserksgangr, it is surprising not to find more names or cognomina indicating this trait.

Overall, there is no general onomastic pattern that indicates a generic need to name *berserkir* for their physical or psychological traits. Some saga authors have chosen such names and may have intended them to signify the negative characteristics of the *berserkir* they describe, but there are many more names that do not conform to this pattern. Furthermore, analysis of names in general shows that many of these names were common in Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia among the general populace and among literary characters, not just among *berserkir*.⁴⁹⁴ This leads to the conclusion that the narrow focus on such names in previous studies has rendered them flawed. A holistic study of Viking Age onomastic practices demonstrates the lack of a broad conventional pattern in Old Norse literature as a whole. That said, some texts do show such patterns. As has been seen, *Egils saga* has an entire family tree that includes many theriophoric names. Whether this was a genuine tradition or a result of authorial invention is and will remain uncertain with the evidence available, but it shows that onomastic traditions within any family were considered plausible at the time the sagas were written down and could have existed.

⁴⁹⁴ See 4.5.4.

4.5.3 Medieval usage of the byname *berserkr*

While the earlier part of this section has analysed onomastic patterns, this section examines the two known instances of *berserkr* as a byname in the high medieval period. Both examples are found in *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*.

The first instance dates from 2nd August 1354 and is included in a list of transactions between Archbishop Olaf of Nidaros and King Magnus: ‘Item aff Skyrbaghom fiugura ørtoga boll køypti broder Gunnar aff Arne œyres boll gaff Thorer berserker fore husprœy oc stiuffdotthor sina’ (Also from Skyrbaghom Brother Gunnar bought a measure of four thirds of an ounce from Arne, Thorer berserker gave an ounce measure for his wife and step-daughter).⁴⁹⁵ There is no explanation of who Thorer berserker was, although it seems likely that he was a free man or tenant at Skyrbaghom. There is also no indication of why he is known as *berserkr*. Nevertheless, he is paying to the church moneys on behalf of his wife and step-daughter, which appears to legitimise his presence in society.

The other instance is found in the will of Brother Narve Matthiassön, a monk in Oslo, and is dated 19 April 1389: ‘... en likame minom wæll ek lægherstað j sancti Haluarðz kirkiu neer mæistara Oghmunde bærsærk frenða minom’ (... and I wish my corpse to be placed in St. Halvarð’s church near my kinsman Master Oghmunde berserk).⁴⁹⁶ Master Oghmunde has been laid to rest in hallowed ground and the title *mæistari* (master, scholar) indicates that

⁴⁹⁵ *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, ed. by Chr. C. A. Lange and Carl R. Unger, 22 vols (Christiania: P. T. Mallings Forlagshandel, 1847-1972), II (1852), 267.

⁴⁹⁶ *Dipl. Norv.*, IV (1858), 422.

he was a clergyman, but there is no indication of why he has the byname *berserkr*.

At first glance, the byname *berserkr* might be thought to be fundamentally at odds with the values that a Christian is supposed to have held, especially a clergyman. *Berserkir* were still a staple of the Old Norse literature of the time and nearly always had a negative image, even when members of a king's warband.⁴⁹⁷ Therefore it seems strange that these men had this byname. However, the Christian *berserkr* of the *riddarasögur* may provide an explanation for this.⁴⁹⁸ These men may have been named ironically, being particularly meek and not at all like the *berserkir* of Old Norse literature or they may have been named for their actual *berserkr*-like qualities, being champions of Christ. However they obtained their bynames, the presence of these men in the written record together with the descriptions of Christian *berserkir* suggests that more than one meaning of ON *berserkr* was current among the populations of Norway and Iceland in the fourteenth century.

Blaney's concept of semantic weakening as an explanation for the changes in usage is at odds with the obvious currency of ON *berserkr*, which the example of a fourteenth-century clergyman bearing it as a byname shows.⁴⁹⁹ At this time *berserkir* were certainly thought of as heathen troublemakers but the term also denoted a great warrior or champion.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁷ See 4.4.1 to 4.4.4.

⁴⁹⁸ See 4.4.5

⁴⁹⁹ Blaney, 'Berserkr', pp. 178-79.

⁵⁰⁰ See 4.4.

Therefore, the meaning would have to be based on context, and the hearer would accept that it could have different connotations under different circumstances. These examples, alongside the examples of Christian *berserkir*, demonstrate that ON *berserkr* had a wider and more complex range of meanings than the one-dimensional image of the bullying *hólmgǫngumaðr* suggests. They also show that the medieval Scandinavians were able to assimilate and understand variations in the meaning of ON *berserkr*, while keeping straight in their minds the different contexts in which each would be applicable. The heathen warrior could exist alongside the warrior of God in the minds of Old Norse speakers without causing confusion.

4.5.4 Conclusions

The most common names for *berserkir* are generally also among the most common names used in Norway and Iceland.⁵⁰¹ Björn is a typical example of

⁵⁰¹ See Table 4.3 which lists names of *berserkir* ranked according to their incidence as unique individuals. The maximum number of unique individual *berserkir* with a specific name is four, so a fourfold scale has been chosen to rank the incidence of those names as unique individuals in Nordic society during the Viking Age and medieval periods. From most common to least common the scale is: Very Common, Common, Uncommon and Rare. Some names are unknown in Nordic society outside sagas and they are marked as such in the table. This scale has been chosen to enable realistic comparison of the varying quantities of unique individuals known from each source. The names have been compiled from my own analysis of Old Norse literature, and

this. It occurs four times as the name of a *berserkr*, which makes it one of the most used names alongside Grímr and Agnarr, while also being in frequent general usage throughout Norway and Iceland and a common name in Sweden with over one hundred examples found on Swedish runestones. It is notable that compound names with Björn as an element do not occur as names of *berserkir* in the *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, yet they were extremely common throughout the Nordic lands. Grímr is a common name for *berserkir* that was also often used in Norway and Iceland. Examples of its usage are known from as early as the eighth century in Norway but it is less common in Sweden, where only nine runestones record people by that name. Agnarr is an exception, because few historical examples are known and it does not occur on runestones at all. Although these names are common among *berserkir*, there are many examples of *berserkir*, whose names only occur once as *berserkir*, and that are not in general usage throughout the Viking Age. Some of these names have become personal names in the medieval period, while others have no examples outside their appearance as *berserkir*, such as Ámon, which is only known from the *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and does not appear anywhere else as a personal name.⁵⁰²

from: Lind, *Norsk-Isländska Dopnamn*; Lind, *Norsk-Isländska Dopnamn: supplementband*; E. H. Lind, *Norsk-Isländska Personbinamn från Medeltiden* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1920-21); Peterson, *Runnamnslexikon*; and *Personnavne*, ed. by Assar Janzén, Nordisk Kultur, VII (Stockholm: Alb. Bonniers Boktryckeri, 1947).

⁵⁰² *Fsn*, III, 269.

Very Common names of <i>berserkir</i>			
Name	Norway	Iceland	Sweden
Agnarr	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Björn*	Very Common	Very Common	Very Common
Grímr	Very Common	Very Common	Rare
Common names of <i>berserkir</i>			
Name	Norway	Iceland	Sweden
Angantýr	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Haraldr	Common	Rare	Uncommon
Þórir	Very Common	Very Common	Very Common
Ulfr	Very Common	Very Common	Very Common
Uncommon names of <i>berserkir</i>			
Name	Norway	Iceland	Sweden
Arngrímr	Uncommon	Common	Unknown
Gautr	Uncommon	Uncommon	Uncommon
Geirr	Uncommon	Rare	Rare
Haddíngr	Uncommon	Uncommon	Unknown
Haki	Rare	Rare	Rare
Hárekr	Common	Uncommon	Rare
Haukr	Common	Common	Rare
Hervarðr	Uncommon	Uncommon	Rare
Hrani	Common	Uncommon	Rare
Ingjaldr	Common	Common	Common
Jökull	Uncommon	Uncommon	Unknown

Name	Norway	Iceland	Sweden
Kolr	Common	Common	Rare
Ótryggr	Rare	Rare	Uncommon
Sóti	Rare	Rare	Rare
Tindr	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Qgmundr	Very Common	Common	Uncommon
Rare names of <i>berserkir</i>			
Name	Norway	Iceland	Sweden
Álfr	Common	Rare	Unknown
Ámon	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Ásgautr	Uncommon	Uncommon	Uncommon
Ásmundr	Common	Common	Common
Atli	Very Common	Very Common	Rare
Barri	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Bíldr	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Brámi	Rare	Rare	Rare
Brandr	Rare	Very Common	Rare
Brúsi	Common	Uncommon	Rare
Brynjólfur	Common	Uncommon	Rare
Búi	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Böðvarr	Very Common	Very Common	Rare
Bölverkr	Common	Common	Unknown
Borkr	Common	Common	Unknown
Dagr	Very Common	Common	Rare

Name	Norway	Iceland	Sweden
Eysteinn	Very Common	Common	Unknown
Eysöðull	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Eyþjófr	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Framarr*	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Garðarr	Uncommon	Uncommon	Unknown
Gautan*	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Gellir	Rare	Common	Unknown
Glammaðr	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Hálfr	Uncommon	Uncommon	Rare
Halli	Unknown	Uncommon	Rare
Hárr	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Héðinn	Very Common	Common	Rare
Heiðrekr*	Uncommon	Uncommon	Unknown
Helgi	Very Common	Very Common	Common
Herkir	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Hesthöfði	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Hjálmar	Rare	Unknown	Rare
Hjörvarðr	Rare	Rare	Rare
Hólmsteinn	Common	Common	Common
Hrólfir	Very Common	Common	Uncommon
Hrómundr	Common	Common	Unknown
Hrossþjófi	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Hrærekr	Common	Rare	Unknown
Ívarr	Very Common	Rare	Rare

Name	Norway	Iceland	Sweden
Járnhauss*	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Jolgeirr	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Kári	Very Common	Very Common	Common
Klaufi	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Leiknir	Rare	Rare	Rare
Lífólfr	Rare	Unknown	Unknown
Ljótr	Common	Common	Unknown
Loðinn*	Very Common	Common	Rare
Loðmundr	Uncommon	Uncommon	Unknown
Moldi	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Ógautan*	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Örn	Rare	Common	Rare
Ötunfaxi*	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Reifnir	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Röndólfr	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Siggeirr	Rare	Rare	Rare
Sigmundur*	Very Common	Very Common	Uncommon
Sinfjötli*	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Skati	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Snækollr	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Styrr	Uncommon	Uncommon	Rare
Surtr	Uncommon	Common	Unknown
Svartr	Rare	Common	Rare
Svipdagr*	Rare	Rare	Unknown

Name	Norway	Iceland	Sweden
Sæmingr	Uncommon	Uncommon	Unknown
Sqrkvér	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Sqrkvir	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Sqrli	Common	Common	Unknown
Tjōsnir	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Tófi	Very Common	Rare	Uncommon
Tóki	Common	Uncommon	Very Common
Torfi	Uncommon	Common	Unknown
Tryggvi	Uncommon	Uncommon	Rare
Tyrfingr	Uncommon	Unknown	Unknown
Vazi	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Þórðr	Very Common	Very Common	Common
Þórormr	Rare	Rare	Unknown
Þorsteinn	Very Common	Very Common	Very Common
Þrōstr	Unknown	Rare	Unknown

Table 4.3 A comparison of the incidence of names in sagas with historical usage (* indicates those with characteristics of *berserkir* but not explicitly named as such)

The range of names used for *berserkir* does not accord with the theory that *berserkir* were named for their traits or given names with negative associations. Instead we find a range of names that reflects the more general pattern of usage in Norway and Iceland during the Viking Age and medieval period. The variety of names present suggests that, as a general principle,

authors were using names that had been part of the tradition they were writing down rather than inventing names to fit a particular onomastic pattern conforming to the requirements of genre. However, some of the names ascribed to *berserkir* appear to have come into usage or become more popular during the medieval period rather than the Viking Age. This may indicate names that have been assigned to *berserkir* by authors rather than the names being part of a tradition associated with a particular saga. This level of potential invention is less likely to have been present where *berserkir* are integral to the narrative and thus part of a long tradition, rather than as elements within stock episodes, which could have been added later. Furthermore, the names identified are broadly Norwegian and Icelandic, although there is some variation in the incidence of these names in those countries, with a very small number of names that are demonstrably of Danish or Swedish origin. As a result there is no onomastic evidence to support the idea that *berserkir* were generally Swedish, an idea that is commonplace and discussed in Section 4.6.

4.6 The ethnicity of *berserkir*

Where the ethnicity of *berserkir* is known, many of them come from Sweden. For example Halli and Leiknir in *Eyrbyggja saga* are gifts from the king of Sweden to Hákon jarl and are both Swedish.⁵⁰³ Ljótr inn bleiki in *Egils saga* is ‘söenskr at ætt’ (of Swedish descent).⁵⁰⁴ Similarly, Gautr in *Porskfirðinga saga*

⁵⁰³ Íf, 4, pp. 60-63.

⁵⁰⁴ Íf, 2, p. 206.

is Swedish, as is Sigmundr's companion Skjöldr in *Njáls saga*, although Skjöldr is actually merely unpleasant rather than being described as a *berserkr*.⁵⁰⁵ Some *berserkir* are definitely Swedish, as these examples show, and the inclusion of a particularly unpleasant Swede in *Njáls saga* fits this pattern. These characters are uniformly nasty, a trait that fits the depictions of Swedes in the sagas. As Foote has noted, Swedes are almost always depicted negatively, being cowardly, untrustworthy, simple, inadequate or even just poorly clad.⁵⁰⁶ These images seem to derive from the hostility of the Norwegians towards the Swedes and their function is intended to provide comic relief in the narratives, although Snorri appears to have toned this aspect of their depiction down somewhat in his own work. The depiction of Swedes in this negative fashion presumably owes its genesis to border disputes and rivalry between both nations, as well as to Sweden's late conversion to Christianity. Pagan cults were still being celebrated at Uppsala as late as 1080, for example.⁵⁰⁷ Given that *berserkir* were probably linked to Óðinn, they may

⁵⁰⁵ Íf, 8, p. 191; Íf, 12, p. 105.

⁵⁰⁶ Peter Foote, 'Icelandic historians and the Swedish image: Comments on Snorri and his precursors', in *Snorre Sturlasson och de isländska källorna till Sveriges historia: fyra föreläsningar från ett symposium i Stockholm hösten 1988*, ed. by Göran Dahlbäck (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 1993), pp. 9-42.

⁵⁰⁷ Adam Bremensis, 'Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae Pontificum', in *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches*, ed. by Werner Trillmich and Rudolf Buchner (Berlin: Rütten

have survived as a group much later in Sweden and thus, traditions about *berserkir* may have been remembered from there more clearly than they were from elsewhere in Scandinavia or Iceland. This, combined with the stereotype of Swedes, could easily have given rise to the depictions of big, dumb *berserkir* that feature in many *Íslendingasögur*. However, the examples cited above from the *Íslendingasögur* are the only *berserkir* that are specifically identified as being Swedish. Although the examples cited are all Swedish, other *berserkir* are clearly stated as not being Swedish, like Þorir haklangr, the son of Kjotvi inn auðgi, who was the king of Agðir in Norway, or Þórir þomb and Qgmundr illi, who are from Hálogaland.⁵⁰⁸ Geirr inn gerzki in *Gull-Þóris saga* is Russian and Kveld-Ulfr in *Egils saga* is Norwegian.⁵⁰⁹ The presence of *berserkir* that are definitively not Swedish confirms that there was no general pattern of Swedish *berserkir* in Old Norse literature, and the idea that they were probably arises in later interpretations of the evidence.

4.7 *Berserkr*-like characters: *blámenn*

Using the attributes defined earlier in Section 4.3 as a guide, it may be possible to identify other figures that could have been recognised as *berserkir* by the

& Loening, 1961), 135-499 (pp. 470-73); Birgit Sawyer and Peter Sawyer, 'Scandinavia enters Christian Europe', in *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia Volume 1: Prehistory to 1520*, ed. by Knut Helle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), I, 147-159 (p. 154).

⁵⁰⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 114-15; Íf, 7, p. 62.

⁵⁰⁹ Íf, 13, p. 191; Íf, 2, pp. 3-4.

medieval audience, such as Þorgrímr in *Hávarðar saga ísfirðings*, who is described as skilled in magic by his opponent, Atli: ‘... ok sé fyrir þeim Þorgrímr Dýrason, er verstr maðr er í öllum Dýrafirði ok fjölkunnugastr’ (and see before them Þorgrímr Dýrason, who is the worst man in all of Dýrafjörðr and the most skilled in magic).⁵¹⁰ It transpires that Þorgrímr is immune to Atli’s sword and so Atli bites his throat out instead, after which he is able to chop Þorgrímr’s head off. This episode is similar to the fight between Egill Skalla-Grímsson and Atli inn skammi in Chapter 65 of *Egils saga*, in which Egill also bites out the throat of Atli.⁵¹¹ Based on their powers, both of these characters could be *berserkr* and it is possible that the medieval audience would have understood this, without being told directly. The eponymous hero of *Hreiðars þáttr* is another such character, being large, ugly and strong.⁵¹² When angered he demonstrates exceptional strength like a *berserkr* by lifting a man off the ground and killing him. However, he is never actually called a *berserkr*. It is also possible that these characters lacked some essential characteristic of the *berserkr* and the medieval audience would have understood this too. Therefore, the following discussion includes such figures, because analysis of *berserkr*-like characters has the potential to expand our understanding of the medieval concept of what did or did not constitute a *berserkr*.

⁵¹⁰ Íf, 6, p. 350.

⁵¹¹ Íf, 2, pp. 209-10.

⁵¹² ‘Hreiðars þáttr heimska’ in *Íslendinga þættir*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Bokaverzlun Sig. Kristjánssonar, 1945), pp. 114-32 (114).

Of the characters that resemble *berserkir blámenn* (black- or blue-men) bear the greatest resemblance. The term is used to refer to all people with a dark skin colour and is usually used with reference to people from Africa or the Middle East. Their function as stock villains is nearly identical to that of the *berserkr* and their behaviour before and during battle resembles *berserksgangr*. As we have already seen, a *blámaðr* takes the role of king's champion in *Kjalnesinga saga* to fight the hero, Búi. This *blámaðr* howls like a *berserkr* and attacks in a frenzied fashion as one would expect of a *berserkr*.⁵¹³ In short, his actions, his strength and his frenzy are all commensurate with the attributes one might expect of a *berserkr*. Where he differs from the expected attributes is that he has to be held back from attacking by four men, which bespeaks both great strength and an animalistic nature. However, it is notable that *blámenn* feature in only three *Íslendingasögur*: *Finnboga saga*, *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* and *Kjalnesinga saga*. *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* records events that took place during the reign of Hákon jarl (970-995) including a wrestling match between Gunnar and a *blámaðr* at the court of Hákon jarl.⁵¹⁴ Once more the *blámaðr* is taking the role of the champion in a combat, although in this case he does not howl or demonstrate any other indications of *berserksgangr*. The situation is much the same in *Finnboga saga* too, the *blámaðr* also being in the service of Hákon jarl and being killed by having his back broken over a stone.⁵¹⁵ These

⁵¹³ Íf, 14, p. 36.

⁵¹⁴ Íf, 14, pp. 366-67.

⁵¹⁵ Íf, 14, p. 283.

are only isolated occurrences and the latter two seem to draw one on the other for the narrative, because it is essentially the same setting and the same event but with a different main character. All three of these sagas were probably written down in the fourteenth century, and only *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* also includes *berserkir*. This late date may indicate that the authors of these sagas have been influenced by the *blámenn* in other genres of saga, or that they were drawing on knowledge of the first recorded visit to Norway by *blámenn* in the reign of Hákon Hákonarsson (1217-1263).⁵¹⁶ These five *blámenn* arrived at Hákon's court as part of a delegation from Emperor Frederick II in 1242, but nothing more is said of them than that they were present with the delegation. It is almost certain that some Scandinavians and Icelanders would have been aware of *blámenn* prior to this visit, but the impact of them actually visiting the court is likely to have been greater than reports from travellers such as Rognvaldr jarl, who encountered them while raiding in the Mediterranean.⁵¹⁷

It is in the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* that *blámenn* really become staple elements. The C manuscript of *Ívens saga* features a fight with two *blámenn* (giants in the A manuscript) but a *blámaðr* also takes the role of

⁵¹⁶ *Konunga sögur*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 3 vols ([n.p.]:

Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1957), III, p. 316.

⁵¹⁷ Íf, 34, pp. 224-26.

the forest guardian and guide to adventure in both versions.⁵¹⁸ These *blámenn* still retain the roles that have been identified for *berserkir*. They can be champions like those featured in *Finnboga saga* and *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, as discussed earlier. They can be *holmgöngumenn*, like the two *blámenn* in the C manuscript of *Ívens saga* mentioned previously. In essence their roles and behaviour are the same as those of *berserkir* and they are often paired with them, as is the case with Sarodaces' *blámenn*, who share their tent with the *berserkir* and cannot be cut with iron.⁵¹⁹

Blámenn must have had a great attraction to the authors of the sagas in which they feature. The outlandish and unfamiliar nature of *blámenn*, their 'otherness', must have made them attractive in the hostile roles that *berserkir* had largely occupied before. The colour of their skin may have created associations with the goddess Hel, who was parti-coloured black and white, in the minds of the listeners and thus reinforced the image of the devilish nature of these men. Bearing this in mind, it may well be the case that *blámenn* became substitutes for the traditional antagonistic *berserkir* because their colour and the associations it carried in medieval Nordic culture suited that role. As such, the *blámaðr* of the sagas is very much a literary construct but the

⁵¹⁸ *Ívens saga*, ed. by F. W. Blaisdell, Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ Series B, 18 (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Boghandel A/S, 1979), p. 128; and NR, II, 40-41 and 46-47.

⁵¹⁹ *LMIR*, II, 253.

attributes of the *blámaðr* may still be compared with and used to understand the literary and historical *berserkr*, because the two are largely the same.

4.8 Change over time within the sagas

So far *berserkr* have been discussed with reference to their depiction in Old Norse literature, but not the temporal framework for such depictions. This section discusses only *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*, a list of which is given together with the dates of composition that I have used in Appendix 2. As discussed previously, dating Old Norse literature can prove problematic.⁵²⁰ Therefore, I have used the dates given in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* as the basis for dating the *Íslendingasögur* because these represent the most recent research.⁵²¹ The dates given in the Íslenzk fornrit editions of the *Íslendingasögur* have been used for comparative purposes when constructing the chronology. The chronology of the *fornaldarsögur* has been constructed using dates from the editions of those sagas or from critical literature related to them. This has meant that some works could not be dated and thus have not been considered in this section.⁵²²

One aspect of the temporal framework within which this literature was created that has interested me is whether it is possible to identify trends that might indicate variations or changes in understanding or meaning of ON

⁵²⁰ See 2.3.1.1.

⁵²¹ *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997).

⁵²² See Appendix 2 for a table of the dates of the works cited.

berserkr as the medieval period progresses. However, upon further examination it seems likely that the motifs discussed are generally pervasive throughout the period. For example, *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Svarfdæla saga* were written down approximately one hundred years apart, with *Vatnsdæla saga* being of late thirteenth-century or early fourteenth-century date, while *Svarfdæla saga* is of late fourteenth-century date, and *Óláfs saga helga* as recorded in *Heimskringla* was written in the early thirteenth century.⁵²³ All of these feature *berserkir* that cannot be harmed by swords, so there is no clearly delineated period when the concept of the invulnerable *berserkr* was popular, because it is present from start to finish of the period covered by this chapter. Likewise, immunity to fire is a feature of sagas throughout the whole of the thirteenth century. Snorri Sturluson mentions the lack of fear of fire that *berserkir* have in his *Heimskringla*, while *Njáls saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, both of which also make reference to it, date from the end of the thirteenth century.⁵²⁴ This suggests that a consistent and persistent image of the *berserkr* was prevalent throughout the medieval period. An examination of the incidence of *berserkir* in *Íslendingasögur* shows that their occurrence in sagas, as a percentage of the total output and relative to the production of sagas that do not feature *berserkir*, remains steady until the fourteenth century. At this

⁵²³ Íf, 8, p. liv; Íf, 9, p. lxxxviii; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla II*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Íslensk fornrit*, 27, 4th edn (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), p. xxix.

⁵²⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 17; Íf, 12, p. 267; Íf, 8, p. 124; see also 4.3.1.

time, they become less popular in ‘historical’ sagas, possibly as a result of their adoption into other, more fantastical genres of saga and also because the incidence of *blámenn* rises, taking over the role of *berserkir*.

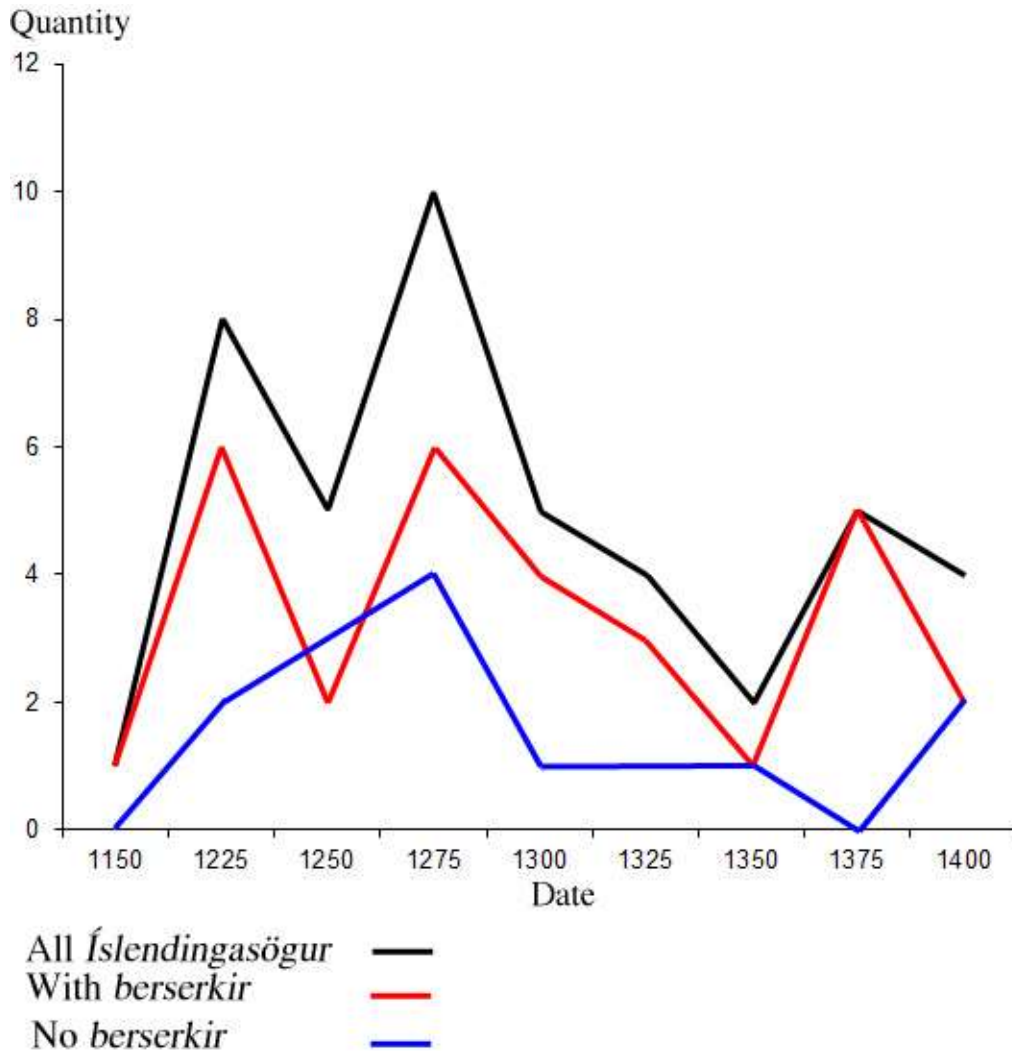


Figure 4-1 Incidence of *berserkir* in *Íslendingasögur* from 1150 to 1400

AD

Analysis of *fornaldarsögur* is trickier than that of *Íslendingasögur* because the dating is much less precise and thus this analysis does not draw on a complete data set comprising the entire corpus of extant *fornaldarsögur*. However, it is clear that the high point of such sagas was the fourteenth century and that the incidence of *berserkir* in *fornaldarsögur* is much higher

than in *Íslendingasögur* both in terms of their presence within sagas and the number of them depicted, as can be seen in Figure 4.2. As can be seen in this figure, *berserkir* are more likely to be found in *fornaldarsögur* than they are in *Íslendingasögur*. The *fornaldarsögur* are also much more likely to include *berserkir* than they are to exclude them. Clearly *berserkir* had become a staple element of such sagas by the time of their heyday in the fourteenth century.

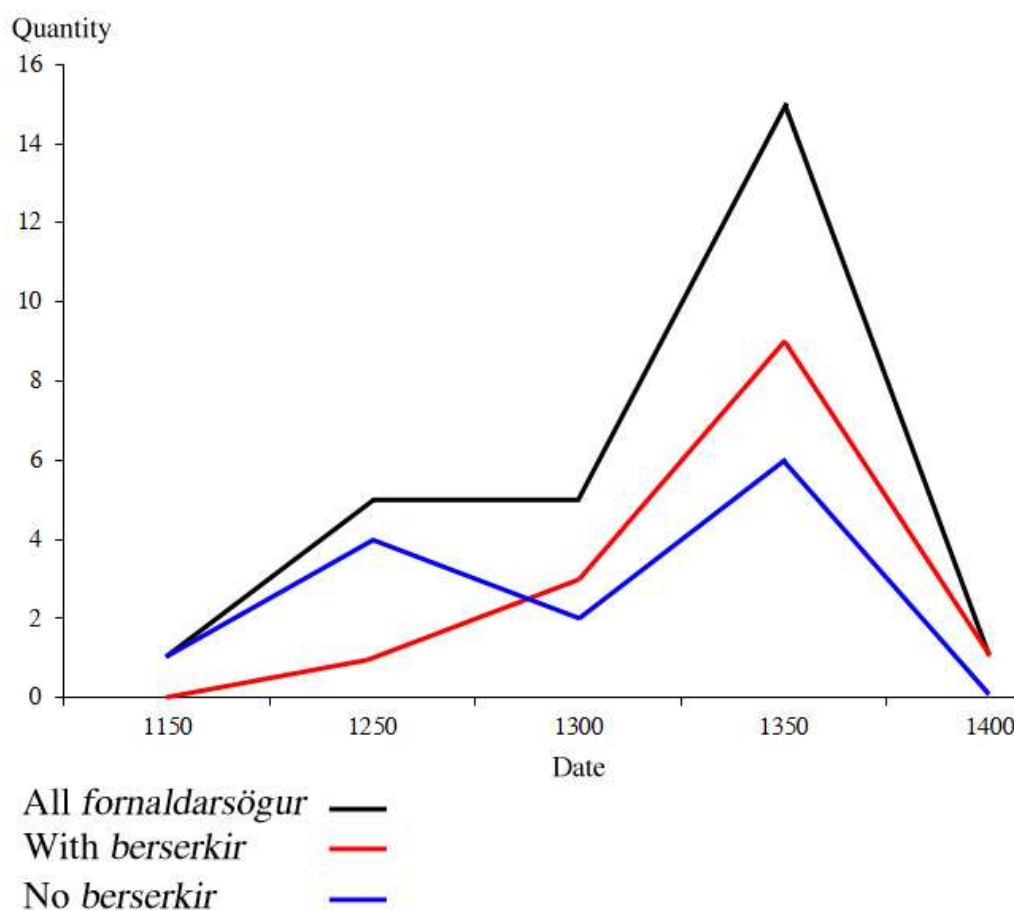


Figure 4-2 Incidence of *berserkir* in *fornaldarsögur* from 1150 to 1400 AD

Unfortunately, it is not possible to undertake a full and complete analysis of all sagas due to the lack of reliable dating evidence, but it certainly seems that as *berserkir* became more popular in the *fornaldarsögur* they became less popular in the *Íslendingasögur*, perhaps suggesting that they had become less ‘real’ to the authors of those sagas.

4.9 Conclusions

In terms of the specific attributes of *berserkir* in Old Norse literature, a range of behaviours are recorded, but the most common and unifying themes are howling and shield-biting, which I have shown to be a form of posturing and possibly a ritual rather than battle madness. Invulnerability, including the ability to blunt swords by looking at them, is attributed to *berserkir* and it may be rationalised as resulting from the wearing of a thick animal pelt as armour, as is emphasised by the invulnerability of Þórir hundr, who could only be wounded on parts of his body that were not covered by his animal skin armour. Foaming at the mouth may be discounted as an attribute, because it only occurs rarely. Thus, the *berserkr* in Old Norse literature postures before battle and wears a thick animal pelt to protect himself. This model may also be applied to the Viking Age *berserkr*, because it is sufficiently entrenched in literary depictions as to represent an enduring tradition with some antiquity.

In addition to these attributes, *berserkir* in Old Norse literature are more complex figures than much of the research suggests. They are not solely sociopaths with a penchant for killing and stealing.⁵²⁵ They have a role in protecting the kingdom and defending their king. Their proclivity for theft may be construed as a natural extension of the warband economy within which they function and later as a result of their exclusion from society when Christianity obtained a foothold and the pagan religion was left behind. However, although they have a connection to Óðinn, they are not holy warriors or crusaders for the Old Norse religion, nor are they priests or shamans. Their connection to the

⁵²⁵ *Edda*, I, p. 84.

god is a result of their function within society and of their primary sphere of activity being that over which Óðinn holds sway: warfare and rulership. The Christian *berserkr* is also close to God, as the examples from *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* show. In this regard he is a *miles Christi* and the analogy may be easily extended to the pagan *berserkr* too, with both fighting battles and duels for their lord.

The initiatory *berserkr* probably did not undertake initiations per se, but did take part in rites of passage or coming of age tests. This role may have resulted from this close relationship with Óðinn, because such a connection would have given the *berserkr* social and moral authority, so his actions would have validated the induction of young men into society and positions of power. There is a consistency within the narratives that bespeaks a remembered historical tradition of this type of ritual. The tradition has been transformed during the literary process into a fight to the death and formal duel, where historically it was probably a mock fight, and it is viewed through a medieval lens but it still seems probable that young men among the Viking Age social elite were tested in a rite of passage that probably began as a formal initiation ritual in the distant, tribal past.

It also becomes evident once one examines the source material in more detail that ON *berserkr* makes no real transition of meaning over the course of the medieval period from a dangerous but useful member of a king's retinue to the wandering troublemaker and finally to acceptance as a Christian champion. Instead ON *berserkr* retains all of these meanings contemporaneously. While there may be geographical variation in usage, this is less easy to tease out. The Christian *berserkr* is only found in Norwegian material and not in Icelandic, so

he may be geographically Norwegian, but there is no evidence that explicitly shows that the Icelanders did not share this idea. Given the close contact between the two countries, it seems likely that they would have shared these concepts or at least have been aware of them.

With regard to the onomastic evidence, although some *berserkir* do bear names that describe specific negative attributes, analysis of onomastic patterns demonstrates that there are no actual naming patterns that are specific to *berserkir*. The range of names by which *berserkir* are called is little different from the range of names borne by ordinary members of Nordic society in the Viking Age and medieval period. The onomastic evidence also casts doubt on the idea that *berserkir* in the sagas were generally Swedish. Analysis of the ethnicity of *berserkir* in the *Íslendingasögur* shows that, in those cases where it can be determined, there is an even division between Norwegian and Swedish *berserkir* with a small number of *berserkir* from other countries.

This analysis shows that much that is believed about *berserkir* does not stand up to closer scrutiny and that the *berserkr* was a complex character with a defined role in Viking Age society. The medieval saga authors appear to have forgotten the full details but enough has survived to permit construction of models of the behaviour and activities of *berserkir* during the Viking Age.

5 Non-literary sources for *berserkir* to c.1400 A.D.

5.1 Introduction

Holistic analysis of *berserkir* requires broader investigation of the wider Germanic world and of the periods before Old Norse literature was written down, because we do not have hard evidence for the Viking Age itself and must produce theoretical models to help understand the functions and roles of *berserkir* in that society. This has been done with varying success by previous scholars as discussed in Chapter 3 and this chapter addresses the issues faced by those scholars, as well as assessing their success in this.

The only definitive depictions of *berserkir* are in Old Norse texts, because ON *berserkr* is a term that is known solely from those sources and there is little evidence from the Viking Age for *berserkir*, because these sources were written down from the thirteenth century onwards. For the Viking Age itself we must rely upon a small quantity of skaldic verse which mentions but does not describe *berserkir*.⁵²⁶ As a result, there are no certain Viking Age depictions of *berserkir* in the archaeological record or among sources that are not written in Old Norse. However, despite these difficulties, parallels have been drawn between Old Norse depictions, earlier texts and archaeological remains and it is possible to identify general trends in behaviour and societal function that may be accorded to *berserkir*.⁵²⁷ Furthermore, some sources provide an explanation for the behaviour described in Old Norse literature as I shall show.

⁵²⁶ See 4.2.

⁵²⁷ See 4.4.

The key to connecting *berserkir* from the sagas to the Migration and Vendel Period past lies in their connection to Óðinn and to *ulfheðnar*. Snorri's description of *berserkir* as Óðinn's men shows that medieval Icelanders believed *berserkir* to be linked to Óðinn, while their hostility to Christian missionaries in the *Íslendingasögur* demonstrates their pagan credentials and reinforces the idea that they may have had a closer connection to the gods than most people.⁵²⁸ A uniform pan-Germanic monoculture is unlikely and Shaw demonstrates in his study of the goddesses Eostre and Hreda that local cult practices and deities existed.⁵²⁹ However, he acknowledges that deities such as Óðinn might have had more widespread cults that were socially rather than geographically limited, being the province of the social elite rather than of a particular place. While these cults probably had varying rites both geographically and temporally, the presence of a common deity may have created a sense of community despite the differences. Thus, identifying figures from these earlier periods that may be analogous to Óðinn can lend evidence to the discussion on *berserkir*.

As I have shown, *ulfheðnar* were either a type of *berserkr*, as *Vatnsdæla saga* suggests, or were a similar type of warrior with similar habits, making a connection between the etymology of *ulfheðinn* and that etymology of *berserkr*

⁵²⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 17; see also *Íf*, 12, p. 267 and *Íf*, 8, p. 124.

⁵²⁹ Philip A. Shaw, *Pagan Goddesses in the Early Germanic World: Eostre, Hreda and the Cult of Matrons* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011), pp. 10-13 and 100-01.

that derives it from **berr / *beri*.⁵³⁰ This connection permits a broader range of evidence to be considered when seeking parallels in other cultures that may be used as models for *berserkir* in the Viking Age, because we may consider depictions of warriors wearing wolfskins from the earlier periods and consider whether those depictions sufficiently resemble the *berserkir* of the sagas.

Although I favour an etymology linked to the wearing of a bearskin, the precise etymology, if one exists, is not as important for understanding *berserkir* in the Viking Age as might be thought, because it is possible that both etymologies arose separately and were conflated at a later date, or that they sufficiently pre-date the Viking Age for them to have less relevance to Viking Age usage. Keeping this in mind, the link to animal-skin-wearing warriors is still important if we are to expand our understanding of *berserkir* beyond the literary plane.

The evidence that has previously been considered to inform understanding of *berserkir* includes Indo-European warriors known as age-set warriors who were divided into groups according to age, and were expected to pass through the same societal stages at the same time. Mallory and Adams note that there is strong evidence for specifically warfare-related age sets ranging from the status of an armed youth, presumably a warrior in training, to the untested warrior of the **koryos* (a warrior brotherhood), and finally to

⁵³⁰ Íf, 8, p. 24; see also 3.1.

gaining the status of adult after proving oneself in battle.⁵³¹ Other evidence that has contributed to analysis of *berserkir* is depictions on archaeological artefacts of warriors in wolfskins and the personal name evidence that derives from this practice.⁵³² Age-set warriors and *Männerbünde* have been identified with the groups of *berserkir* at king's courts and in roving bands. They have also been connected with the initiation ritual that Danielli and others identified in some episodes in Old Norse literature.⁵³³

The names Wolfhetan and Ulfheðinn, as discussed in Chapter 3, are two names that may have represented a status before they became personal names.⁵³⁴ The areas where these names occur are also those areas where artefacts depicting warriors in wolfskins are most common, thus making it possible to link the names and the depictions, and to deduce links between the practices in those areas and the probable practices of *berserkir* in Viking Age Scandinavia.

The practices of age-set warriors from Indo-European times through to the early medieval period in Europe span a time period too great to permit

⁵³¹ *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, ed. by J. P. Mallory and D. Q. Adams (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), pp. 6-7; see 5.4.1 for discussion of the **koryos* age set.

⁵³² See Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, for a synthesis of the Indo-European evidence and an attempt to link it through to the Viking Age; see 3.1 for the personal name evidence outside Scandinavia.

⁵³³ See 3.3.

⁵³⁴ See 3.1.1.

detailed models to be created from those periods. However, they inform our knowledge of the range of human activity in the spheres with which *berserkir* and similar warriors may be associated and can be compared to the later Old Norse evidence. Correspondences between the two permit a model to be created that will, of necessity, be a general one covering all of Scandinavia and the whole of the Viking Age, even though geographical and temporal variations must certainly have occurred.

Through holistic analysis of these several areas, I shall determine whether these examples comprise general practice that is the domain of normal human existence or whether they do form a continuous tradition that was carried forward from early Indo-European societies to the Viking Age. I shall demonstrate what the probable historical reality of *berserkir* was in the Viking Age, and what their roles and function within Scandinavian society were by creating a model that will form the baseline for comparison of Viking Age *berserkir* with popular culture depictions of *berserkir*.⁵³⁵

5.2 Archaeological Sources

In Scandinavia and the pan-Germanic world archaeology confirms the use of zoomorphic masks and animal-skins through depictions of such practices and as a result of artefacts discovered. Figure 5.1 shows the locations of the main artefacts discussed in this section and identifies the approximate geographic spread covered. One outlier in Kiev is marked but is not considered to delineate the easternmost extent of the area under discussion, although there is

⁵³⁵ See Chapter 6 for an analysis of modern depictions of *berserkir*.

solid evidence for animal mummification from Kiev that may be related to actual aristocratic warrior practice.⁵³⁶



Figure 5-1 Locations of archaeological evidence

The eastern boundary of the main study area is approximately defined by a line from Gutenstein to Valsgärde, with the southern boundary extending from Gutenstein to Finglesham. England marks the western boundary and the northern parts are considered to include all of Scandinavia. These boundaries are approximate and are based on artefacts recovered which could easily have travelled some distance before reaching the site where they were recovered by archaeologists, especially in the case of small items. The boundaries given do not presume that all practices related to *ulfheðnar* and *berserkir* are strictly

⁵³⁶ See 5.2.11.

delimited by them, because the vagaries of archaeological recovery mean that our knowledge of the full cultural extent of animal-skin-wearing warriors as expressed through the archaeological record has been compiled piecemeal.

Animal ornament is the predominant feature of Germanic and Nordic styles from the migration period to the Viking Age as an examination of the archaeological finds demonstrates amply.⁵³⁷ Depictions of human beings are more restricted and the depiction of animal-skin wearing humans is even more so. Such images are rare and are predominantly associated with warrior graves such as those at Vendel and Valsgärde.⁵³⁸ Their scarcity and their association with warrior graves may be indicative of a socio-cultural restriction to those at the top of society. Examples of warrior iconography are discussed below with a view to identifying whether this is really the case and what these artefacts can lend to the debate about *berserker*. No attempt has been made here to discuss all examples of these artefacts. Instead the main areas and finds are discussed with the intention of providing an overview that can be used for comparison with the literary evidence.

Depictions of warriors range from the animal-headed figures on the Gallehus horns through images on bracteates to the impressed helmet plates of

⁵³⁷ For examples see: Lennart Karlsson, *Nordisk form: Om djurornamentik* (Stockholm: Statens Historiska Museer, 1983); *Nordeuropeisk dyrestil, 400-1100 e. Kr.*, ed. by Karen Høilund Nielsen, Hikuin, 29 (Højbjerg: Forlaget Hikuin, 2004); and David M. Wilson and Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, 2nd edn (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980).

⁵³⁸ See 5.2.4 and 5.2.5.

the Vendel and Valsgärde graves. What they have in common is either a depiction of warriors with helmets that often have bird-headed terminals, or depictions of warriors wearing wolf pelts with distinctive sharp muzzles and long tails. Bear pelts are not present in this iconography, although bears are depicted, but the connection to *berserkir* can still be deduced from examination of the traditions associated with the animal-skin-wearing warriors of the pre-Viking Iron Age.

Local traditions are not easy to identify but, as Svanberg has discussed, it is highly likely that each area had its own traditions, and by extension that those traditions extended to the way in which *berserkir* fitted into society.⁵³⁹ However, when it comes to a detailed examination of archaeological evidence for *berserkir*, it is immediately obvious that what little evidence is available extends across a broad part of north-western Europe, and thus indicates significant commonality of culture in the broader Germanic and Scandinavian world. A word of caution needs to be sounded at this point. There is no absolute proof that the images on the archaeological evidence are or were *berserkir* or *ulfhednar*. Identifying them as such is a matter of interpretation, but not unreasonable given the body of literary evidence and the conclusions that may be drawn from it, even though that literary evidence post-dates the Viking Age by a significant margin.⁵⁴⁰ As discussed above and in Chapter 4, it is clear that medieval Scandinavians and Icelanders considered *berserkir* and

⁵³⁹ Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age*, p. 202.

⁵⁴⁰ See Chapter 4.

ulfheðnar to be related.⁵⁴¹ It is also likely that *berserkir* wore bearskins, in the same way that *ulfheðnar* wore wolfskins.⁵⁴² Therefore, a connection may be drawn between the pre-Viking Age depictions of wolfskin-clad warriors and Viking Age *berserkir*.

As already stated, the archaeological sources are found across north-western Europe (Figure 5.1). Few of these sources are Scandinavian and none date from the Viking Age, which has meant that previous researchers had to use the Migration Period and pre-Viking Iron Age sources to create models that showed how *berserkir* probably functioned within Viking Age society. The connection between these earlier images and the descriptions of *berserkir* in the Old Norse sagas exists primarily by means of these models, but the models also engage with a consistent continuum of Indo-European traditions of age-set and animal-skin wearing warriors who existed outside the normal bounds of society until certain conditions had been fulfilled.⁵⁴³ All too often the models constructed using this evidence fail to consider the possibility that *berserkir*-like warriors could have existed independently of each other and without direct influence. As such, the histories of ‘mad warriors’, as Speidel described them, are flawed from the outset, even before they fail to consider that *berserkir* probably did not go berserk in the modern sense of the term.⁵⁴⁴ The following discussion considers not just depictions of warriors in animal-

⁵⁴¹ Íf, 8, p. 24.

⁵⁴² See 3.1.

⁵⁴³ See 5.4.

⁵⁴⁴ Speidel, *Ancient Germanic Warriors*, p. 253.

skins, but also the associated images to construct a rounded picture of the high status warrior, and to demonstrate how *berserkir* belong within this category.

5.2.1 The Torslunda matrices

Possibly the most famous depiction of an animal-skin clad warrior is on a set of four bronze helmet plate matrices found at Björnhovda in Torslunda on Öland, Sweden, in 1870.⁵⁴⁵ The matrices would have been used to create pressed foil decorations from sheet bronze for helmets.⁵⁴⁶ Bruce-Mitford also notes that the matrices were not found together, but rather in pairs by two different people. We do not know which of the matrices were found together, as a result of which it is not certain that they even belong together.

Nevertheless, the commonality of theme and developing narrative indicated by these matrices suggests that they are thematically linked, and the major studies of these matrices have always considered the four as a coherent collection in their own right.⁵⁴⁷

Each matrix depicts a different scene in a sequence that Beck identified as depicting the life of a warrior from initiation to fully-fledged member of the

⁵⁴⁵ Oskar Montelius, *Sveriges historia til våra dagar: I. Sveriges hednatid, samt medeltid, förra skedet, från år 1060 till år 1350* (Stockholm: Hjalmar Linnströms Förlag, 1877), p. 286.

⁵⁴⁶ R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, 'Fresh observations on the Torslunda Plates', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 2 (1968) 233-36 (p. 233).

⁵⁴⁷ Beck, 'Die Stanzen', pp. 237-50; and Müller, 'Wolfhetan', pp. 200-12.

warband.⁵⁴⁸ The first matrix (A in Figure 5.2) shows a man with a sword and dagger confronted by two animals. The upright posture, lack of a visible tail and blunt snouts indicate that these are bears. The man's legs are flexed to indicate motion as are the legs of the horned-helmeted figure in matrix D, perhaps indicating that his actions are part of a dance or are ritual in nature, as Kershaw suggests.⁵⁴⁹ The man is wearing only a tunic, whose texture resembles that of the beasts he is fighting and also that of the creature in the second matrix (B in Figure 5.2), suggesting that he is wearing an animal-skin. His sword appears to have been plunged into one of the bears.

(This image has been removed from the online version of this thesis. A hardbound copy of this thesis is available in the Nottingham University library, or you may follow the reference given.)

Figure 5-2 The Torslunda matrices. Lettering follows Bruce-Mitford's sequence (public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

⁵⁴⁸ Beck, 'Die Stanzen'. pp. 238-39.

⁵⁴⁹ Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, p. 84.

Matrix B depicts a man with axe in hand leading a creature on a rope. The creature is presumably a bear, because it has many of the same features of the bears in matrix A, although it also appears to have long ears that are decidedly unbearlike. The man is wearing treads that are decorated in similar fashion to the skin of the creature that he is holding.

Matrix C depicts two men standing in identical poses with boar-crested helmets, swords and spears. They appear to be wearing tunics with decorated hems and their clothes lack the decoration shown on the other two figures' clothes, suggesting that these are not animal-skin. This may be a depiction of warriors in the battle-line, but their weapons are pointing to the floor, which could be an indicator of peaceful intent. Comparison with the eighth-century Tängelgårda stone (SHM 4373) from Lärbro, Sweden, suggests an alternative interpretation of the matrix (Figure 5.3).⁵⁵⁰ The stone appears to show a funeral procession in the second panel from the top. In this procession the warriors carry their swords point down as they walk backwards behind a horse carrying a body. In the top panel warriors carry their weapons raised as if engaged in

⁵⁵⁰ Erik Nylén and Jan Peder Lamm, *Bildstenar*, 3rd edn (Möklinta: Gidlunds Förlag, 2003), p. 67; for recent discussions on the interpretation of this stone see also Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'Sagomotiv på de gotländska bildstenarna. Fallet Hild Högnadotter', in *Gotlands bildstenar: Järnålderns gåtfulla budbärare*, ed. by Maria Herlin-Karnell, Gotländsk Arkiv, 84 ([n.p.]: Fornsalens Förlag, 2012), 59-71 (pp. 59, 61 and 63); and Sigmund Oehrl, 'Ikonografiska tolkningar av gotländska bildstenar baserade på nya analyser av ytorna', in Karnell, ed., *Gotlands bildstenar*, 91-106 (pp. 91-92).

battle, while the horse bearing the warrior enters from the right, presumably carrying the warrior into Valhalla. It is possible that matrix C represents such a funeral procession, indicating that the warrior has symbolically died and thus has little to fear from battle, because he cannot die again. This type of death fits well with the initiation rituals that have been proposed for *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar*.⁵⁵¹ However, the usage of similar plates on Valsgärde 7 and Vendel XIV indicates that this is less likely, because those helmet plates have the warriors advancing towards the front of the helmet as if supporting the helmet's wearer.⁵⁵²

(This image has been removed from the online version of this thesis. A hardbound copy of this thesis is available in the Nottingham University library, or you may follow the reference given.)

Figure 5-3 Detail of Tängelgårda I (Historiska museet)

⁵⁵¹ See 3.3 and 5.2.16.

⁵⁵² See 5.2.4 and 5.2.5.

Matrix D depicts a figure in motion with spears in each hand and a helmet with birds' head terminals. He has a sword sheathed in a baldric that loops around his right shoulder and is clearly depicted without his right eye, thus leading Hauck to conclude that this figure is Óðinn with his ravens Huginn and Muninn represented by the bird-headed 'horns' on his helmet.⁵⁵³ Beside this figure is a man with spear in his left hand and apparently drawing his sword with his right. He is dressed in a wolfskin, as is immediately clear from the sharp muzzle, long tail and upright ears on its head. It might be argued that this is a dog's skin, because the two are similar in form and thus difficult to distinguish between in iconography, but wolves and dogs in Norse culture occupied similar symbolic spaces so that distinction is not vital to interpreting these artefacts.⁵⁵⁴ Evidence for dog-warriors as well as wolf-warriors is present in Old Norse and Latin literature. Þórir hundr may be an example of a dog-warrior as his byname suggests, although he and his men are supposed to have worn either reindeer- or wolfskins at Stiklestad.⁵⁵⁵ The

⁵⁵³ Karl Hauck, 'Herrschaftszeichen eines Wodanistischen Königtums', *Jahrbuch für Fränkische Landesforschung*, 14 (1954), 9-66 (pp. 46-47).

⁵⁵⁴ Anne-Sofie Gräslund, 'Wolves, serpents, and birds: Their symbolic meaning in Old Norse belief', in *Old-Norse religion in long-term perspectives: Origins, changes and interactions. An international conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, ed. by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 124-29 (124-25).

⁵⁵⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla II*, p. 345; *Olafs saga hins helga*, p. 192.

claimed presence of dog-headed warriors (Lat *cynocephali*) in the camp of the Lombards is one such example of dog rather than wolf-warriors.⁵⁵⁶ These warriors are every bit as fierce as their wolfish brethren and thus occupy the same social role.

The wolfskin conceals the warrior's human features apart from his legs and arms, and the wolf-head gapes in a howl. The feet of the *ulfhedinn* figure are the same shape as those of the two warriors in the third plate, while their position resembles the position of the feet of the other figures but have a greater sense of motion to them, indicating that the warrior is advancing as he draws his sword. This plate appears to represent the warrior about to go into battle lead by the figure in the horned helmet.

As noted above, these dies were found in the same area, but not necessarily together. There are also physical differences that differentiate them, suggesting that there are two pairs of dies rather than a set of four. Bruce-Mitford outlined these differences and identified that matrices A and B are sufficiently similar to conclude that they were made by the same person as a pair, to the extent that B fits above A neatly with a slight taper which indicates that it would have fitted in that position on a helmet.⁵⁵⁷ The means of employing these two matrices was to apply the foil to the back of them and hammer the foil into shape there, whereas matrices C and D must have been

⁵⁵⁶ *Pauli Historia Langobardorum* Lib. I ch. 11, *Scriptores rerum*

Germanicarum in usum scholarum ex monumentis Germaniae historicis recusi 48 (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1987), pp. 59-60; See also 5.1.14.

⁵⁵⁷ Bruce-Mitford, 'Torslunda', p. 234.

used by hammering the bronze foil over the front of them, because the reverse of these two is rough and unsuited to foil production. This mode of employment has resulted in noticeable wear to their fronts, and their construction is also different from that of the first two.⁵⁵⁸ Matrices C and D differ from matrices A and B in these significant particulars, but their resemblance to each other is limited to their mode of employment and their rough construction. Other than this there is little to indicate that they are a matched pair.

Despite the fact that these differences exist, the events portrayed can form a coherent narrative, as Beck has shown, that is similar to the descriptions of those episodes in Old Norse literature that have been interpreted as initiations.⁵⁵⁹ In the case of these plates, the young warrior must fight wild animals first. He wears only a rough tunic that appears to be of animal-skin. He returns with one animal led on a rope, demonstrating his success over the animal kingdom, and his tunic has been replaced with treads. The roughness of his initial dress and the transition to attire comprised of treads but no shirt may indicate a step towards his acceptance as an adult. Matrix C may be interpreted as his acceptance into the warband; he stands beside his fellow wearing good clothes, a boar-crested helmet, and carrying a sword and spear. Alternatively, as discussed above, this could be a funeral scene, which would offer a second interpretation of matrix D. Matrix D shows us the young warrior wearing a wolfskin, perhaps the final badge of his office, led by a horned figure that

⁵⁵⁸ Bruce-Mitford, 'Torslunda', pp. 234-35.

⁵⁵⁹ See 3.3 and 5.2.16.

probably represents Óðinn because of its single eye. This could have an apotropaic function, representing the numinous power that the warrior calls upon to ensure his success in battle. Alternatively, it could depict the young warrior fighting alongside Óðinn as one of his *einherjar*, indicating the warrior's ultimate goal or destination.⁵⁶⁰ Although there are several possible interpretations of these matrices, the congruence of their discovery supports the idea that they are meant to be read together. Even if they were made by different people, they were gathered together to be used together. Their nature is demonstrably martial, being only suited for decorating helmets, and, as I show below, such decoration may be found from Austria to England to Sweden in the period immediately prior to the Viking Age. Furthermore, whichever interpretation is adopted, matrix D appears to show that Óðinn and animal-skin-clad warriors were related before the Viking Age, which indicates that Snorri's description of *berserkir* as Óðinn's men may not be far from the mark.

5.2.2 The Gutenstein scabbard mount

Gutenstein lies on the Danube near Sigmaringen in southern Germany. Works undertaken at Gutenstein in 1887 unearthed two late seventh-century graves near the church there. These were clearly the graves of high status warriors,

⁵⁶⁰ Much has been made of *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* as an army of the dead.

The ritual death and rebirth of the initiation ritual in other cultures has been seen to reinforce this. See Kershaw, *The One-eyed God* for extensive discussion of this and for a detailed examination of the sources.

based on the surviving grave goods, but they were vandalised after their discovery and the surviving goods dispersed around the countryside. Despite this, some of the artefacts found their way back into the hands of archaeologists and were able to be studied.⁵⁶¹ Among the recovered artefacts was a sword preserved in its sheath, which was decorated with silver plates (Figure 5.4). The decoration appears to reuse older silver pieces, and it is these that are of interest here. The uppermost plate on the sheath depicts a man in a wolf's pelt carrying a sword and a spear, reminiscent of the wolfskin-clad figure on one of the Torslunda matrices. The sword is sheathed and held point downward in the left hand, while the spear is held point downward in the right hand, as if the figure were handing over the sheathed sword to another person. Lower down the scabbard is a fragment that consists solely of a pair of feet pointing in the opposite direction to the whole figure found at the top of the scabbard mount, and the edge detail of this element matches that of the whole figure. Therefore, it appears that this image was once part of a larger plate depicting the wolf-warrior together with other warriors in a scene much like that on the Torslunda matrices. There was probably a complementary figure facing the whole one in the original plate, with a warrior figure in between the

⁵⁶¹ Samson, *Les Berserker*, p. 298.

two, as is shown on the Obrigheim foil.⁵⁶² Figure 5.4 shows how these elements fit together according to Hauck's suggested reconstruction.⁵⁶³

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Figure 5-4 The Gutenstein scabbard mount (by the author based on Hauck's reconstruction. Photograph by Christian Bickel, via Wikimedia Commons)

⁵⁶² See 5.2.3.

⁵⁶³ Karl Hauck, 'Alemannische Denkmäler der vorchristlichen Adelskultur', *Zeitschrift für Württembergische Landesgeschichte*, 16 (1957), 1-40 and Pl. VIII (Plate III, Fig. 5).

The design below the figures, or feet in the case of the fragment, is the typical animal-head interlace design that was most common in the pan-Germanic world, consisting of either snakes' or birds' heads. Within the interlace is a cross that may be interpreted as a Christian symbol indicating a synthesis of the old pagan religion as represented by the wolfskin-clad warrior and Christian belief shown by the cross. Müller notes that Christianity was not yet ubiquitous among the people of this region in the seventh century, so this fusion of symbols is entirely feasible.⁵⁶⁴ However, it is equally possible to see in this design a swastika typical of Germanic iconography at this time rather than a cross, so the argument for syncretic religious practice is not as strong as it might be. This may be of import for understanding the development of the ritual aspects of *berserker* activity, although it seems unlikely at this stage that it will be possible to identify with any certainty the influence that Christianity had and how it might have changed those ritual activities.

The problem with interpreting this foil is the lack of detail in the central part. It is only possible to reconstruct a full version of it by comparison with other similar artefacts and the range of similar depictions is limited. Hauck, as noted earlier, has chosen to depict a wolfskin-clad warrior drawing his sword like the *ulfheðinn* on Torslunda matrix D. The presence of a tail on the lower fragment confirms that the other figure is a wolfskin-clad warrior. The spearhead of the spear that warrior is carrying point downwards seems clear

⁵⁶⁴ Wolfgang Müller, 'Archäologische Zeugnisse frühen Christentums zwischen Taunus und Alpenkamm', *Helvetica Archaeologica*, 65/66 (1986), 1-77 (p. 72).

enough but the second spearhead could equally be interpreted as the lower part of a scabbard. Perhaps this second figure should be in a similar pose to the whole figure depicted on the left. Reconstructing a central horned-warrior figure is not unreasonable for this piece, based on the limited evidence available, but such a reconstruction must remain open to question. While it seems likely that the scabbard mount once depicted a warrior advancing towards his opponent under the protection of a figure in a horned helmet, this is not certain.

5.2.3 The Obrigheim foil

Obrigheim lies near Bad Dürkheim in south-western Germany (Figure 5.1). The Obrigheim foil was found during excavations of a Merovingian cemetery there in 1884.⁵⁶⁵ The Obrigheim foil dates from the seventh century and depicts a wolfskin-clad warrior in the same pose as that of the scabbard mount from Gutenstein (Figures 5.5 and 5.6). Like the warrior on the Gutenstein scabbard mount, the warrior on the Obrigheim foil carries in his left hand a sheathed sword held vertically with the pommel at the top and a spear held in his right hand at his side with the point facing downwards at a forty-five degree angle. The warrior on the foil has in front of him a figure like the horned-helmeted figure of Torslunda matrix D. The figure has horns on its helmet that might have bird-headed terminals, but the detail is lacking in this

⁵⁶⁵ Christoph Engels, 'Obrigheim', in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. by Johannes Hoops, 2nd edn, 35 vols (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1973-2007), XXI (2002), 515-16.

case. It is carrying a sword in its right hand and a spear in its left, and appears to be leading the wolfskin-clad warrior towards what might be a battle line. The detail is not easy to decipher but there are indications of a shield and spears pointing towards the two oncoming figures and it is probable that the figure in the centre is intended to be a numinous power that protects the warrior. If this is the case, then the foil probably depicts a wolfskin-clad warrior advancing on the enemy under the protection of a war god in much the same fashion as Torslunda matrix D depicts the *ulfheðinn* advancing with Óðinn.

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Figure 5-5 The Obrigheim foil (Hauck, ‘Germanische Bilddenkmäler’, Pl. II, Fig. 3a)⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁶ Karl Hauck, ‘Germanische Bilddenkmäler des früheren Mittelalters’, *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 31 (1957), 349-79 (Pl. II, Fig. 3a).

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Figure 5-6 Reconstruction drawing of the Odrigheim foil (Hauck, 'Germanische Bilddenkmäler', Pl. III, Fig. 4)

Figures carrying swords in a similar fashion may be seen on the Tängelgårda stone, where they appear to be in a funeral procession walking backwards behind Sleipnir which is bearing a corpse, and on the Gutenstein scabbard mount where the figure may be opposed by another similar figure.⁵⁶⁷ They are also seen on helmets from Valsgärde and Vendel in Sweden as discussed below.⁵⁶⁸ The interpretation of this image seems straightforward by comparison with the Gutenstein scabbard mount. A warrior is advancing towards an enemy shieldwall with the horned-helmeted figure advancing before him, either drawing him on or protecting him in the battle. The rather passive manner in which he is carrying his sword confuses the issue somewhat and may suggest instead a ritual being undertaken.

⁵⁶⁷ See 5.2.2, Figure 5.3 and Figure 5.4.

⁵⁶⁸ See 5.2.4 and 5.2.5.

5.2.4 The Valsgärde helmets

Helmet plates on helmets from the graves at Valsgärde in Sweden provide additional data for the discussion. Only four reconstructible helmets were excavated and these all date from the sixth or seventh centuries. Three of these have evidence of helmet plates: those from Valsgärde 6, Valsgärde 7 and Valsgärde 8.

Valsgärde 6 is a seventh-century grave with a large quantity of grave goods.⁵⁶⁹ The list includes one helmet, three shields, two swords, 2 knives, 1 lance or spear, arrows, gaming pieces, a gaming board and the bones of at least twenty animals, including a goshawk.⁵⁷⁰ This is clearly a high status grave.

The helmet from Valsgärde 6 features a plate with four stylised beasts on it that may be intended as a monster-quelling motif like the stylised one on the Sutton Hoo purse cover.⁵⁷¹ These beasts are depicted in opposed pairs on the plate (Figure 5.7). Arent has suggested that this is an evolution of the design, Valsgärde 6 being younger than the other Valsgärde graves under discussion, and indicative of the loss of or a move away from the *signa sacra* nature of these helmet plates.⁵⁷²

⁵⁶⁹ See Greta Arwidsson, *Die Gräberfunde von Valsgärde I: Valsgärde 6* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1942) for the full excavation report on this grave.

⁵⁷⁰ Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 6*, pp. 138-51.

⁵⁷¹ See 5.2.7.

⁵⁷² Alice Margaret Arent, 'The Heroic Pattern: Old Germanic Helmets, *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga*', in *Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A*

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Figure 5-7 Detail of the animal motif from Valsgärde 6 (Arent, ‘The Heroic Pattern’, Pl. 10)

Like Valsgärde 6, Valsgärde 8 is a high status grave with significant quantities of grave goods but dating from the second half of the seventh century.⁵⁷³ The helmet from this grave features two helmet plates that are of interest here.⁵⁷⁴ One is a stylised animal motif that features two figures, one with a tail and one without (Figure 5.8). This may depict two beasts fighting each other or a person conquering a beast. Arwidsson had accounted for the differences in the figures as a lack of skill on the part of the artist, but the differences are too pronounced for that to be the case.⁵⁷⁵ In both cases, the

symposium, ed. by Edgar C. Polomé (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), p. 135-36.

⁵⁷³ See Greta Arwidsson, *Die Gräberfunde von Valsgärde II: Valsgärde 8* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1954) for the full excavation report on this grave; for dating see Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 8*, pp. 131-40.

⁵⁷⁴ Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 8*, pp. 22-28.

⁵⁷⁵ Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 8*, p. 127.

image of a warrior between two beasts or with a beast held on a rope is brought to mind, and these plates probably had the same significance. It is also significant that this plate sits above the eyes on the helmet, suggesting that it probably had the same symbolic value as the depictions of the warrior with the captured beast from Vendel I and the fighting warriors from Vendel XII.⁵⁷⁶

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Figure 5-8 Detail of the beast motif from Valsgärde 8 (Arent, ‘The Heroic Pattern’, Pl. 9)

The second plate from Valsgärde 8 features a mounted warrior like the one from the Sutton Hoo helmet (Figures 5.9 and 5.26).⁵⁷⁷ The warrior carries his spear raised in a martial position while another figure with a spear leads his horse. An enemy warrior lies under the horse, thrusting his sword into its belly, possibly representing those powers arrayed against the mounted warrior. A fourth figure dressed only in belt and horned helmet can be seen behind the

⁵⁷⁶ See 5.2.5; Figure 5.14 for Vendel I; and Figure 5.19 for Vendel XII.

⁵⁷⁷ See 5.2.7.

mounted warrior. This fourth figure has much in common with the horned god of the other helmet plates discussed here, although this figure is depicted with two eyes, as are all but Torslunda matrix D. He has his right arm raised and appears to have hold of the end of the mounted warrior's spear. The figure leading the horse may represent numinous powers that carry the warrior safely into battle and home again, as Arent suggests, while the horned figure is aiding the thrust of the spear, perhaps directing it.⁵⁷⁸ This suggests that that victory in battle could only be achieved through divine agency.

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Figure 5-9 Drawing of detail from the Valsgärde 8 helmet (Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7*, Fig. 65)

The figure being trampled beneath the horse is also attacking it even as his legs become entangled in its legs. If the other figures are to be taken as numinous agencies seeking to aid the warrior, then this figure represents those that seek to hinder him and bring him down. This motif is a development of

⁵⁷⁸ Arent, 'The Heroic Pattern', p. 142.

Roman funeral art that has been appropriated and repurposed by the emergent elites of the Germanic world to aid in establishing their identity, as Høilund Nielsen has noted with regard to similar examples from the Staffordshire hoard.⁵⁷⁹ The Roman 'fallen warrior' motif is found predominantly on gravestones such as that of Longinus Sdapeze found near Colchester, and shows a clearly defeated warrior being ridden down in direct contrast to the active assault of the rider on this and similar helmet plates.⁵⁸⁰ While this motif in Germanic art has been influenced by Roman funeral sculpture the Germanic and Scandinavian examples are more dynamic and cluttered, lacking the triumphalism of the Roman examples. The style and aggressive nature of the warrior attacking a horse from the ground does not accord with the commemorative function of a gravestone. Instead, the circumstances of the motif's preservation on helmet plates which were worn while the wearer was still alive and engaging in hazardous activity suggests that they had an alternative, prophylactic function.

Valsgårde 7 was another high status ship-burial with a wide range of grave goods including two swords and three shields in addition to the helmet

⁵⁷⁹ Høilund Nielsen, 'Symposium',

<<http://finds.org.uk/staffshoardsymposium/papers/karenhoilundnielsen>>; see also 5.2.8.

⁵⁸⁰ Marjorie Mackintosh, *The Divine Rider in the Art of the Western Roman Empire*, BAR International Series 607 (Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, 1995), pp. 59-60.

that is of interest here.⁵⁸¹ Arwidsson has concluded that it dates to c. 675 A.D. based on analysis of the artefacts recovered from it.⁵⁸² The helmet plates from Valsgärde 7 offer enticing parallels with the Torslunda matrices as well as sharing much in common with the helmet plates from the other graves at Valsgärde.⁵⁸³

Like Torslunda matrix C, one plate depicts two warriors together (Figures 5.2 and 5.10). The warriors carry spears with their points downwards and their shields raised. They have eagle-crested helmets, and snakes march at their sides. These armoured warriors are clearly intent upon battle, with the snakes perhaps representing the hostile force they can bring to bear. This plate is repeated around the base of the helmet, giving the impression of a column of warriors marching towards its front. The direction of the marching warriors is reversed on the left side when compared with those on the right side, so that all the warrior images face the front of the helmet.

The warriors on this plate are similar to those on Torslunda matrix C, insofar as they represent a similar scene and thus similar iconography, even though the specific details vary.

⁵⁸¹ See Greta Arwidsson, *Die Gräberfunde von Valsgärde III: Valsgärde 7* (Lund: Berlingska Boktryckeriet, 1977) for the full excavation report.

⁵⁸² Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7*, p. 152.

⁵⁸³ Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7*, pp. 21-33.

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Figure 5-10 Drawing of warriors in battle line from Valsgärde 7

(Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7*, Fig. 115)

A second, fragmentary plate depicts a mounted warrior with a second figure standing at his back wearing a horned helmet with bird-headed terminals and carrying a spear (Figure 5.11). The second figure has his hand in a position to aid the thrust of the rider's spear. Other figures appear on this plate too. One lies on the ground beneath the warrior's horse thrusting his sword into the horse's belly. Another is on his knees in front of the horse, while yet another appears to be flying in the air above the horse's head. This last figure is in such a position that he may be impaled on the rider's spear. This is a variation of the helmet plate from Valsgärde 8 (Figure 5.9). The bird-headed terminals on the figure behind the rider indicate that this figure is probably intended to be the same numinous power as that on Valsgärde 8 and may be related to the probable depiction of Óðinn on Toroslunda matrix D. This plate is repeated in rows immediately above the warriors in column, again on both sides of the helmet and with the plate reversed on one side so that both sides appear to be riding towards the front of the helmet.

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Figure 5-11 Drawing of helmet plate from Valsgärde 7 (Arwidsson, Valsgärde 7, Fig. 133)

Immediately above the eyes on this helmet are two plates depicting figures in horned helmets with spears and swords (Figure 5.12). These plates are fragmentary but clearly show both warriors carrying two spears in the outside hand and a sword in the other. The swords are held point upwards and the spears point downwards. The composition is strongly reminiscent of the warriors on the Sutton Hoo helmet plates sited above the eyes on that helmet and it is significant that these helmet plates were also sited above the eyes of Valsgärde 7, indicating that both had the same ritual significance.⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸⁴ See 5.2.7 and Figure 5.25.

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Figure 5-12 Drawing of the horned figures from Valsgärde 7 (Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7*, Fig. 138)

Sited above the figures in horned helmets is a fourth helmet plate, which depicts the warrior between two beasts (Figure 5.13). What survives of this plate appears to show the warrior with his feet in the same position as on Torslunda matrix A and two bear-like creatures on either side of him.

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Figure 5-13 Drawing of helmet plate showing warrior between two beasts from Valsgärde 7 (Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7*, Fig. 142)

The whole ensemble on the helmet from Valsgärde 7 shows how plates made from the Torslunda matrices could have been expected to be arranged on

a helmet. It also provides a strong link to the other imagery discussed in this section, indicating that this aristocratic imagery was part of a wider aristocratic culture that existed across much of northern Europe in the seventh and eighth centuries.

The abstract beast imagery of the plates from Valsgärde 6 and 8 is different in style from that on the other artefacts considered here but the events depicted appear to be the same as those discussed earlier: a warrior proving himself by defeating a beast. Thus it is possible to link these high status warriors with those discussed when examining less abstract depictions of men in combat with animals.

The helmet plate from Valsgärde 7 depicts the warrior in the shieldwall and is indicative of his role and status. In similar fashion, the mounted warrior imagery from both Valsgärde 7 and 8 shows that the wearer is higher status, because he can ride into battle and that he has the support of a numinous power when he does so, as shown by the figure behind him, directing his spear.

The image of the horned figure, as I discuss below, is sufficiently common on artefacts found within the same areas being discussed in this section to reinforce the idea of a continuum of belief and culture. Variations in these depictions may well be born of local subcultures but the overarching imagery remains the same and provides a vehicle for linking the various images of wolf-warriors to the Viking Age *ulfheðnar* and *berserkir*.

5.2.5 The Vendel helmets

Vendel is a parish in Uppland in Sweden, where excavations in 1881-83 revealed the presence of fourteen graves of sixth- and seventh-century date.⁵⁸⁵ Helmets were identified in graves I, XII and XIV, and it is these that are of interest here. Grave I (henceforth Vendel I) dates to the second half of the seventh century.⁵⁸⁶ Grave XII (henceforth Vendel XII) dates to the mid-sixth century and grave XIV (henceforth Vendel XIV) dates to the second half of the sixth century.⁵⁸⁷ The dating of these graves is imprecise and it is not currently possible to date them more closely than to a part of a century, but this does not affect their utility in aiding understanding of warrior culture between the Migration Period and the Viking Age, because a broad chronology can be established. The chronology is useful in considering the evolution of imagery related to warrior culture generally, and the place of animal imagery in that warrior culture as it may relate to *ulfhæðnar* first and through them to *berserkir*.

The Vendel I helmet features a number of foils depicting elements that will already be familiar from the artefacts previously examined here. Although the helmet was fragmentary, sufficient was present that it could be

⁵⁸⁵ See Hj. Stolpe and T. J. Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel* (Stockholm: K. L. Beckmans Boktryckeri, 1912) for the full excavation report.

⁵⁸⁶ Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, p. 59.

⁵⁸⁷ Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, p. 60.

reconstructed (Figure 5.14).⁵⁸⁸ Of interest for this study is the strip of foils that circles the helmet at its base.

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Figure 5-14 Vendel I helmet (Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, Pl. V, Fig. 1)

Above the eyes at the front of the helmet and at the centre back of the helmet are foils depicting a warrior with a defeated monster or bear, like Torslunda matrix B (Figure 5.2). The warrior carries an axe and leads the monster on a rope. In the interests of symmetry, the positions of the warrior and the monster are reversed on the right side of the helmet when compared to the left side positions, which are the same as the Torslunda plate. The artistic

⁵⁸⁸ Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, pp. 10-18.

style is different from Torslunda matrix B, but the essential details are the same with both warriors carrying an axe (Figures 5.15 and 5.16).

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Figure 5-15 The surviving foil above the left eyebrow of the Vendel I

helmet (Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, Pl. VI, Fig. 3)

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Figure 5-16 Detail of the warrior with monster motif from Vendel I (Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, Pl. VI, Fig. 2)

This helmet also features a series of plates along each side depicting a mounted warrior carrying a shield and spear. On the left side, he is wearing an eagle-crested helmet. Two birds accompany him, identified as ravens by some commentators, but the shapes of their beaks clearly show that one is an eagle

with a hooked beak and identical to the head on the helmet-crest, and the other is probably a raven, based on its straight beak, and because this would conform to the beasts of battle motif. In front of the warrior's horse is a snake rearing up to attack, which is a chthonic image representing those powers arrayed against humanity (Figure 5.17).⁵⁸⁹

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Figure 5-17 Vendel I, left side of helmet (Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, Pl. VI, Fig. 1)

On the right side, the warrior has a boar-crested helmet. Two birds accompany him in this image too, one being an eagle with its curved beak, while the other is less readily identifiable, but is probably a raven as on the left side. In this image the warrior's horse is being led by a small figure carrying a spear that may represent the powers that aid humanity (Figure 5.18).

⁵⁸⁹ Arent, 'The Heroic Pattern', pp. 139-140.

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Figure 5-18 Vendel I right side of helmet (Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, Pl. V, Fig. 2)

The helmet from Vendel XII depicts two warriors in opposition above each eye (Figure 5.19). This helmet plate occupies the same position as the warrior versus monster depictions on the helmet from Vendel I (Figures 5.15 and 5.16).⁵⁹⁰ This may represent a similar situation, where, instead of fighting a beast, the warrior has fought a single combat with another person. As Arent notes, the warriors on the Vendel XII helmet are dressed similarly to the warriors on Torslunda matrix B.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁹⁰ Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, pp. 45-51.

⁵⁹¹ Arent, 'The Heroic Pattern', p. 137.

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Figure 5-19 Detail above left eye of Vendel XII helmet (Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, Pl. XXXVI, Fig. 5)

Like the helmet from Vendel XII, the Vendel XIV helmet depicts two warriors in opposition above each eye (Figure 5.20).⁵⁹² These warriors are dressed differently from those on Vendel XII, but the style of dress is somewhat reminiscent of the warriors on Torslunda matrix C. The warriors are engaged in a struggle: the left-hand figure has a spear piercing the lower part of his tunic, while a spear pierces the shield of the right-hand figure. Their whole posture is martial and this may represent the warrior in battle, perhaps with an apotropaic function.

⁵⁹² Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, pp. 53-58.

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Figure 5-20 Plate depicting warriors that was placed above the eyes of the helmet from Vendel XIV (Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, Pl. XLI, Fig. 3)

The Vendel XIV helmet also depicts rows of warriors on either side of the helmet (Figure 5.21). These warriors carry their spears with point down and have a shield in their left hands, while their swords are sheathed at their sides. All have eagle-crested helmets and the lead warrior in the procession appears to have a boar's head with tusks. These appear to be warriors in procession rather than warriors at war. Perhaps this is the battle line that the warrior has joined but before the fight begins. This procession of warriors is similar to the depiction of two warriors together on the Torslunda matrices and may be intended to portray the same motif; the duty of the warrior to stand beside his comrades in the fray, or possibly his role as leader because he is a warrior with a special connection to numinous powers as shown by the boar's head of the leading warrior.⁵⁹³

⁵⁹³ See 5.2.14 for discussion of this point.

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Figure 5-21 The Vendel XIV helmet (Stolpe and Arne, *Graffältet vid Vendel*, Pl. XLI, Fig. 7)

The imagery on the Vendel helmets differs in the fine detail but still appears to tell the same story as that on the Toroslunda matrices and the helmet plates discussed here. Both the warrior who has tamed or captured a beast and the warriors in the battle line are present on these helmets and they are directly linked to the warrior on horseback with protective and hostile powers arrayed against him.

5.2.6 The Finglesham belt buckle

The Finglesham belt buckle was found at Finglesham in England in the seventh-century grave of a young male, who was approximately eighteen years old (Figure 5.22).⁵⁹⁴ The grave is thought to have been covered with a mound,

⁵⁹⁴ Sonia Chadwick Hawkes and Guy Grainger, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Finglesham, Kent*, ed. by Birte Brugman, Oxford University School of Archaeology Monograph, 64 (Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2006), pp. 21, 80, 264 and 339.

like the Vendel and Valsgärde burials, because it was found at some distance from the other burials in this cemetery.⁵⁹⁵ It is not as rich as those discussed earlier in this section, but a spear, a knife, a bucket and other metal fittings were recovered from the burial. Given the youth of the deceased this buckle may have been an heirloom or an indicator of the status to which the young man would have aspired had he lived.

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Figure 5-22 The Finglesham belt buckle (photograph by Rory Bowman, via Wikimedia Commons)

⁵⁹⁵ Chadwick Hawkes and Grainger, *Finglesham*, p. 78.

The buckle depicts a warrior with a spear in each hand, wearing only a belt and a helmet which has horns with bird's head terminals. The penis is depicted, showing that the figure is nude except for the belt and helmet, which recalls the requirements for duelling in the *Lex Baiuvariorum*, where a warrior should only wear a belt or loincloth.⁵⁹⁶

Iconographically, this image is much like the depictions of other horned helmeted figures, suggesting a cultural connection. It has been suggested that the bird's head terminals could represent Óðinn's ravens Huginn and Muninn, as has been suggested for other artefacts.⁵⁹⁷ If this is the case, then this could be a Germanic depiction of Woden, although Huginn and Muninn are only known from Scandinavian sources. Depictions of Óðinn with only one eye are probably the product of a Nordic sub-culture, because depictions of Woden in the Germanic world all depict him with two eyes.⁵⁹⁸ Speidel has suggested that the image on the buckle is a weapon dancer but its feet are flat on the ground and not in motion like those of the figures on the other artefacts described here.⁵⁹⁹ Despite this, the flexed knees could indicate a dance-like motion, and the two spears are not held in an aggressive pose, suggesting ritual rather than warlike activity.

⁵⁹⁶ See 5.3.

⁵⁹⁷ Eric Oxenstierna, *Järnålder, guldålder* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1957), p. 237; Axel Olrik, 'Gudfremstillinger på guldhornene og andre ældre mindesmerker', *Danske Studier* (1918), 1-34 (9).

⁵⁹⁸ Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, p. 272.

⁵⁹⁹ Speidel, *Ancient Germanic Warriors*, p. 120.

5.2.7 The Sutton Hoo purse-lid and helmet

The famous excavations at Sutton Hoo, England, in 1938-39 unearthed a high-status, possibly royal, ship burial, that was reinvestigated by Bruce-Mitford between 1965 and 1970.⁶⁰⁰ Carver undertook further investigations of the site between 1983 and 2001, although he did not reinvestigate the ship burial (Mound 1).⁶⁰¹ The burial was dated to c. 625 A.D. using radiocarbon dating in combination with detailed analysis of the finds, and is generally thought to have been that of Rædwald, leader of the Wuffing dynasty of the East Angles.⁶⁰² Although the range of finds in this burial was splendid and extensive, as well as demonstrating clearly early connections between East Anglia and Sweden, only a purse-lid and helmet from this burial are of particular interest here, because they are decorated with designs that resemble other continental and Scandinavian designs that have been used to provide a model for interpreting *berserkir* in the Viking Age.⁶⁰³

⁶⁰⁰ Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, 3 vols in 4 (1975-1983), I (1975), 230-36.

⁶⁰¹ M. O. H. Carver, *Sutton Hoo: A seventh-century princely burial ground and its context*, Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London, 69 (London: British Museum Press, 2005).

⁶⁰² Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, I (1975), 682, 688-90, 717.

⁶⁰³ Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, I (1975), 693 and nn.

The Sutton Hoo purse-lid features decoration showing a man surrounded by two beasts that resembles the depiction on Torslunda matrix A (Figure 5.23).⁶⁰⁴

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Figure 5-23 Sutton Hoo purse cover (photograph by Rob Roy, via Wikimedia Commons)

The man's knees are flexed with his legs spread wide. His arms are raised in front of him with his hands on his shoulders in a pose that Bruce-Mitford construed as passive, but which appears more to represent the sort of pose adopted by dancers of a 'haka' such as that performed by the All Blacks before rugby matches. The beasts have their back legs intertwined with the man's legs, their forelegs grasp him at the shoulder and their muzzles are open beside his head, as if to swallow it. Bruce-Mitford suggests that they are whispering in his ears, which would fit with the idea of a ritual conflict during

⁶⁰⁴ Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, II (1978), 487-522.

which the young warrior gains secret knowledge.⁶⁰⁵ The beasts appear to be wolves, because they have tails and upright ears, and that is how Bruce-Mitford identified them.⁶⁰⁶ There is much less of conflict in this depiction than there is in Torslunda matrix A, where the violence is overt.

The depiction of opposed beasts is repeated at the top centre of the purse-lid, where two depictions of this motif are intertwined in a highly stylised form. This time there is no man present in between the beasts and his place is taken by a delicate interlace pattern.

The two beasts are set up in opposition using the animal interlace design that is typical of Salin's Style II, a style that was popular throughout Scandinavia and Europe from the sixth century.⁶⁰⁷ This intricately interlaced design features the motif twice with two animals flanking the interlace and the two opposing animals set up in the centre of the design superimposed upon each other. The human figure is missing from this design, lost to the ribbon interlace.⁶⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the situation of the animals indicates that the motif is intended to be interpreted as a repetition of the two depictions beneath it on the purse cover, although Bruce-Mitford suggests that it is more closely related to the depiction of two horses intertwined with each other on the flange of the

⁶⁰⁵ Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, II (1978), 514.

⁶⁰⁶ Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, II (1978), 512.

⁶⁰⁷ Klindt-Jensen, 'Scandinavian Art before the Vikings', in Wilson and Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, pp. 30-31.

⁶⁰⁸ Arent, 'The Heroic Pattern', p. 132.

shield boss.⁶⁰⁹ In doing so, he interprets it as belonging to the same mould as the *Fürstengrab* found at Beckum in Westphalia. Here, an ornate purse-lid, but lacking the representations of animals and men, was found in association with the burial of two horses with their legs intertwined. While there may be a ritual connection between that burial and the depictions on the Sutton Hoo purse-lid, it is unclear what it is.

In considering the significance of the depictions on the purse-lid, the clearer connection lies in the motif of man versus beast. It is possible that the opposed animals at the top of the lid represent the same motif, or that they have the same ritual meaning as the *Fürstengrab* from Beckum, but any connection without further evidence must remain speculative. The relationship between the man opposed by beasts and its Scandinavian parallels is striking, despite the obvious differences in the passivity of the Sutton Hoo man versus the aggressiveness of Torslunda matrix A, and appears to indicate that elements of aristocratic culture were similar in both England and Sweden.

The Sutton Hoo helmet was originally covered in tinned bronze sheeting stamped with figures in the same manner as impresses from the Torslunda matrices would have been used (Figure 5.24).⁶¹⁰ The decorations from the Sutton Hoo helmet are fragmentary but are repeated across the helmet, so it has been largely possible to reconstruct them, with the exception of one figural design, which was too fragmented. Two of the designs are interlace patterns

⁶⁰⁹ Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, II (1978), 522.

⁶¹⁰ Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, II (1978), 204.

that are not relevant to this study, but two of the designs are similar to the Scandinavian helmet plates previously discussed in this chapter.

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Figure 5-24 Sutton Hoo helmet showing detail of warrior with horned helmet (photograph by Aiwok, via Wikimedia Commons)

One design depicts two warriors each carrying a sword in one hand and two spears in the other, which broadly resembles one of the plates from Valsgärde 7 (Figure 5.25).⁶¹¹ They are wearing helmets with bird-headed terminals, which, like the depiction on the Finglesham belt buckle of a man in horned helmet, are similar to that on Torslunda matrix D as well as to the horned-helmeted figures on the Obrigheim foil and Gutenstein scabbard discussed earlier.⁶¹² Given the probable date of the Sutton Hoo burial, it is not

⁶¹¹ Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, II (1978), 186-89; see also 5.2.4.

⁶¹² See sections 5.2.1, 5.2.2, 5.2.3 and 5.2.6.

inconceivable that these warriors represent Woden or mummers playing Woden, and that they are one of the last remnants of pagan expression in East Anglia.

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Figure 5-25 Replica of the plaque above the left eye of the Sutton Hoo helmet (photograph by Johnbod, via Wikimedia Commons)

The position of the feet on these warriors clearly indicates motion and neither of the warriors appears to be wearing armour or to be prepared for battle, thus suggesting a ritual activity. Bruce-Mitford suggests that they are performing a spear dance and that the crossed spears in the centre of the image represent spears lying on the ground.⁶¹³ If it is true that this plate represents a spear dance, then it is a tantalising hint of the rituals of aristocratic warriors. Such a hint might be linked to *berserker* through the chain of archaeological connections that is being examined here and the link to Óðinn that is established by the iconographic similarity between the helmets on these figures

⁶¹³ Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, II (1978), 188.

and that of the figure on Torslunda matrix D that has been identified as Óðinn because of its single eye.

The other plate of interest depicts a mounted warrior trampling an enemy under foot while a smaller figure stands behind him grasping his spear as if to give it extra force or to ensure that it is directed correctly. The warrior on the ground is thrusting his sword into the rider's horse, an image that is seen also on a bracteate from Pliezhausen and on the helmets from Valsgärde 7 and 8.⁶¹⁴ As with the other depictions, this figure may represent a malign power that opposes the warrior as was also suggested for the helmet from Valsgärde 8.

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Figure 5-26 Replica of the plaque from the side of the Sutton Hoo helmet
(photograph by Johnbod, via Wikimedia Commons)

⁶¹⁴ For Pliezhausen see 5.2.9; for Valsgärde 7 and 8 see 5.2.4 and Figure 5.9.

5.2.8 The Staffordshire hoard

Embossed foils from the Staffordshire hoard, which dates to the seventh century, include a number of warrior images that share attributes with the Vendel helmet plates.⁶¹⁵

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Figure 5-27 Fragment of gold foil showing a mounted warrior (StH 1400)

(Portable Antiquities Scheme, CC-BY-SA)

Two foils (StH 1400 and StH 1624) depict a mounted warrior on a galloping horse (StH 1400) and a foe on the ground striking at a horse (StH 1624) (Figures 5.27 and 5.28). Similar images may be found on the Sutton Hoo, Vendel and Valsgärde helmets and also on a disc from Pliezhausen in Germany.⁶¹⁶

⁶¹⁵ Paper given by Karen Høilund Nielsen at the Staffordshire Hoard Symposium (March 2010).

<<http://finds.org.uk/staffshoardsymposium/papers/karenhoilundnielsen>>

[Accessed 24/08/2012].

⁶¹⁶ See 5.2.4, 5.2.5 and 5.2.7.

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Figure 5-28 Fragment of a gold foil showing a warrior plunging his sword into a horse (StH 1624) (Portable Antiquities Scheme, CC-BY-SA)

Other foils from the Staffordshire hoard also bear images of warriors. One foil depicts part of a line of marching soldiers (Figure 5.29). The surviving part shows the upper body of one warrior with the arm and shield of another behind him. The warrior carries a spear in his right hand and, presumably, a shield in his left hand, based on the part of the warrior behind him that is visible. The warriors are wearing eagle-crested helmets like the warriors on the helmet from Vendel XIV and it seems likely that the same sort of scene is being depicted, although there are stylistic differences between the two, such as the ballooning tunics.⁶¹⁷ These differences may be ascribed to local variations in culture once more, but the content is still indicative of broader, shared culture across Sweden and England, and also close contact between these societies.

⁶¹⁷ Compare with Figure 5.21.

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Figure 5-29 Fragment of foil with line of warriors (StH 1423) (Portable Antiquities Scheme, CC-BY-SA)

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Figure 5-30 Kneeling warrior foils (StH 1432, StH 1529 and StH 1556)
(Portable Antiquities Scheme, CC-BY-SA)

A third set of foils was found in the Staffordshire hoard. These foils all depict kneeling warriors with spear and shield and have no known parallels (Figure 5.30). As a result of the lack of parallels, their fragmentary nature and

the lack of a firm context for their usage, there is little that can be said about them or their relationship to *ulfheðnar* and *berserkir*.

As Høilund Nielsen notes, the Staffordshire hoard foils belong in the same tradition as the Scandinavian and German examples but they also represent a variant style that indicates a local sub-culture within the broader Germanic aristocratic culture.⁶¹⁸

5.2.9 Bracteates

Even a cursory examination of bracteates demonstrates the vast number that has been recovered.⁶¹⁹ However, despite the large number of bracteates found, the number that is of interest to this study is significantly fewer and this section seeks to highlight trends through reference to select examples rather than to describe all relevant bracteates, which would be the task of a much larger volume than this one. These bracteates may be related to the study of *berserkir* by the iconographic similarities with the helmet plates that have been discussed previously in this chapter.

No bracteates depict warriors in animal pelts, but a small number depict warriors in combat with animals or show the warrior on horseback with

⁶¹⁸ Høilund Nielsen, ‘Symposium’,

<<http://finds.org.uk/staffshoardsymposium/papers/karenhoilundnielsen>>.

⁶¹⁹ See Morten Axboe, Klaus Düwel, Karl Hauck and Lutz von Padberg, *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit: Ikonographischer Katalog*, Münsterche Mittelalter-Schriften 24, 7 vols (München: Fink, 1985-89) for a detailed listing of bracteates.

another warrior stabbing the horse from below. Raven-like birds and eagles are also a feature of some of these bracteates which Hauck has interpreted as meaning that the rider is Óðinn or Woden.⁶²⁰

Wicker has criticised Hauck's approach and interpretation, finding areas where his assessment of the evidence may be called into doubt.⁶²¹ In particular, she calls into question the interpretation of the rider images as being Óðinn and Baldr, and agrees with Malmer that the gods on the bracteates could be Ullr and Njǫrðr instead or in addition.⁶²² However, in the case of the bracteates discussed in this section and those that are similar to them, the broader question of whether the rider figures on all bracteates are Óðinn is not directly relevant, because the deity appears to be represented by the horned figure behind the rider and not by the rider figure. In the case of the warrior between two beasts, this may not be as easily interpreted as a representation of a god, unless the intent is to depict Óðinn with his wolves, because there are no other mythological narratives surviving that describe such a scene.

A bracteate (IK 71) thought to have been found near Hamburg in Germany, dating to c. 500 A.D., features a warrior contesting with two animals that may be interpreted as a depiction of the same scene as Torslunda matrix A

⁶²⁰ Karl Hauck, 'Machttaten Odins. Die Chiffrenwelt der Brakteaten und die Methoden ihrer Auswertung' in *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit – Auswertung und Neufunde*, ed. by Wilhelm Heizmann and Morten Axboe (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), pp. 1-60 (pp. 3-4).

⁶²¹ Wicker and Williams, 'Bracteates and Runes', pp. 161-65.

⁶²² Wicker and Williams, 'Bracteates and Runes', p. 163.

(Figure 5.31).⁶²³ Similar bracteates have been found in Germany (IK 599 – Derenburg) and in England (IK 604 – Holt area).⁶²⁴ Stylistically these bracteates do not resemble any of the helmet plates discussed in this section, but the motif is the same as the helmet plates with a warrior between two beasts.⁶²⁵ On IK 71 the animal on the right appears to have been defeated, while that on the left is still fighting and has bitten the man's hand. The man raises his sword in anticipation of striking the left-side animal. He is dressed in a tightly fitting tunic and knee length treads, which differ from the clothes worn by other warriors depicted fighting animals. This depiction is more civilised than the rough clothes of the warrior on Torslunda matrix A and perhaps reflects a different tradition and culture of warriors fighting beasts. The image is largely the same, with stylistic differences on IK 599, but the positions of all figures are reversed on IK 604.

⁶²³ Mogens B. Mackeprang, *De nordiske Guldbrakteater: Brakteatstudiets historie. Brakteatypernes udvikling, geografiske fordeling, kronologi, motiver og prægningsteknik* (Aarhus: Universitetsforlaget I Aarhus, 1952), pp 35, 83 and 179 and Pl. 5.14; See also Alexandra Pesch, *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit – Thema und Variation* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), pp. 120-23.

⁶²⁴ Pesch, *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit – Thema und Variation*, pp. 120-23.

⁶²⁵ See 5.2.1 and 5.2.7 for the helmet plate images.

Pesch suggests that the figure may be Óðinn or Týr fighting wolves.⁶²⁶ If this is the case then perhaps the helmet plates depicting this image also represent the same thing, linking the warrior that wears them with the activities of those gods, but the identification of this image as either of these gods is not certain. The suggestion that the image is Óðinn identifies an alternative interpretation, which could show the link that Snorri mentions in *Ynglinga saga*, when describing *berserksgangr*.⁶²⁷ In this case the bracteate gains totemic significance, because the image may be both a representation of the warrior who has had to fight a beast as part of coming of age, and a representation of Óðinn fighting Fenrir. While this is a possibility that would explain one method for young, aristocratic warriors to enhance their ties to Óðinn through a rite of passage, there is little evidence to support it, and the image of the warrior on the bracteates has nothing in common with the horned-helmeted figures identified as supporting powers previously in this chapter.

Another bracteate dating from c. 700 A.D. was found in a woman's grave at Pliezhausen in south-western Germany.⁶²⁸ It depicts a warrior on the ground stabbing a horse, like the helmet plates from Staffordshire, Sutton Hoo

⁶²⁶ Alexandra Pesch, 'På glatis med ikonografi', in *Ragnarok Odins verden*, ed. by Torsten Capelle and Christian Fischer (Silkeborg: Silkeborg Museum, 2005), pp. 25-32 (pp. 29-30).

⁶²⁷ See section 3.1.2.

⁶²⁸ Walther Veeck, *Die Alamannen in Württemberg*, 2 vols (Berlin and Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1931), I, 294.

and Valsgärde (figure 5.32).⁶²⁹ The stylistic elements are strongly reminiscent of the foils from the Staffordshire hoard, particularly the way the hair is depicted and the manner in which the figures are looking upwards.⁶³⁰

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Figure 5-31 Gold bracteate from the Hamburg area (IK 71) (Mackeprang, *Guldbrakteater*, Pl. 5.14)

The Pliezhausen bracteate features a rider with a spear raised in his hand. A smaller figure behind him has a hand on his spear aiding or directing the spear thrust. The horse is in full motion forwards with a figure underneath it thrusting his sword into the breast of the horse. As with the similar helmet plate images, this appears to show a rider being aided by a god, as represented by the smaller figure, while hostile powers, represented by the figure on the ground, oppose him. In this instance the god-figure lacks the horned helmet

⁶²⁹ Karl Hauck, 'Alemannische Denkmäler', p. 6; see also Figures 5.9, 5.11, 5.26 and 5.28.

⁶³⁰ See 5.2.8.

with bird's-head terminals. Despite this difference, the image clearly belongs in the same tradition as the previously discussed helmet plates, although representing a variant tradition. Its similarity to the foils from the Staffordshire hoard is particularly interesting here. While it is tempting to consider this a local sub-culture, the presence of similar foils in England indicate that this variant was in use across a wider area.

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Figure 5-32 Bracteate from Pliezhausen (photograph by Bullenwächter, via Wikimedia Commons)

Neither of these images are of wolfskin-clad warriors, but they are iconographically similar to images associated with wolf-warriors and they lie within the area defined by finds of such images. As such, they belong to the body of evidence that indicates a broader culture of elite warriors with a connection to numinous powers associated with pelt-wearing and which stretched from Austria to England to Sweden in the eighth century.

The fact that bracteates are almost all made of gold indicates that they belonged to the wealthier members of society and it is certain that they were worn as pendants, because they have loops for chains or cords and some of

these show significant wear, while others were found *in situ* with beads as spacers, showing how they were worn.⁶³¹ The images depicted on them are sufficiently similar to those on helmet plates as to suggest that they had similar meaning, but the predominant deposition pattern is in female graves, so it is unlikely that they indicate that the wearer had been through an initiation rite, as has been suggested for the helmet plates.⁶³² Most scholars agree that they had an amuletic function, which is appropriate given the mythological theme of the iconography; by depicting the gods' triumphs, they protect their wearer through sympathetic magic.⁶³³ In addition to their function as jewellery Axboe has suggested that they were Charon's obols, as evidenced by their deposition

⁶³¹ Morten Axboe, 'Amulet Pendants and a Darkened Sun: On the function of the gold bracteates and a possible motivation for the large gold hoards', in *Roman Gold and the Development of the Early Germanic Kingdoms: Aspects of technical, socio-political, socio-economic, artistic and intellectual development*, ed. by Bente Magnus, KVHAA Konferenser, 51 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001), pp 119-135 (pp. 120-22).

⁶³² H. Roth, 'Brakteaten', in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. by Johannes Hoops, 2nd edn, 35 vols (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1973-2007), III (1978), 346; Morten Axboe, *Brakteatstudier*, Nordiske fortidsminder, B25 (Copenhagen: Det kongelige nordiske oldskriftselskab, 2007), p. 153; see also 5.2.1, 5.2.4, 5.2.5, 5.2.7 and 5.2.8.

⁶³³ Axboe, 'Amulet Pendants', pp. 119 and 122-23; Karl Hauck, 'Machttaten Odins', pp. 28-34.

in corpses' mouths.⁶³⁴ As artefacts that were designed to be displayed openly, it is probable that they had social functions as well as spiritual. Bracteates worn in public could have been an indicator of status and affiliation, showing this through their high value and iconography related to or depicting the lord of the gods, and reinforcing their status by giving bracteates as gifts to other members of the elite.⁶³⁵

As stated, the value of the bracteates explicitly links them to the upper echelons of society. Linking bracteates to *berserker* is more problematic, because of the lack of depictions of wolf-warriors on the bracteates themselves, as well as the presence in women's graves of bracteates. Therefore, it seems likely that bracteates do not provide direct evidence for *berserker*, but they link those artefacts that do provide that evidence directly to the warrior elite in Scandinavian society, for depictions of *berserker* are found in association with iconography that has been shown to be an expression of an elite identity on bracteates.

5.2.10 The Gallehus horns

The Gallehus horns were discovered at Gallehus in Denmark. The first of the horns (henceforth, the older horn) was discovered in 1639, while the second (henceforth, the younger horn) was discovered in 1734.⁶³⁶ Both horns are

⁶³⁴ Axboe, *Brakteatstudier*, pp. 152-4.

⁶³⁵ Axboe, 'Amulet Pendants', pp. 124-25.

⁶³⁶ Lis Jacobsen and Erik Moltke, *Danmarks Runeindskrifter*, 3 vols (Copenhagen: Ejnjar Munksgaards Forlag, 1941-42), Text (1942), Cols 24-37

thought to date from the first half of the fifth century based on the runic inscription on the younger horn, because the similarity of the artwork suggested to Moltke that they were made in the same workshop at roughly the same time.⁶³⁷ Unfortunately, they were stolen and melted down in 1802 so it is not possible to examine them directly but drawings of them survive, which show a variety of warriors, some of whom have animal personae.

The older horn features seven bands of images but only two can be related to the warrior imagery under discussion here. The third band of images down from the mouth of the older horn depicts two warriors, one with a wolf's head and the other with what may be a bird's head, facing each other with weapons raised (Figure 5.33). The depiction of these warriors is stylistically different from the depictions discussed earlier in this chapter, but the event depicted resembles the opposed warrior imagery of the Vendel XII and Vendel XIV (Figures 5.19 and 5.20). Between the two figures is a nebulous anthropomorphic figure with a snake's tail that winds underneath and behind the wolf-headed figure. It appears to be opposing the bird-headed figure, which has intertwined snakes beneath it and another snake figure behind it.

(28); Hans Brix, *Guldhornene fra Gallehus: Med et tillæg om Gundestrupkarret* (København: Gyldendal, 1949), pp. 19-27.

⁶³⁷ Jacobsen and Moltke, *Danmarks Runeindskrifter*, Text (1942), Col. 31.

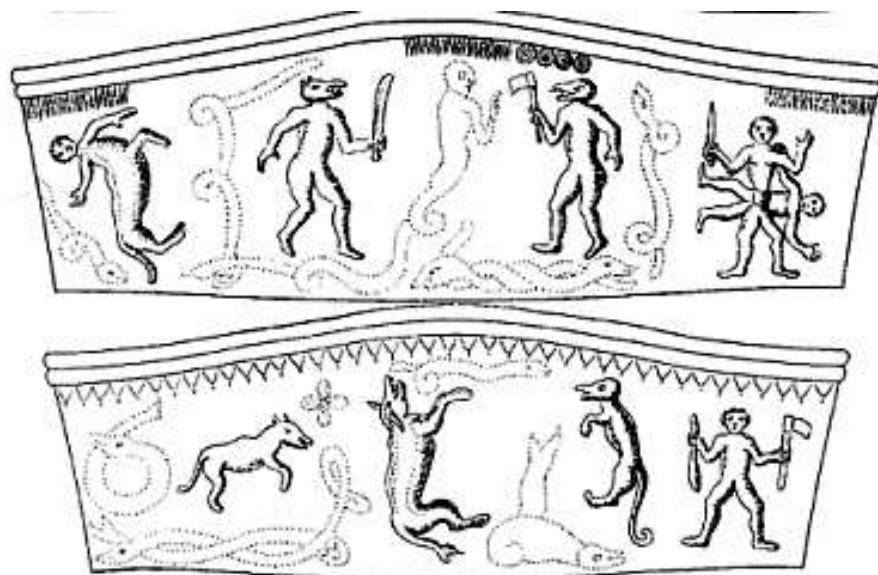


Figure 5-33 Panels 3 and 4 of the older Gallehus horn with panel 3 at the top of the image (excerpt from etchings by J. R. Paulli, 1734. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons)

The other figures in the third panel do not appear to fit the later Germanic and Scandinavian pattern and may belong to an earlier tradition that did not survive into the Vendel Period and later. This is particularly true of the centaur figure. The armed figure on the right with the prostrate body in front of him may represent the end result of the duel or could be a depiction of something altogether different. Neither of these images relates directly to the discussion of *berserkir*, so I shall not discuss them further.

The fourth panel depicts three beasts and a man with an axe in one hand and possibly a staff or rope in the other. The posture of the animals appears to show them prostrate or defeated, while the man is in an assertive pose with his legs spread, feet flat on the floor and arms raised. This suggests that he has triumphed over them and that this is another depiction of the warrior defeating beasts as seen on Torslunda matrix B and the helmet from Vendel I (Figures 5.2 and 5.16).

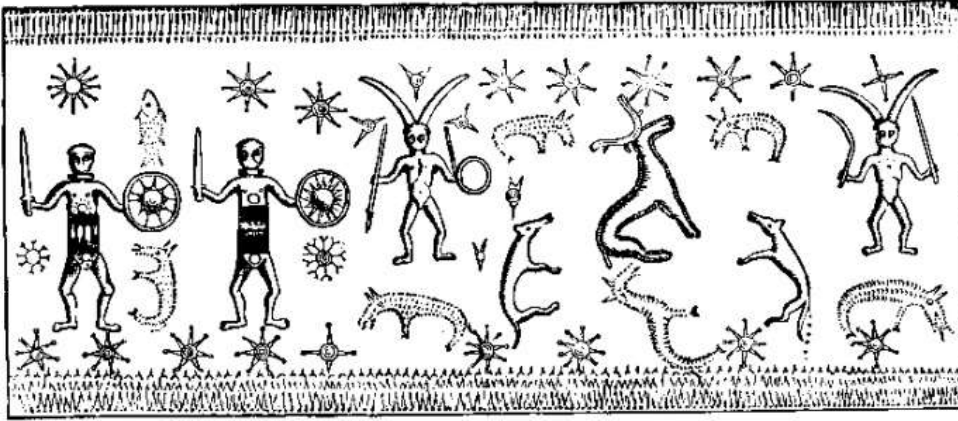


Figure 5-34 Panel 2 from the younger Gallehus horn (excerpt from etchings by J. R. Paulli, 1734. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons)

The younger horn has six panels instead of seven, and the uppermost panel, closest to the mouth of the horn contains a runic inscription, which reads **ekhlewagastiR : holtijaR : horna : tawido** (I, Lægæst Holt's son/ from Holt, made the horn).⁶³⁸ The second panel depicts warriors in similar posture to that in panel three of the older horn but carrying sword and shield instead of an axe and another item (Figure 5.34). There are two figures in this panel with horns. One carries a spear and another item while the other appears to have a sickle and a sword. The horns curve outwards instead and do not have bird's head terminals so they do not resemble closely the images of Óðinn on the helmet plates discussed earlier, although it is tempting to see in these images an earlier evolution of the horned figure on, for example, Torslunda matrix D. The legs of all the anthropomorphic figures in this panel are flexed and appear to stand less flat-footed than those of the figure on panel 4 of the older horn.

⁶³⁸ Jacobsen and Moltke, *Danmarks Runeindskrifter*, Text (1942), Cols, 25-28, 31.

Interpretation of these images is problematic. Stylistically there is little resemblance between the images on the Gallehus horns and the later helmet plates, but the resemblance of the warriors in panel 3 of the older horn to duelling mummers suggests that the images lie within the same warrior-elite sphere as the helmet plates and other artefacts discussed in this chapter.⁶³⁹ Similarly, the warrior versus beasts motif of panel 4 of the older horn is indicative of a tradition that survived within the pan-Germanic and Scandinavian world through to the end of the Vendel period, if not into the Viking Age. From this, it would appear that the animal warrior or animal mask was a feature of society in the fifth century, just as much as it was later.

5.2.11 Zoomorphic masks

Felt masks recovered from Hedeby in 1979-80 may be associated with rituals similar to those that *berserker* followed. The masks are of tenth-century date and cover the front of the face leaving the back uncovered, although Hägg writes that they were probably worn with a hood to complete the disguise.⁶⁴⁰ The edges of the masks are ragged now, but would have been smooth and the shape symmetrical when they were first made (Figure 5.35).

⁶³⁹ See 5.2.11 for discussion on masks and mummers.

⁶⁴⁰ Inga Hägg, *Die Textilfunde aus dem Hafen von Haithabu*, Berichte über die Ausgrabungen in Haithabu, 20 (Neumünster: K. Wachholz, 1984), pp. 69-72; Gunnell, *Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, p. 76.

(This image has been removed from the online version of this thesis. A hardbound copy of this thesis is available in the Nottingham University library, or you may follow the reference given.)

Figure 5-35 Mask from Hedeby shown as found (left) and reshaped (right)

(Hägg, *Textilfunde*, Fig. 46)

Reconstructions give the masks an ursine appearance, although Gunnell has suggested that one is a sheep and the other a bull.⁶⁴¹ This find certainly proves that masks were a feature of Viking Age activity and may indicate a connection between them and the rituals of *berserkir*. It is also possible that the mumming that played a significant part in Scandinavian Christmas rituals until recently was derived from or related to the Yuletide rituals of *berserkir*, such as the induction of young men into a warband.⁶⁴² The resemblance between the masks and the depiction of a figure on an eleventh-century runestone at Källby in Sweden (Vg 56) is striking (Figure 5.36).⁶⁴³ One cannot help but draw a comparison between the two and speculate whether the depiction is of a person of sufficient status to take a role in rituals that used these masks.

Unfortunately, the runic inscription does not help determine whether the

⁶⁴¹ Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, p. 76.

⁶⁴² Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, p. 107; see also 3.3 and 4.4.2.

⁶⁴³ See 5.2.12.

person it commemorates was a *berserkr* or a mummer, because it only states who raised the stone and for whom:

stur-akR + sati + stin + þasi + (i)ftiR + kaur + faþur + sin

(Styr[l]akr placed this stone in memory of Kaur, his father).⁶⁴⁴

In connection with masks there is also a reference to Gothic warriors, presumably Scandinavian Rus but possibly members of the Varangian guard, performing a Yuletide ceremony or Gothikon (Gr Γοθικού) for the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII in the mid-tenth century.⁶⁴⁵ The ceremony involved two groups of warriors performing ring dances while clashing their spears on their shields and shouting rhythmically. Two of the warriors wore masks and animal-skins with the hair turned outward in a fashion similar to the wolfskins discussed earlier in this section.

⁶⁴⁴ *Samnordisk runtextdatabas*

<<http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>> [accessed 5 December

2013]; see also Hugo Jungner and Elisabeth Svärdström, *Västergötlands*

Runinskrifter, Sveriges runinskrifter, 5, 2 vols (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1970), I, 80.

⁶⁴⁵ Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos, *De cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae*, I, 381-82; Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, pp. 66-76.

(This image has been removed from the online version of this thesis. A hardbound copy of this thesis is available in the Nottingham University library, or you may follow the reference given.)

Figure 5-36 Källby (Vg 56) (photograph by Henrik Karlsson,

<http://www.algonet.se/~hkkbs/>)

(This image has been removed from the online version of this thesis. A hardbound copy of this thesis is available in the Nottingham University library, or you may follow the reference given.)

Figure 5-37 Fighting Mummers in the Cathedral of St Sophia, Kiev

(National Historical Reserve, “St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev”)

Further evidence of later masked activities lies in an eleventh-century fresco in the cathedral of St. Sophia in Kiev, which depicts two warriors fighting; ‘The fight of the guisers’ (Ru Борьба Ряженных) as it is known (Figure 5.37).⁶⁴⁶ One wears an animal mask, is stripped to the waist and barefoot. The other carries an axe and a shield but wears no mask. This fresco is usually described as two warriors mumming, and quickly brings to mind a ritual duel or dance like the Gothikon.⁶⁴⁷ It is probably reading too much into it

⁶⁴⁶ Sergej Aleksandrovic Vysotsky, *Svetskie freski Sofijskogo sobora v Kieve* (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1989), p. 127, cited from Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, p. 72.

⁶⁴⁷ See 3.3, 4.4.2 and 5.2.16.

to expect a ritual connection with the fresco of a mounted warrior being attacked by a bear that lies beside it, despite the temptation of linking it to a bear and thus *berserkir*. However, other frescoes around it feature performers in front of an audience, so the guisers fresco should probably be considered in the context of entertainment in the same manner as the bear hunt would have been, as Gunnell suggests, which reinforces the idea that it is a representation of the Gothikon or a similar event.⁶⁴⁸ Vysotsky suggests that the frescoes are depictions of the events of c. 953 A.D. when Princess Olga travelled to Byzantium to meet Constantine Porphyrogenitos and the Gothikon described above was performed.⁶⁴⁹ This is less easily provable than interpreting the fresco as a depiction of an entertainment, so I shall not approach it from that perspective. Instead it is better to consider it as a depiction of an entertainment of that sort, given the lack of evidence, and as an example of how the ritual duel with a *berserkr* that is such a stock feature of the *Íslendingasögur* might have appeared.⁶⁵⁰ This image, which dates from the end of the Viking Age, may well be the Swedish or Kievan version of a *berserkr* painted by someone with recent knowledge of what they were.

⁶⁴⁸ Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, p. 71.

⁶⁴⁹ Vysotsky, *Svetskie freski*, p. 127, cited from Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, p. 72.

⁶⁵⁰ See 4.3.3

5.2.12 Runestones

Runestones provide some pictorial and some epigraphic evidence that contributes to the discussion about the existence and nature of *berserkir* and *ulfhednar*. As already been shown, the Källby stone (Vg56) features a masked figure that might be interpreted in the context of the Gothikon performed for Constantine Porphyrogenitos as a *berserkr*-like character.⁶⁵¹

As discussed in Chapter 4, theriophoric names are common on runestones in Sweden.⁶⁵² Such names have been used as evidence that particular groups of warriors were *berserkir*, such as the twelve brothers mentioned in Saxo, all of whose names include the element ‘björn’.⁶⁵³ However, as discussed in Chapter 4, this evidence is equivocal at best.⁶⁵⁴ It does not mean that all the people for whom or by whom these runestones were raised were *berserkir*. Two runestones include variations of the name Ulfheðinn, and these are more likely to relate to the tradition of wearing an animal-skin. The form **ulueþin** is known to date from a late-twelfth-century runestone in Uppland, Sweden (U 799).⁶⁵⁵ This stone clearly post-dates the Viking Age and relates directly to the personal name Ulfheðinn stating that:

⁶⁵¹ See 5.2.11 and Figure 5.36.

⁶⁵² *Runnamnslexikon*, pp. 44-45 and 240-42; see also 4.5.

⁶⁵³ Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, I, 364-65; see also 4.5.

⁶⁵⁴ See 4.5.

⁶⁵⁵ *Upplands runinskrifter*, ed. by Wessén and Jansson, III.1, 398-401.

**: tomas : ligær : unt:ir: þæma : steni :+ han uarþar : ulueþin ioan : i
: brunnum : han risti : runir : þøsar :⁶⁵⁶**

(Tomas lies under this stone. Ulfheðinn guards him. Ioan from Brunna carved these runes)

The name's continued usage may indicate that the literal interpretation of *ulfheðinn* as one who wears a wolf's pelt no longer had the same transparency or no longer carried the same semantic force as it would have done when *ulfheðnar* were a part of society.⁶⁵⁷ A second runestone from Igelsta mill, Södertälje, in Södermanland dates to the Viking Age and includes the form **ul(f)hiþin** (Sö 307).⁶⁵⁸ The inscription reads:

**ul(f)hiþin * auk : au... ...aiR : raistu : stai(n) : þinsa : at : þurstin :
faþur : sin :⁶⁵⁹**

Ulfheðinn and ... they raised this stone in memory of their father Þorsteinn.

Here we have the personal name but no evidence to support his actual function within society. These examples demonstrate that Ulfheðinn was a personal name used from the Viking Age onwards, but do not provide any more evidence that we can link to *berserkir*.

⁶⁵⁶ *Upplands runinskrifter*, ed. by Wessén and Jansson, III.1, 399.

⁶⁵⁷ See 3.1.1.

⁶⁵⁸ *Södermanlands runinskrifter*, ed. by Brate and Wessén, I, 283-4.

⁶⁵⁹ *Södermanlands runinskrifter*, ed. by Brate and Wessén, I, 283.

In addition to the two epigraphical sources for the name, there are a small number of runestones that include a motif similar to the warrior between two beasts found on Torslunda matrix A and the other similar designs discussed earlier. One side of the Lund stone (DR 314) features a mask with two wolf-like beasts on either side of it (Figure 5.38).⁶⁶⁰

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Figure 5-38 The Lund stone showing the opposing beasts motif (Jacobsen and Moltke, *Danmarks Runeindskrifter*, Fig. 726)

⁶⁶⁰ Jacobsen and Moltke, *Danmarks Runeindskrifter*, I, cols 360-63 and II, 286-87.

The Hunnestad monument also featured a similar motif with a wolf-like beast beside a mask (DR 285), although this has now been lost and is only known from a drawing in Ole Worm's *Monumenta Danicorum* (Fig. 5.39).⁶⁶¹

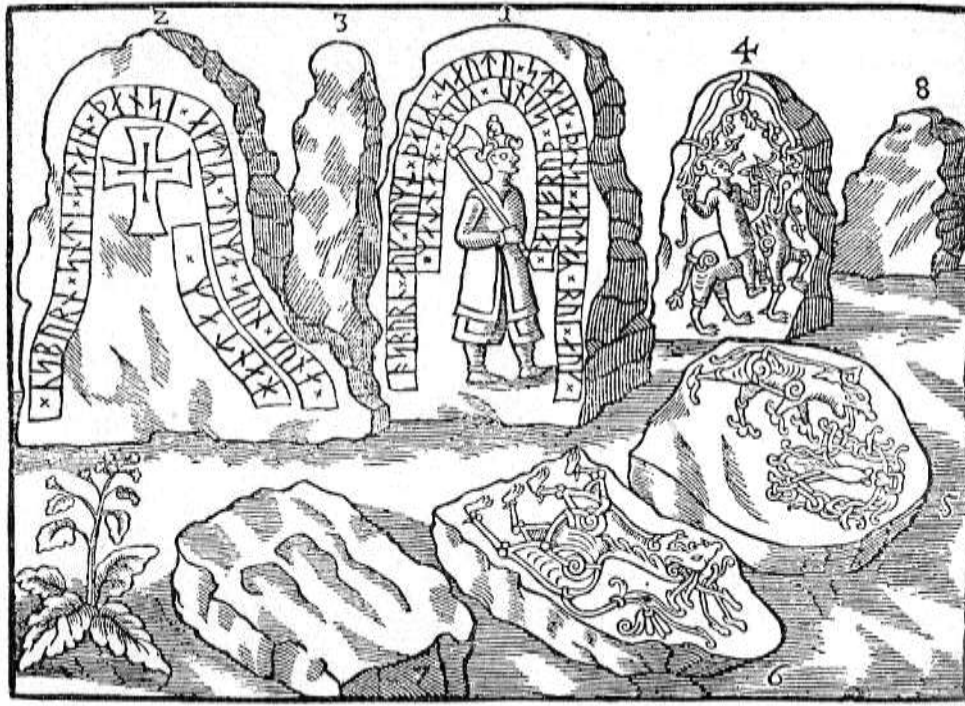


Figure 5-39 The Hunnestad monument with the beast and mask depicted bottom right (by Ole Worm (1643), public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

The masks on these stones are typical of such designs, being somewhat abstract, but their arrangement with the beasts strongly resembles that of the warrior between two beasts motif found on helmet plates. If, as seems likely, these have the same symbolic significance as each other, then the mask stands in place of the person and may represent their symbolic role at certain times in society. In adopting the mask in their rituals, the person may have been

⁶⁶¹ Jacobsen and Moltke, *Danmarks Runeindskrifter*, I, cols 336-339 and II, p. 267.

considered to be the embodiment of the deity or demon represented by the mask and thus the mask on the stone also represents that entity, thus conflating both identities. Having stated this, it is important to note that scholars are not in agreement about the interpretation of these masks. Suggestions for interpretations range from them being the faces of Christ, Óðinn, Þórr or even of demons, or as masks that depict the faces of these.⁶⁶²

It is tempting to link the masks on runestones to the Hedeby masks, to the painting of the mummers in Kiev and to the description of the masked dancers in the Gothikon on a purely functional level. However, unlike the Källby stone (Vg56), the masks on the Lund and Hunnestad stones do not resemble those from Hedeby or depicted on the wall of the Hagia Sophia in Kiev. Nevertheless, given the divine nature ascribed to the masks and the apotropaic or amuletic function that seems to dominate discussion of them, these more ornate depictions probably do occupy the same semantic landscape as the warrior between two beasts motif found on the helmet plates. Their function, if not their form, may have been the same or similar, being an indicator of membership in the martial elite and announcing a close connection with one or more gods. They would have indicated that the wearer had been admitted to the martial elite and had the right to represent the god on earth, as suggested by Price and Mortimer in their discussion on the Sutton Hoo

⁶⁶² For a brief review of this and a list of related literature, see Marjolein Stern, *Runestone Images and Visual Communication in Viking Age Scandinavia* (unpublished doctoral thesis: University of Nottingham, 2013), p. 37.

helmet.⁶⁶³ It is certainly overinterpreting the evidence to state that these runestone images represent the presence of *berserkir*, but they do belong within the same social niveau to which *berserkir* belonged. When taken together with the evidence from the helmet plates, the iconography of these images is sufficiently similar to indicate that those who wore the helmet plates were probably the same social group as those that are commemorated by these stones. These people may not have been *berserkir* or *ulfheðnar*, but it does seem likely that they were because of the close association with images of warriors in animal-skins and also with images of Óðinn.

5.2.13 The Lewis gaming pieces

The Lewis gaming pieces (commonly known as the Lewis chessmen) were found near Uig on the Isle of Lewis in early nineteenth century at some time before 1831, and possibly as early as the 1780s.⁶⁶⁴ Various stories occur describing their discovery, meaning that it is not possible to determine precisely how they were found and even the findspot has not been definitively identified, although Caldwell et al. prefer Mèalasta to Uig Strand.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶³ Neil Price and Paul Mortimer, 'An Eye for Odin? Divine Role-Playing in the Age of Sutton Hoo', *European Journal of Archaeology*, (forthcoming), 1-22 (pp. 17-18) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/1461957113Y.0000000050>>

⁶⁶⁴ David H. Caldwell, Mark A. Hall and Caroline M. Wilkinson, *The Lewis Chessmen Unmasked* (Edinburgh: National Museums Scotland, 2010), p. 19.

⁶⁶⁵ Caldwell, Hall and Wilkinson, *The Lewis Chessmen Unmasked*, pp. 15-19.

Ninety-three pieces survive, of which seventy-eight are chess pieces, one is a belt buckle and the remainder are thought to be pieces for *tafl*.⁶⁶⁶ They are carved mainly from walrus ivory, which indicates a Scandinavian origin, and were probably made in or near Trondheim, Norway, because the style of carving resembles that of other artefacts and carvings from Norway generally and Trondheim in particular.⁶⁶⁷ The style of clothing and armour on the chess pieces indicates production in the second half of the twelfth century or the early thirteenth century.⁶⁶⁸

Four of the twelve warders from this set are clearly biting their shields with teeth conspicuously protruding over the edge of the shield rim in contrast to the remaining warders.⁶⁶⁹ Each warder holds his sword upright in his right hand and carries a shield in front of him in his left. However, they differ in details. Warder 29 has a conical helm and carries a shield with a flattened top edge more like a heater shield than the others (Figure 5.40).

⁶⁶⁶ David H. Caldwell, Mark A. Hall and Caroline M. Wilkinson, 'The Lewis Hoard of Gaming Pieces: A re-examination of their context, meanings, discovery and manufacture', *Medieval Archaeology*, 53 (2009), 155-203 (p. 155).

⁶⁶⁷ Caldwell, Hall and Wilkinson, 'The Lewis Hoard', p. 165; Caldwell, Hall and Wilkinson, *The Lewis Chessmen Unmasked*, p. 37.

⁶⁶⁸ Caldwell, Hall and Wilkinson, 'The Lewis Hoard', p. 165.

⁶⁶⁹ The warders are numbers 29, 123, 124 and 125 using the National Museums Scotland (numbers 1-29) and British Museum (numbers 78 onwards) numbering systems.

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Figure 5-40 Warder 29 (photograph by Nachosan, via Wikimedia Commons.)

Warders 123 and 124 are substantially the same with rounded shields that more resemble kite shields and have an incised cross on them (Figure 5.41). Their helmets are conical with a fluted design and an obvious rim, unlike that of warder 29. Stylistically, warder 125 is similar in features and design to warders 123 and 124, but he wears only a coif and his shield has an incised saltire (Figure 5.42). The warders biting their shields appear to depict a medieval idea of *berserker*. They are neither unarmoured nor are they wearing bearskins, but the act of biting the shield demonstrates their status.

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Figure 5-41 A carving based on Warders 123 and 124 stands guard outside the Uig Community Centre and Museum (photograph by Bob Embleton, via Wikimedia Commons)

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Figure 5-42 Warder 125 (photograph by Rob Roy, via Wikimedia Commons)

These warders represent a late twelfth-century idea of how *berserkir* looked, and may be easily compared to *berserkir* in the sagas. A particularly

interesting comparison may be made with the description of Grettir's slaying of Snækollr, where Grettir kicks the tail of the shield (ON *skjaldarsporðr*) into his mouth.⁶⁷⁰ The shield as described in this episode appears to closely match the shields borne by the warders, showing that these images reflect the medieval concept of the *berserkr* rather than the Viking Age reality. Therefore, the Lewis warders may be used to help visualise how medieval people in the Nordic countries envisaged *berserkir*.

5.2.14 Animal warriors from the Migration Period to the Viking Age

What becomes clear as one catalogues the depictions of animal warriors described above is that they are widespread across Austria, England, Germany and Sweden. They are martial in nature and associated with warrior accoutrements. There are significant iconographic similarities to suggest that these artefacts all belong to a wealthy warrior-class continuum, as demonstrated by the quality of the grave goods where they have been found *in situ*, and that the horned-helmeted figure that was identified as Óðinn on the Torslunda matrix D is a major feature of their identity. The similarities also indicate that the features of this warrior class were shared, with some local variation, across a large part of north-western Europe, as an examination of the spatial distribution of these finds demonstrates (Figure 5.1).

Furthermore, the body of evidence demonstrates that animal-skin-clad warriors were a part of the warrior consciousness across that same geographical area, and were known even as far as Byzantium. The areas where

⁶⁷⁰ Íf, 7, p. 136.

the artefactual evidence has been found are also those where the personal names Wolfhetan and Ulfheðinn were the most common in the eighth and ninth centuries.⁶⁷¹

The early find of the Gallehus horn with its animal-headed warriors indicates that the depictions and probable realities of the eighth century belonged to an older tradition of theriomorphic warriors. The wearing of animal-skins is a feature of many cultures that has arisen separately throughout the world, so it is not surprising that Germanic warriors would also have done the same and over a long period of time.⁶⁷² The concept behind wearing skins is that the wearer in some way gains the attributes of the animal whose skin they are wearing. It may also be considered a badge of rank, assuming that the wearer killed the animal themselves and thus has proven themselves to be at least as deadly as the animal itself. Such an interpretation would fit well with an early evolution of the initiation ritual described earlier.⁶⁷³

Confirmation of the presence of animal warriors may be found in literary sources such as *Historia Langobardum*, where Paulus Diaconus describes how the Langobards, whose way was blocked by the Assipitti, pretended to have fearsome dog-headed warriors among their number:

Simulant, se in castris suis habere cynocephalos, id est canini capitis homines. Divulgant apud hostes, hos pertinaciter bella gerere, humanum

⁶⁷¹ See 3.1.1.

⁶⁷² See 5.4.

⁶⁷³ See 3.3 and 4.4.2.

sanguinem bibere et, si hostem adsequi non possint, proprium potare cruorem.⁶⁷⁴

(They pretend that they have in their camps cynocephali, that is, men with dogs' heads. They spread the rumor among the enemy that these men wage war obstinately, drink human blood and quaff their own gore if they cannot reach the foe.)⁶⁷⁵

Paulus Diaconus was writing in the eighth century, at the same time when the Germanic wolf-warriors were depicted on martial accoutrements. These images with their broad geographical spread indicate some commonality of culture across the pan-Germanic and Scandinavian world. Svanberg has convincingly argued for the presence of numerous local sub-cultures within the broader overarching culture of the Viking Age, which view is reinforced in the artefacts under discussion by the differing artistic styles, but similar iconography.⁶⁷⁶ These artefacts show that there was probably a wider aristocratic culture that crossed geographical boundaries and was shared with only small variations throughout the Germanic and Scandinavian world, and that culture made use of warriors in wolfskins.

The idea that warriors might use animal-skins to adopt a different identity is reinforced by Saxo when he describes how Bessus disguised himself as a giant by wearing goatskins to terrify those he met. He puts in the mouth of

⁶⁷⁴ *Pauli Historia Langobardorum*, Lib. I ch. 11, pp. 59-60.

⁶⁷⁵ Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, trans. by William Dudley Foulke, LL.D. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 20.

⁶⁷⁶ Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age*, pp. 190-91 and 201-02.

Gro the words ‘nam tegmine sæpe ferino contigit audaces delituisse viros’ (for it happened often that brave men were disguised with the fur of a wild beast).⁶⁷⁷ The use of pelts as a form of concealment was within the bounds of believability for earlier periods during Saxo’s lifetime and, taken together with the previous evidence cited, it is highly likely that a class of warriors that wore animal pelts existed within Scandinavia during the Viking Age and earlier.

While no examples of bear-warriors are known from the iconography of the Vendel period or Viking Age, *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* are inextricably linked in Old Norse literature. The links are strong and are likely to have endured from the Viking Age. Therefore, what applies to *ulfheðnar* in the pre-Viking period may also be applied to *berserkir* in the Viking Age, as I have previously stated. It seems likely that the use of bearskins in Viking Age Scandinavia represents a divergent tradition that emerged as a result of local circumstances, perhaps as a result of contact with the Sámi, who had a flourishing bear cult.⁶⁷⁸

5.2.15 The religious connotations of the archaeological evidence

The idea that the decorations on the helmets may have had an apotropaic function is reinforced by the presence of a cross on the nasal of the seventh-century Benty Grange helmet and the cross-shaped inscriptions on the eighth-

⁶⁷⁷ Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, I, 90-91.

⁶⁷⁸ Clive Tolley, ‘*Hrólfs saga kraka* and Sámi bear rites’, *Saga Book*, 31 (2007), 5-21, provides a useful summary and bibliography on this topic.

century Coppergate helmet.⁶⁷⁹ The use of the cross for protective purposes is further reinforced by the protective prayers inscribed on the latter. The main inscription runs from the front of the crest to the back of the neck, and reads:

IN NOMINE : DNI : NOSTRI : IHV : SCS : SPS : DI :

ET : OMNIBVS : DECEMVS : AMEN : OSHERE : XPI

‘In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, The Holy Spirit (and) God; and to (or with) all we say Amen. Oshere’.⁶⁸⁰

The secondary inscription runs transversely across the helmet and its two halves are separated by the crest of the helmet which carries the first inscription. Although damaged, it is possible to read that the secondary inscription is a repetition of the first.⁶⁸¹ Tweddle has suggested that the animal ornament on the eyebrows of the Coppergate helmet reflects the intended apotropaic function of the boars on the eyebrows of the Sutton Hoo helmet. This demonstrates that those elements of the helmet design that have no physical protective function may have had an apotropaic or amuletic function. Arent has suggested that they may have been *signa sacra*, which fits well with the protective function of the helmet plates and bracteates.⁶⁸²

⁶⁷⁹ Dominic Tweddle, *The Anglian Helmet from 16-22 Coppergate*, The Archaeology of York Volume 17 Fascicule 8: The Small Finds (The Dorset Press: Dorchester, 1992), pp. 983-89, 1012-15 and 1094.

⁶⁸⁰ Tweddle, *The Anglian Helmet*, pp. 1012 and 1013.

⁶⁸¹ Tweddle, *The Anglian Helmet*, pp. 1012.

⁶⁸² Arent, ‘The Heroic Pattern’, pp. 130-99.

Arent interpreted the helmet plates of the eighth century as representing the trials undergone in achieving the status of manhood and the responsibilities that remained following the rituals.⁶⁸³ In representing these achievements and responsibilities, the helmet plates obtained an apotropaic function, seeking to perpetuate earlier successes and employ them to achieve future successes. They depicted Óðinn because they sought to use his influence to protect the wearer, and perhaps also to ensure that the wearer travelled to Valhalla after death. This apotropaic function is perhaps nowhere better depicted than on the Obrigheim and Gutenstein foils, where the wolf-warrior on one side appears subdued and unprepared for battle, while on the other the warrior is aroused to battle, presumably through the influence of the figure with the horned helmet.⁶⁸⁴ Arent proposed the idea that the subdued warrior represented one who has undergone a mock death but this does not have to be the case. It is equally possible that the subdued warrior is merely unprepared for battle, and has not performed the pre-battle rituals that will fire up his battle-lust and prepare him to engage the enemy.

Whichever interpretation is favoured, the significance of numinous powers such as Óðinn and Woden is emphasised by these helmet plates. Without the mediating participation of the power, the warrior remains unprepared for battle. He must channel the god's spirit to achieve victory by performing the appropriate rituals, dances or chants. Performing these rituals

⁶⁸³ Arent, 'The Heroic Pattern', p. 139; see also 5.2.16 for a discussion of the archaeological evidence and how it relates to initiation or rites of passage.

⁶⁸⁴ Arent, 'The Heroic Pattern', p. 139.

may help the warrior achieve an ecstatic state, as has been suggested by most researchers, or it may just bolster his courage and enhance his focus.⁶⁸⁵ While true *ekstasis* or a berserk state is not necessarily achieved, the morale effect of performing chants and rituals cannot be denied for those that believe in them.

5.2.16 Initiation and the archaeological evidence

The archaeological evidence hints at the story of initiation from boyhood to adulthood. The helmet plates may be badges of that new rank showing the stages that the warrior has passed through to achieve his new status.⁶⁸⁶

Although described as initiation rituals, the term must be understood in its broadest sense. These are rituals that are performed to mark the progress of the young man through the stages of life, and they are not necessarily indicators of entry to a religious order or similar secretive group as might be understood by the term ‘initiation’. The initiation rituals of tribal Germanic societies may have included such secret societies, but changes in society that occurred before the Viking Age as part of the transition towards medieval society are likely to have precluded the existence of such groups. It may be more useful to consider these initiations as being in a similar mould to a medieval knight’s vigil.

The works of Tacitus, Ammianus Marcellinus and Procopius indicate a Germanic tribal tradition of initiation rituals or rites of passage for young men wishing to become accepted as adults into society. The imagery of the

⁶⁸⁵ See 3.2 and 4.3.5.

⁶⁸⁶ Schjødt, *Initiation between two Worlds*, p. 454; see 5.4 for discussion of initiation rituals in more detail and with reference to parallel cultural forms.

archaeological evidence appears to support this with a range of images that could be indicators of having achieved adulthood through a rite of passage.⁶⁸⁷ The events depicted on the helmet plates that show a person being assailed by or having captured a beast provide some evidence that the episodes in Old Norse literature that have been interpreted as initiations or rites of passage are based on a remembered historical reality.⁶⁸⁸ Although these events are not cited as rituals by the medieval authors of Old Norse literature, there is no reason why they should be. Such rites of passage are common to most societies in one form or another and thus their nature might pass without comment.

The quality of the artefacts and their survival only in higher status graves may indicate that by the sixth century, from when the earliest examples are known, these rites of passage were the preserve of the upper echelons of society, where previously they had been for a whole tribe. The presence of the horned-helmeted figure on the helmet plates and bracteates reinforces the tie to a numinous power such as Óðinn, because he was the leader of the gods and it was to him that nobles went when they died, as is stated in *Hárbarðsljóð*.⁶⁸⁹ Scandinavian society was becoming more stratified even by the Roman period, so the continuing process of political and social change that resulted in highly stratified medieval societies was ongoing throughout the period being analysed

⁶⁸⁷ See 3.3 and 5.2.16.

⁶⁸⁸ See also 5.4 for a discussion of how these rituals functioned within historical parallels to *berserkir*.

⁶⁸⁹ *Edda*, I, 82.

here.⁶⁹⁰ The social change from a whole tribe under arms to a dedicated warband under a king would have affected who might be *berserkir* or *ulfheðnar*. Instead of all young men in the tribe being initiated into society through combat, as is thought to have been the case for the Indo-European **koryos* and the Germanic tribes described by Tacitus, only the elite would be inducted.⁶⁹¹ The warriors, whose helmets are discussed here, are likely to have undertaken similar rites of passage that enabled them to join the warband as full members. They were of high status, to judge by the richness of their graves and it is possible that they were *ulfheðnar* or *berserkir*, champions of a great lord, themselves, because the imagery associated with them includes wolfskin-clad warriors.

5.2.17 The fallen warrior motif and its connection to *berserkir*

The helmet plates that depict warriors on horseback are of interest because they inform our knowledge of martial culture in the pre-Viking Age period and appear related to images of wolfskin-clad warriors, which means that by

⁶⁹⁰ Björn Myhre, 'The Iron Age' in *History of Scandinavia*, ed. by Knut Helle, I, 60-93 (pp. 72-74; Thomas Lindkvist, 'Early political organisation: Introductory survey', in *History of Scandinavia*, ed. by Knut Helle, I, 160-67 (163 and 166); Birgit and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From conversion to reformation, circa 800-1500*, The Nordic Series, 17 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 49-53.

⁶⁹¹ See Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, p. 18 for discussion of the **koryos*; see also 5.4.1 and 5.4.3.

extension we may consider analysis of their relationship to *ulfheðnar* as a model for *berserkir*.

As discussed with reference to the Staffordshire hoard, Sutton Hoo, Valsgärde 7 and 8, Vendel I, and the Pliezhausen bracteate, figures on horseback appear to be a common element of the warrior iconography and feature heavily on other bracteates that have not been discussed here.⁶⁹² Some of these examples feature a warrior lying beneath the horse stabbing it, and this has been identified as deriving from the fallen warrior motif, which is a feature of Roman memorial art.⁶⁹³

There are some crucial differences between the Germanic usage of this motif and the Roman usage.⁶⁹⁴ The fallen warrior in Roman art is usually passive, being trampled and thus a victim. The fallen warrior on the helmet plates and bracteates discussed in this chapter is most often stabbing the horse from underneath. He is actively opposing the rider and challenging his forward progress. This action is strongly reminiscent of a tactic apparently employed by Germanic warriors at the Battle of Strasburg. Ammianus Marcellinus describes the warriors crawling beneath the Roman horses to gut them and render their riders vulnerable:

⁶⁹² See Axboe et al, *Die Goldbrakteaten* for further examples of horsemen on bracteates.

⁶⁹³ Høilund Nielsen, 'Symposium',
<<http://finds.org.uk/staffshoardsymposium/papers/karenhoilundnielsen>>.

⁶⁹⁴ See Mackintosh, *The Divine Rider*, for a detailed discussion of the use of the fallen warrior motif on Roman funereal art.

21. Cumque ita ut ante dictus docuerat perfuga, equitatum omnem a dextro latere sibi vidissent oppositum, quicquid apud eos per equestres copias praepollebat, in laevo cornu locavere confertum. Eisdemque sparsim pedites miscuere discursatores et leves, profecto ratione tuta poscente. 22. Norant enim licet prudentem ex equo bellatorem cum clibanario nostro congressum, frena retinentem et scutum, hasta una manu vibrata, tegminibus ferreis abscondito bellatori nocere non posse, peditem vero inter ipsos discriminum vertices, cum nihil caveri solet praeter id quod occurrit, humiliter et occulte reptantem latere forato iumentum incautum rectorem praecipitem agere levi negotio trucidandum.

(21. And when (just as the above-mentioned deserter had told us) they saw all our cavalry opposite them on the right flank, they put all their strongest cavalry forces on their left flank in close order. And among them here and there they intermingled skirmishers and light-armed infantry, as safe policy certainly demanded. 22. For they realised that one of their warriors on horseback, no matter how skilful, in meeting one of our cavalry in coat-of-mail, must hold bridle and shield in one hand and brandish his spear with the other, and would thus be able to do no harm to a soldier hidden in iron armour; whereas the infantry soldier in the very hottest of the fight, when nothing is apt to be guarded against except what is straight before one, can creep about low and unseen, and by piercing a horse's side throw its unsuspecting rider headlong, whereupon he can be slain with little trouble.)⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁹⁵ *Ammianus Marcellinus*, trans. by John C. Rolfe, I, 276-77.

Perhaps the depiction of a warrior attacking the horse represents a genuine tactic used against cavalry by Germanic tribesmen, while also representing the range of powers that might be arrayed against a warrior in battle. The supporting figure that appears on these artefacts most often wears a helmet with horns that end in birds' heads, and represents a power that guides the warrior's spear to its target, as is demonstrated by his holding the end of the spear. It seems most likely in the specific cases studied here that the figure represents a war god of high status like Óðinn or Woden. The bird-headed terminals on the helmets, possibly representing the ravens Huginn and Muninn, the association with a spear and the apparent nature of being the power behind the victory suggest the connection to Óðinn in particular.

The association of this type of depiction with depictions of warriors wearing wolfskins and the other depictions of warriors in the battle line all appear to belong within the same social group and appear to be indicators of membership in a warband as a warrior or leader. The presence of one item hints that the others might have been present or that it has been taken from a full panoply of warrior accoutrements. The suggestion that *ulfhednar* and *berserkir* wore the helmet plates as a token of their social status seems well-founded, so the presence of any of these items within a grave indicates that the deceased may have been a *berserkr* or *ulfhedinn*, or that they were associated with them and the social elite in the case of the female grave from Pliezhausen.⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹⁶ Schjødt, *Initiation between two Worlds*, p. 454.

5.3 Law codes

As discussed in Chapter 2, law codes may contain clues about the nature of *berserkir*. The Old Norse laws contained in *Grágás* actually mention *berserksgangr*, although *berserkir* and *berserksgangr* are not mentioned in any other Old Norse legal sources. Law is also an important feature of the *Íslendingasögur*.⁶⁹⁷ They feature many scenes involving lawsuits and the law is enacted to force even the dead to comply, as occurs in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Chapter 55), when the ghosts are summonsed for trespass and leave after the correct court proceedings have been undertaken.⁶⁹⁸ The fact that legal drama is such a feature of these sagas is evidence that a long tradition of rule by law existed in Iceland. *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* support this by stating that the first laws were brought there from Norway in the early tenth century.⁶⁹⁹

A large number of law codes are also known from Norway, again in later redactions, which have been collected in *Norges Gamle Love*. The survival of so many law codes in Scandinavia, and the presence of law codes in the wider early medieval Germanic society reinforces the idea that they were an important part of society throughout the Viking Age and medieval period. The lack of any laws relating to *berserksgangr* or *berserkir* may be a feature of the later date that the Norwegian laws were written down. However, *Grettis saga*, written in the later fourteenth century, mentions that Eiríkr jarl Hákonarsonr

⁶⁹⁷ For a brief overview of the surviving law codes see *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, pp. 223-44.

⁶⁹⁸ Íf, 4, pp. 150-52

⁶⁹⁹ Íf, 1, pp. 6-7 and 313.

passed a law outlawing duelling and *berserkir* in the early eleventh century.

This law is a direct cause of much of the action later in the saga and so may be a purely literary device, or it may indicate earlier Norwegian legislation that has not survived, or at least a late fourteenth-century folk tradition that such was the case.⁷⁰⁰

Of the surviving law codes, only the Icelandic *Grágás* makes reference to *berserkir*.⁷⁰¹ The original manuscript of *Grágás* has been lost and the text is known only from later manuscripts, the earliest of which date to the mid- to late thirteenth century: Codex Regius is thought to have been written about 1260, while Staðarhólsbók is thought to date from around 1280.⁷⁰²

Íslendingabók states that the laws of Iceland began to be written down in 1117-18, and *Grágás* makes reference to this earlier text, *Haflíðaskrá*, by stating that it has precedence when having to choose between different written versions of the laws.⁷⁰³ As Dennis et al. note, the two texts are not identical but they do have elements in common, one of which is the section on *berserkir*. This suggests that the law regarding *berserksgangr* is from the same source in both texts, and that it may be from a common source, perhaps even *Haflíðaskrá*,

⁷⁰⁰ Íf, 7, p. 60.

⁷⁰¹ See also 2.3.4.

⁷⁰² *Laws of Early Iceland*, trans. by Dennis, Foote and Perkins, p. 13.

⁷⁰³ Íf, 1, pp. 23-24; *Grágás: Konungsbók*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen, p. 213;

Laws of Early Iceland, trans. by Dennis, Foote and Perkins, pp. 4-5.

unlike those elements where significant variation occurs.⁷⁰⁴ Chapter 11 of the *Kristinna laga þátttr* section of *Grágás* in *Skálholtsbók* states:

Ef maðr gengr berserks gang ok warder þat fiörbaugs Garð ok sua wardar körlum þeim er hia eru. nema þeir stöðue hann at. þa wardar eingum þeirra ef þeir geta stoðuat hann. Ef optar kemr at. ok wardar fiörbaugs garð þott stoðuat werði.⁷⁰⁵

(If a man goes berserk he shall be punished with lesser outlawry as shall those men that are present unless they stop him. None shall be punished if they are able to stop him. But if it happens again the penalty is lesser outlawry even if he is stopped.)

This section of the law code is specifically related to Christianity and how Christian people should act, thus implying that to undergo *berserksgangr* is anti-Christian or pagan, and thus that *berserkir* were related to the old gods.

I have also argued that *berserkir* were champions, who fought as proxies in one of their roles.⁷⁰⁶ Early Germanic law codes, like the *Lex Baiuvariorum* describing judicial duels, may be linked to *berserkir* as part of their function as champions. The descriptions of how these are undertaken have been used in

⁷⁰⁴ See also 2.3.3.

⁷⁰⁵ *Grágás: Skálholtsbók: Genoptrykt efter Vilhjálmur Finsens udgave 1883*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1974), p. 25. The same text is in Chapter 7 of that same section in *Codex Regius: Grágás: Konungsbók*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen, p. 23.

⁷⁰⁶ See 4.9.

the past to propose a specific etymon for *berserkr*.⁷⁰⁷ However their usefulness can be extended beyond etymology to the roots of *berserkir* themselves and their place in society. Linking *berserkir* to the law codes has been done by means of comparison with the etymological evidence that directs us to examine particular types of behaviour, such as wearing no armour in battle. *Lex Baiuvariorum* (XIII, 8) provides a description of how legal duels are to be fought following a section describing the compensation to be paid for using the dark arts (Lat *malefacias artes*) on someone else. It sets out how they may prove themselves innocent:

Et si negare voluerit, cum XII sacramentales iuret, aut cum campione cincto defendat se, hoc est pungna duorum.⁷⁰⁸

(And if he wishes to deny it, he shall be judged by twelve oath-helpers, or he may defend himself by girded combat [i.e. wearing only a loincloth], that is a duel)

This form of single combat is the province of champions, and it is possible that the concept of *berserkir* fighting without armour stems from this type of duel. In this respect, it becomes more probable that *berserkir* may have worn no armour, hence ‘threw off their armour’, under certain circumstances, while in other circumstances they wore animal pelts. By this token, both etymologies of *berserkr* would be applicable. The problem with *Lex Baiuvariorum* is that it only gives general details about duelling and the reference to *campio cinctus* appears to assume that the reader will know what that is. In referring to this

⁷⁰⁷ Kuhn, ‘Kämpfen’, pp. 219-220.

⁷⁰⁸ *Lex Baiuvariorum*, ed. by Beyerle, pp. 136-38.

law as evidence for warriors duelling while wearing only a belt or loincloth, Kuhn perhaps overstates the case, because more than one explanation of this usage is possible.⁷⁰⁹

Nevertheless, the connection between Lat *campio* and ON *kappr* appears to have some merit and Kuhn's additional comments on other parallels, particularly the Old Frisian *berskinze cempa* 'warrior with bare thighs', may support his interpretation of this law, especially in light of the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon gloss that relates OE *cempa* to Lat *gladiator*.⁷¹⁰ The Old Frisian laws refer to the requirement of duellists involved in a judicial duel to fight without armour and wearing little clothing.⁷¹¹ Hans Kuhn concluded that OFris *cempa* also derived from Lat *campus* 'a field of combat' and was related to ON *kappi* 'champion'.⁷¹² From this he deduced that *berserkir* fought without armour or stripped to a loincloth, but too little evidence survives to firmly support or refute this view. It is also worth considering this with reference to the the horned-helmeted figure on helmet plates, where he is shown wearing only a belt.⁷¹³ In the case of the Finglesham belt buckle, the horned warrior

⁷⁰⁹ Hans Kuhn, 'Kämpfen', p. 219.

⁷¹⁰ *Old Frisian Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. *berskinz(i)e* and *kampa*.; Hans Kuhn, 'Kämpfen', p. 219.

⁷¹¹ *Friesische Rechtsquellen*, ed. by von Richthofen, pp.76-78 (Ems. I) and 77-79 (Rüst. and Westerl.).

⁷¹² Kuhn, 'Kämpfen und Berserker', 218-227.

⁷¹³ See 5.2 throughout for examples of a horned figure that is wearing only a belt and has been interpreted as Óðinn or Wodan.

figure is obviously naked apart from the belt as his penis is depicted clearly.⁷¹⁴ Stripping down to a loincloth or belt may have been a means to emulate the god or to engage the god as a participant in the duel, ensuring that people will recognise the will of the god in its result.

The law codes, as can be seen, provide scant evidence for *berserkir*. The similarity between the description of the judicial duel in *Lex Baiuvariorum* and the depictions of the horned warrior on helmet plates may indicate that duelling fell within the domain of this god. The use of champions in such duels would have been the preserve of *ulfheðnar*, *berserkir* and similar warriors from the Migration period to the Viking Age, as the champions of lords and kings. The presence in *Grágás* of a section outlawing *berserksgangr* among a series of Christian laws hints at the pagan nature of *berserksgangr* and thus *berserkir*. Taken together, these law codes which stem from a wide time period, suggest the judicial oversight of a god and a judicial role for *berserkir*. They also clearly point to the pagan nature of the historical *berserkr* and *ulfheðinn*. However, individually and in isolation they do not provide much evidence at all, and they must be considered together with all the evidence for *berserkir* for them to contribute their full worth.

5.4 Parallels to the *berserkr* in other cultures

Scholars have sought parallels to *berserkir* in other cultures to provide models for their activities, place in society and from the earliest recorded uses of

⁷¹⁴ See 5.2.6.

animal-skins onwards.⁷¹⁵ The need to do this results from the lack of available Viking Age evidence for *berserkir*, hence the considerable discussion and speculation that has obtained throughout the history of their study.

The main issue with undertaking a comparative analysis like this is that there is a large body of evidence and the links are often tenuous. Similar groups and customs could have evolved separately and without direct influence on each other. As such these groups may be analogous to *berserkir* without actually being related to them. Furthermore, the scope of any study of parallels to *berserkir* relies on the scholar's understanding of the nature of *berserkir*, which requires a detailed knowledge of and source critical approach to *berserkir* in Old Norse literature. Despite these issues, parallels can provide a framework of human activity within which to consider how *berserkir* related to each other and to the rest of their society.

The evidence we do have for *berserkir* indicates that they were members of a warrior brotherhood that was probably a *Männerbund* with cultic origins in its earliest form. They were considered to have a special connection to Óðinn, which in turn suggests that this was a brotherhood of the elite rather than of the ordinary people.⁷¹⁶ By the start of the Viking Age, warfare was changing, so such a brotherhood was probably evolving away from its cultic origins and taking on the character of a medieval king's retinue, and thus initiation rituals were developing into rites of passage or tests of courage instead. However, this has not stopped speculation about or identification with

⁷¹⁵ See 3.5.

⁷¹⁶ See 4.4.

various groups from history. The following discussion examines the attributes of a small number of groups that have been identified as similar to *berserkr* or as impacting on our understanding of *berserkr*, before discussing how relevant these parallels are to analysis of the Viking Age *berserkr*.

5.4.1 The Indo-European **koryos* as Ur-Warband

Kershaw identifies in PIE **koryo-no-s* a personal name and title that is confirmed in Homeric Greek *κοίρανος* (king).⁷¹⁷ From this root a warband (PIE **koryos*) may be deduced: the *koryonos* leads to the *koryos*. McCone has suggested that the *koryos* was a smaller group of warrior novices, an age-set group, whose business lay in raiding rather than fighting wars.⁷¹⁸ In this role it would have been a cultic warrior brotherhood and the earliest suggested form of the *Männerbund* in the Indo-European tradition.

ON *herjan* and related terms have linguistic similarities with PIE **koryonos*, and Kershaw sees in this a key to understanding the development of the *Männerbünde* and the depiction of Óðinn.⁷¹⁹ The etymological relationship appears clear and there are similarities between the depiction of

⁷¹⁷ Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, p. 18.

⁷¹⁸ Kim McCone, 'Hund, Wolf und Krieger bei den Indogermanen', in *Studien zum Indogermanischen Wortschatz*, ed. by Wolfgang Meid, Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Sprachwissenschaft, 52 (Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, 1987), pp. 101-154 (p. 114).

⁷¹⁹ Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, p. 18.

berserkir and the **koryos*, especially in the raiding that they are supposed to have done. As envisaged by McCone, the members of the **koryos* would go on raids to prove themselves and to garner wealth. In this fashion they would establish themselves within society and eventually be able to become full adults within their tribe.⁷²⁰ It is here that the parallel begins to fail. *Berserkir* appear to have been established champions and warriors within the *Íslendingasögur*, while the young men of the **koryos* were still proving themselves. It is possible to see in the two groups an evolution from age-set warriors to the established bodyguard of a lord or king, but the connections between *berserkir* and **koryos* are tenuous.

5.4.2 The Maruts of ancient India

The Maruts (Skt *Marutás*) of India were a race of mythical warriors or storm deities, who underwent ekstasis, and were violent and aggressive, perhaps as a result of imbibing *soma*.⁷²¹ They were the sons of Rudra, who is known for being the leader of the spirit host and for the way that host howls as it charges through the night. In this, Rudra resembles Óðinn as the god of the wild hunt and in his manifestation of fury; Rudra is known as the god of ekstasis and howling.⁷²² Kershaw identifies these attributes as analogues of Óðinn and the

⁷²⁰ Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, p. 180.

⁷²¹ Mallory and Adams, eds, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, pp. 630-631, 634; McCone, 'Hund, Wolf und Krieger', pp. 120-21.

⁷²² Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, pp. 99 and 220-21.

einherjar, with whom she identifies *berserkir*.⁷²³ They always appear beweaponed and are also known from the *Rig Veda* as the companions of Indra, in which role they are dancers. Given that they never appear without their weapons, Kershaw believes that they were weapon dancers. She also sees a parallel with the berserk brothers motif, where a group of *berserkir* are all brothers, because the Maruts were all born at the same time, and thus form an age-set group, like the **koryos*.⁷²⁴

Related to the Maruts are the *maryas* (Skt *márya-*). The term means ‘young man’ but is used in contexts that imply a sacred brotherhood, and especially a group like the **koryos* described above.⁷²⁵ Such a group assumed a lupine aspect, living as a pack and subsisting on what they could take from others.⁷²⁶ In this respect they resemble Sigurðr and Sinfjötli living wild as wolves in the wood, from which Danielli et al. derived the concept of the initiation ritual for *berserkir*.⁷²⁷

If one accepts *berserkir* as berserk warriors existing in a liminal space, this parallel offers a useful explanation of how they may have functioned. It is possible that this depiction provides a reference point for the original form of groups of *berserkir* or *ulfhedðnar* in Germanic tribal societies, but, as I have

⁷²³ Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, p. 99.

⁷²⁴ Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, p. 217.

⁷²⁵ Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, p. 217-18.

⁷²⁶ Mallory and Adams, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, pp. 31, 531, 630-31 and 656.

⁷²⁷ See 3.3 and 5.2.14.

argued, it is unlikely that such a group could easily belong in a society like that of Viking Age Scandinavia.⁷²⁸ Changes to modes of warfare and towards a more centralised society are likely to have precluded the presence of warriors who existed on the margins of that society while still being central to its defence. Thus, the Maruts provide only a baseline from which *berserkir* may have developed without informing knowledge of their probable historical reality.

5.4.3 Early Germanic tribes

Tribes like the Chatti, as described by Tacitus, provide parallels closer to Viking Age Scandinavia both geographically and temporally. Tacitus states in chapters 30 and 31 of *Germania* that the Chatti were particularly physically imposing and savage, and that they habitually refused to cut their hair or beards until they had killed an enemy in battle:

... ut primum adoleverint, crinem barbamque submittere, nec nisi hoste caeso exuere votivum obligatumque virtuti oris habitum.⁷²⁹

(... when first they came of age, to let their hair and beard grow as a sacrifice and pledge to courage, and not to tidy up the state of their faces unless they had killed an enemy.)

In this manner these warriors would appear unkempt and animalistic, only taking on an adult human aspect, when they had killed a foe and were permitted to tie their hair back away from their face. This has the ring of an

⁷²⁸ See 4.9.

⁷²⁹ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, p. 178.

initiation or rite of passage to it that resembles the same concept as the putative **koryos* going on raids to amass reputation and wealth.⁷³⁰ Once the young warrior has passed the test, he is permitted to tidy his appearance and is accepted now as a full adult within the tribe. Snorri recounts how Haraldr hárfagri, while still a young man, swore an oath not to cut nor to comb his hair until he had conquered all Norway, because Gyða, daughter of King Eiríkr of Hǫrðaland, refused to marry him unless he did so.⁷³¹ The process of swearing an oath like this mirrors the oath of the young men of the Chatti, as does the accomplishment of a significant deed.

Tacitus describes Germanic warriors fighting without armour, as in one proposed etymology of *berserkr*, although he ascribes this to poverty and lack of iron rather than bravery.⁷³² Paulus Diaconus relates how the Scandinavian Heruli fought naked and states that it is either so that they might manoeuvre more freely or because they wish to demonstrate their bravery (I, 20).⁷³³ Similarly Jordanes states that they fought lightly armed in contrast to those that

⁷³⁰ Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, pp. 115-17.

⁷³¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 97.

⁷³² Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, pp. 138-39.

⁷³³ Paulus Diaconus, *Pauli Historia Langobardorum*, Monumenta Germaniae historica. Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi, 48 (Hannover: Hahn, 1878; repr. Hannover: Hahnsche Buchandlung, 1987), pp. 66-67.

fought heavily armed, suggesting that they had no armour, while Procopius recounts how they lacked for defensive armour.⁷³⁴

Another point of congruence with *berserker* is the ‘Teutonic fury’ (Lat *furoris Teutonici*) that Lucan, writing in the first century A.D., ascribes to the Teutones.⁷³⁵ To this may be added the chanting from behind their shields that Tacitus describes and the wearing of animal-skins.⁷³⁶

Taken together these manifestations of martial prowess and ferocity may be construed as the most pointed evidence for producing a model for *berserker*. All the traditional attributes are present: howling, ferocity and wearing animal-skins or fighting without armour. However, each element is found separately from the rest and the time period covered is some five hundred years. While it is possible that these tribes all included warriors, who were analogues of the Viking Age *berserkr*, the evidence is insufficiently conclusive. It is also worth noting that the references are to all the warriors of each tribe, except in the case of the Chatti, so no particular group of warriors is being chosen for description. Therefore, it is unlikely that any specific model

⁷³⁴ Iordanis, *Getica*, ed. by Holder, p. 60; Iordanis, *Getica*, ed. by Mommsen, p. 88; Procopius, *History of the Wars Books I-II*, ed. by Jeffrey Henderson, trans. by H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, 48, 5 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914; repr. 2006), I, 486.

⁷³⁵ Marcus Annaeus Lucanus, *Lucan: The civil war*, trans. by J. D. Duff, Loeb Classical Library, 220 (London: Harvard University Press, 1928), p. 22.

⁷³⁶ See 4.3.5 and 5.2.

may be derived from study of these groups and that they may only illuminate aspects of the behaviour of *berserkir*.

5.4.4 Celtic battle rage

The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* describes a legendary cattle raid in first-century AD Ireland, although the earliest manuscript from which it is known dates to the late eleventh or early twelfth century. It describes how the rulers of Connacht try to steal a valuable bull from Conchobar, king of Ulster. They are opposed only by the youthful hero Cú Chulainn, who is a great warrior despite his age and who is marked by his battle-rage. Given the form of Cú Chulainn's battle-rage and the close connection assumed between PDE 'berserk' and *berserksgangr*, it is unsurprising to find that connections have been made between the two.⁷³⁷ When his battle rage comes upon him, Cú Chulainn's body and face contort and swell up, assuming monstrous proportions.⁷³⁸ In this manner his inner rage is made manifest externally and the contortions of his face are reminiscent of the contortions of Egill's face when he sought compensation for the death of his brother from Aðalsteinn.⁷³⁹

His name is also theriophoric, translating as Hound of Culann, which, leaving aside the origin story of his killing Culann's guard dog, may be

⁷³⁷ See Chapter 6 for a discussion of how PDE 'berserk' can confuse rather than enlighten.

⁷³⁸ *The Táin: A new translation of the Táin bó Cúailnge*, trans. by Ciaran Carson (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2007), pp. 37-38.

⁷³⁹ Íf, 2, p. 143.

indicative of initiation into a hound-cult brotherhood.⁷⁴⁰ Eliade has suggested that the process by which Conchobar calms Cú Chulainn down following his slaying of the sons of Nechta is a fictionalised description of an Indo-European initiatory ritual.⁷⁴¹ The link between Cú Chulainn and his *fíán* to *ulfhednar* and *berserkir* could be established by the similar symbolic value of dogs and wolves.⁷⁴² On the face of it, there are marked similarities between Irish warbands and the probable reality of the Norse warband, but these are similarities that are likely to have occurred in any group of young warriors. Güntert's view that the *fíán* were actually Norsemen in Ireland and that Cú Chulainn's battle rage was an actual example of *berserksgangr* seems rather far-fetched, although the Irish would have known of such things at the time that the earliest surviving recension of *The Táin* was written down.⁷⁴³

5.4.5 Sámi bear cults

DuBois considers the bear to be totemic and points out that 'The Finno-Ugric ceremonial bear hunt sought to remove a fierce competitor from the local

⁷⁴⁰ *The Táin*, pp. 42-43.

⁷⁴¹ *The Táin*, p. 50; Eliade, *Rites and Symbols*, pp. 84-85.

⁷⁴² Eliade, *Rites and Symbols*, p. 83; Gräslund, 'Wolves, serpents, and birds', pp. 124-25; Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*, pp. 58n, 82, 159 and 175; McCone, 'Hund, Wolf und Krieger', pp. 102, 118-119 and 124.

⁷⁴³ Güntert, *Über altisländische Berserker-Geschichten*, p. 32.

environment, while winning its power for the hunter and community ...'.⁷⁴⁴

The bear is also treated differently from other animals in burial practice. About forty bear graves have been discovered in Norway and Sweden, in all of which the bones have been split and the marrow eaten.⁷⁴⁵ The bear burial ritual seems to have required the skull and shoulder bones to be intact, and all the broken bones to be included in the grave too, laid out in a specific pattern behind the skull. One example of such a grave from Sörviken in southern Sweden featured a sheet of birch bark placed over the bones and logs placed on top of that sheet.⁷⁴⁶ As Jennbert notes, the bear grave resembles Sámi traditions of human burial and is strongly indicative of the special status accorded bears as early as the Roman Iron Age, from which date the earliest bear graves in Scandinavia are known.

Further evidence for the significance of the bear in Sámi culture is the range of rituals and taboos associated with bears and bear hunting.⁷⁴⁷ These rituals change the relationship between the hunters and the bear from one of hunter versus prey to a symbiotic act that renews the world through its proper

⁷⁴⁴ Thomas A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 48.

⁷⁴⁵ Kristina Jennbert, *Animals and Humans: Recurrent symbiosis in archaeology and Old Norse religion*, *Vägar till Midgård*, 14 (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2011), pp. 111-12.

⁷⁴⁶ Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, p. 112.

⁷⁴⁷ Lotte Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality: An archaeology of Scandinavia AD 400-1000* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 91-93.

fulfilment. The hunter even cuts the bear's nose off and wears it on his face as an act of respect through identification with the bear, a gesture that may be reflected in the wearing of bearskins or bear masks as part of the ritual activities of the *berserkr*.⁷⁴⁸

Hunters drank the blood of the bear to gain its strength and courage, much like Hǫttr in *Hrólfs saga kraka* drank the blood of the monster that was terrorising the hall. In doing so he gained courage and strength that he had not previously had.⁷⁴⁹ In addition to drinking the blood of the bear, the hunter would sprinkle its blood on his family, on his house and on the trees around it even as late as the nineteenth century.

In short, the bear had tremendous significance for the Sámi people and Tolley has seen in *Hrólfs saga kraka* echoes of Sámi traditions about bears.⁷⁵⁰ The connection is brought to the fore when Björn is transformed into a bear by Hvít, the Sámi queen, whom he spurns.⁷⁵¹ As Tolley shows, it is possible to identify elements of the Sámi bear hunt ritual in the tale of Björn in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, which must have been transmitted from Norway to Iceland, where *Hrólfs saga* was written down. Norwegian culture contact with Sámi neighbours in the Viking Age is a feature of Old Norse literature, be it Haraldr hárfagri becoming infatuated with the Finnish maiden Snæfríðr or Þórólfr

⁷⁴⁸ See 5.2.11.

⁷⁴⁹ Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols*, p. 58; See also 3.3.

⁷⁵⁰ Tolley, 'Sámi bear rites', 5-21.

⁷⁵¹ Tolley, 'Sámi bear rites', 13; *Fsn*, I, 47.

Kveld-Úlfsson collecting tribute from the Sámi for Haraldr.⁷⁵² These and similar narratives show that Norwegians were familiar with the Sámi, and through them the Icelanders, like Þórólfr, had occasional contact with and were aware of the Sámi and their practices. Given the geographical proximity of the Sámi and the Norwegians and the cultural contact between the Norwegians and the Icelanders, this is not surprising and it could be argued on this basis alone that the ritual significance of the bear was transmitted to the Norse people at an early stage, leading to the bear supplanting the wolf in the rituals of the warrior cults. In this manner the warriors that would have worn wolfskins in the other Germanic lands may have become *berserkir* in Scandinavia. It is perhaps in this context that bear claws and teeth have been found in rich Migration Period graves, as, for example, that at Snartemo in Norway.⁷⁵³

5.4.6 Running amok in Malaysia

In the nineteenth century, Dasent likened *berserkir* in his translation of *Njáls saga* to Malays, who run amok (Mal *āmuk*) and states of them:

In the case of the only class of men like them nowadays, that of the Malays running a-muck, the intoxicating fumes of bangh or arrack are said to be the cause of their fury. One thing, however, is certain, that the Baresark, like his Malay brother, was looked upon as a public pest, and the mischief which they caused, relying partly no doubt on their natural strength, and partly on the hold which the belief in their

⁷⁵² Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 126-27; Íf, 2, pp. 27-28 and 35-37.

⁷⁵³ Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth*, pp. 93-94.

supernatural nature had on the mind of the people, was such as to render their killing a good work.⁷⁵⁴

Dasent notes that the Malay amok runs wild, destroying everything in the way and is reputed to be immune to pain and injury, but suffers from extreme exhaustion following the berserk fit. This clearly recalls attributes of the *berserkr* as depicted in the sagas, although few *berserkir* actually run amok killing all and sundry that get in their way in the sagas. This mention of Malays using drugs recalls the theories that abound about *berserkir* using various drugs to induce frenzy. Grøn noted that the Malay amok was probably a psychological disorder, while Ödmann attributed it to opium.⁷⁵⁵

The Malay amok is certainly close to the modern English meaning of ‘berserk’, but the descriptions of it do not sufficiently resemble the *berserksgangr* of the sagas, let alone the probable historical reality.

5.4.7 Discussion

From this brief discussion, it can be seen that a variety of historical and reconstructed parallels to *berserkir* existed. These range from the male societies of the earliest Indo-European sources to Sámi shamans and the potential for cross-cultural transmission of bear fetishism.

The range of similar warrior groups within the cultures of Europe and Asia is too large to summarise here, although Kershaw has sought to do so, tracing the warband and its relationship to Óðinn from the postulated **koryos*

⁷⁵⁴ Dasent, *Burnt Njal*, p. xix.

⁷⁵⁵ Grøn, ‘Berserksgangens vesen’, p. 41; Ödmann, ‘Försök’, p. 179.

through the Maruts to the Viking Age.⁷⁵⁶ In a similar vein, Speidel has tried to make the case for a unified Germanic culture from Roman times to the Viking Age through an examination of warrior styles, although with less success than Kershaw.⁷⁵⁷

Warrior societies began as age-set groups, where all young men in the tribe were expected to prove themselves through a coming-of-age rite or initiation ritual. By the time of the Migration and Vendel Periods, these rites of passage appear to have been reserved for the upper echelons of society based on the quality and value of the grave goods that are associated with warrior iconography; with changing conditions came new ways of living and the warband became an elite group wedded to the rulers rather than a universal attribute of all male tribe members. This evolution to the *comitatus* formed around a single chieftain eventually became the personal retinue that was a feature of the medieval period, by which point formal initiation ceremonies and rites of passage were no longer performed, or are not recorded. It is possible that the traditions of *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* originated in the age-set groups and evolved alongside the evolution of the warband but the evidence is too sparse to wholly support this view.

If this is the case then it is likely that the earliest versions of *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* were actually age-set warriors, who had to leave the tribe to prove themselves and earn the right to return to it as full adults. In effect they were dead to the tribe until they had done so. Like the Chatti, this probably

⁷⁵⁶ Kershaw, *The One-eyed God*; see 5.4.1.

⁷⁵⁷ Speidel, *Ancient Germanic Warriors*.

involved having to kill an enemy in battle, although killing a human being may have been replaced or supplemented in some cases by the need to kill a wild animal like a bear. By the Viking Age this practice had probably evolved into the much less dangerous mock combat with a beast or with the returning *berserkir* that was discussed in Chapter 4. It had ceased to be the province of every male member of the tribe and was now the preserve only of those gathered immediately around and sword to the leader or king.

In other areas, such as the Malaysian amok, the research leads strongly in the wrong direction. As I have discussed earlier, such research begins by asking how *berserkir* went berserk before considering whether they did or not. In this regard, the wide variety of societies and groups that exhibit behaviour that resembles that of the *berserkr* is misleading and can confuse the issue as much as it can shed light on who and what *berserkir* were.

5.5 Conclusions regarding the non-literary sources for *berserkir*

The range of non-literary material available for study is potentially vast, but also often only tangentially linked to *berserkir*. In some cases, as with the Malay amok, it can mislead, while in others, it is insufficiently detailed to permit full analysis, as with the many Germanic parallels that are each only represented by one or two sentences in a history. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw some conclusions that relate to *berserkir* from this evidence.

The archaeological evidence indicates a strong warrior culture across north-western Europe from the Migration Period through to the Vendel Period and possibly extending into the Viking Age. The wealth of graves such as those found at Sutton Hoo, Vendel and Valsgärde is great and demonstrates

that similar iconography was in use throughout the study area. It also shows that those at the top of society were expected to be warriors as well as leaders. The images of warriors wearing wolfskins show that some warriors may have actually worn animal pelts which marked them out as standing apart from the ordinary warriors of their time.

The presence of the horned god figure supporting the warrior, as on the helmet plates and bracteates that depict the mounted warrior, suggests that these warriors expected to call upon a deity to help them in battle. In Viking Age Scandinavia, this was probably Óðinn who is often depicted deciding the fate of warriors in Old Norse literature. It is likely that this image represents an analogue of Óðinn such as Woden in pre-Viking Age periods and outside Scandinavia. Opposition to the warrior is represented by the figure on the ground in the trampled warrior motif. This warrior is still dangerous, because his sword is sticking into the horse, but victory over him is close with the help of the deity.

The images of the horned deity showing him wearing little but a belt may reflect the reality of the judicial duels described in *Lex Baiuvariorum* and the Old Frisian laws. By representing themselves in this manner, duellers may have identified themselves with the god and placed the result in his hands. It is probable that this iconography was associated with the social elite, because it is present on both high status helmets and on bracteates made of gold and modelled on Roman coins, thus creating a connection with the Roman imperial past. Where gold bracteates have been found with burials, they are primarily but not exclusively, found in women's graves, suggesting that bracteates were worn more by women than men. This suggests that bracteates were indicators of rank and the iconography was associated with that rank. In the Viking Age

this would have meant it being associated with all people whose social role was affiliated with Óðinn's sphere of influence (i.e. the social elite), not just to the warband itself.

The remaining iconography of the helmet plates appears to show a rite of passage that warriors probably had to pass through to achieve or maintain their station in life. The old tribal societies like the putative **koryos* or the young men of the Chatti, were fading or had disappeared by the Viking Age, so the warriors of the warband were probably now an elite group of men at the top of society, a precursor to the retinues of the medieval period. The ordinary men could be called out to do battle when needed, as occurred with the *fyrð* in Anglo-Saxon England or the Scandinavian *leidangr*, but the warriors of the warband were professionals and would be expected to be the best. Therefore, it is probable that they had rites of passage for new members, as is the case with many groups in society even today. They may have had formal initiation rituals with a cultic element existing within the warband, but that is less certain and probably belonged to the tribal past and not to the Viking Age. It does seem certain from the imagery associated with the warband that they expected to be able to gain Óðinn's favour, which is to be expected of warriors in the upper strata of society, because Óðinn was the god of leaders according to Old Norse literature.

Thus, the picture of the warrior elite gained from this evidence is that they were associated with Óðinn and wore helmet plates and bracteates that demonstrated their affiliation to him. They had a formal induction into the warband through a rite of passage that involved ritual combat with a beast

and/or a *berserkr* as described in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Gísla saga* and *Beowulf*, among others.

The *kappar* in the warband were champions, warriors that fought as proxies for their leader as well as beside him in battle, which links them to duels in the sagas, where the hero frequently fights as a proxy for other characters, to the judicial duels of the earlier law codes and to *berserkir* through medieval usage of ON *berserkr* to translate OFr *champion*.

All of these activities are linked to *berserkir* and it is possible that to be a member of a warband or *comitatus* was also to be a *berserkr*, which would explain why the wealthy graves of the Vendel Period feature overtly Odinic imagery that can be linked so closely to *ulfheðnar* and thus to *berserkir*.

In contrast to the iconography of helmet plates and bracteates, the four warders from Lewis depict the medieval concept of *berserkir*. The manner in which they bite on their shields brings quickly to mind the description of Snækollr on his horse beginning *berserksgangr* before Grettir knocks his teeth out by kicking the bottom of his shield into his mouth.⁷⁵⁸ These four warders must have been instantly recognisable as *berserkir* to Scandinavian viewers and are as clear a depiction of how medieval Scandinavians envisaged *berserkir* as it is possible to get, insofar as the main details of the carvings correspond to the depictions in Old Norse literature.

⁷⁵⁸ Íf, 7, pp. 135-36.

6 Depictions of *berserkir* from the nineteenth century to the present day

6.1 Introduction

The Norse warrior provides fertile ground for the modern screenwriter, author or graphic novel artist.⁷⁵⁹ To some extent, the ferocious Viking is an archetype for the Conan-esque barbarian hero or villain, whose sole pleasures come from fighting, drinking and swiving, and the *berserkr* may be considered the epitome of this archetype. This chapter analyses the depictions of *berserkir* in general histories, books, films, games and graphic novels from the nineteenth century to the present day, although it is more strongly focused on the most recent publications, and shows how the modern concept of the *berserkr* is shaped as much by modern vocabulary as it is by research into historical reality. It demonstrates how *berserkir* appear in modern sources in a limited range of guises that are based on medieval depictions of *berserkir* but which are clearly linked to PDE ‘berserk’ rather than to the probable historical reality of Viking Age *berserkir*. Depictions rarely encompass the full range of descriptors used in Old Norse literature too, tending towards those elements that reinforce the image of the *berserkr* as a dangerously violent and mentally unbalanced individual.⁷⁶⁰

For the purposes of this chapter, I shall generally analyse only those characters that are explicitly identified as *berserkir* and have a Viking theme,

⁷⁵⁹ See *The Vikings on Film: Essays on depictions of the Nordic Middle Ages*, ed. by Kevin J. Harty (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011) for discussions of how Vikings generally have been depicted on film.

⁷⁶⁰ See 4.3 and 4.4.

because the full range of characters that act in a berserk manner is too great to be included in this study. This means that characters like Wolverine from Marvel's the *X-Men* franchise will not be included, despite his berserker rage, because he is not specifically described as a *berserkr*.⁷⁶¹ Other examples of excluded sources are the character Minsc, from the computer game *Baldur's Gate*, who goes berserk when under stress but is not described as a *berserkr*, Gary Numan's album *Berserker* and the works of Australian industrial death metal band The Berzerker.⁷⁶² These last two take the name of the *berserkr*, but do not contribute to the discussion within this thesis because they do not reference *berserksgangr* and are not Viking-themed, hence their exclusion. For similar reasons the analysis will be limited to English-language sources, otherwise the body of available literature would be too large to analyse within the framework of this thesis.

To set the discussion in context, I shall briefly outline the origin and history of the use of PDE 'berserk' and 'berserker' in English, before providing examples of their use in the popular culture of the past two hundred years, and showing how the two are interrelated. Although I have chosen to

⁷⁶¹ Wolverine first appeared in *The Incredible Hulk*, 180 (Marvel, October 1974) and has appeared since then in Marvel's *The X-Men* and his own series as well as in many other Marvel products.

⁷⁶² *Baldur's Gate* (Interplay Entertainment, 1998); Gary Numan, *Berserker* (Numa 1001, 1984; reissued on CD by Eagle Records, EAMCD072, 1999); The Berzerker (Earache Records, 1995-2007; Berzerker Industries, 2008-2010).

use the two main, modern versions for clarity of reference, other variants exist, such as PDE ‘baresark’. They are included in this discussion, but their specific spellings will only be employed where it is necessary to differentiate between variant forms.

6.2 The early history of PDE ‘berserk’ and ‘berserker’

The use of the word ‘berserker’ in the English language is first encountered in Aylett Sammes’ 1676 work *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata*. Sammes, an English antiquary whose main academic focus was an attempt to relate British history to the Phoenicians, describes how Woden’s soldiers would attack ‘like ravening Wolves or Mad-dogs’ and how that ‘furious Onset was called Berserker’.⁷⁶³

The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s earliest citation is Sir Walter Scott’s *The Pirate* from 1822, in which he explained that ‘the Berserkars were champions who lived before the blessed says of Saint Olave and who used to run like madmen on swords, and spears, and harpoons, and muskets, and snap them all into pieces’ and that ‘the berserkars were so called from fighting without armour’.⁷⁶⁴ From this point on, throughout the nineteenth century PDE ‘berserker’ or variants of it can be found with varying definitions of the term and ideas about their nature. Dasent likened *berserkir* in his *Burnt Njal* to Malays, who ran amok and for whom ‘the intoxicating fumes of bangh or

⁷⁶³ Aylett Sammes, *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata: or, the antiquities of ancient Britain, etc.* (London: The Roycroft, 1674/5), p. 438.

⁷⁶⁴ Scott, *The Pirate*, p. 16.

arrack are said to be the cause of their fury'.⁷⁶⁵ This discussion of Malays using drugs recalls the theories that have been proposed about *berserkir* using various drugs to induce frenzy.⁷⁶⁶ Dasent's use of 'baresark' indicates that he subscribed to the view that *berserkir* fought without armour, although he does not explain this in his translation.

Baring-Gould mentions *berserkir* in *The Book of Werewolves*, where he states that they were subject to ferocious frenzy.⁷⁶⁷ In contrast to Dasent, Baring-Gould prefers 'bear-sark' over 'baresark', and notes that he is aware that 'Björn Halldorson's derivation of *berserkr*, bare of sark, or destitute of clothing, has been hitherto generally received, but Sveibjörn [sic] Egilsson, an indisputable authority, rejects this as untenable, and substitutes for it that which I have adopted'.⁷⁶⁸ He also comments in his translation of *Grettis saga* that they were people that had merely lost all self-control: 'It was usually supposed that these Bearsarks were possessed by evil spirits, and it is probable that in many cases they were really mad – mad through having given way to their violent passions'.⁷⁶⁹

The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a definition of PDE 'berserk'. It states that this adjective means 'frenzied, furiously or madly violent'. It also

⁷⁶⁵ Dasent, *Burnt Njal*, p. xix; see also 3.5 and 5.4.6

⁷⁶⁶ See 3.2.1 and 3.2.2.

⁷⁶⁷ Baring-Gould, *The Book of Werewolves*, pp.35-42; see 3.6.

⁷⁶⁸ Baring-Gould, *Book of Werewolves*, pp. 36-37; see 3.1.2.

⁷⁶⁹ *Grettir the Outlaw: A story of Iceland*, trans. by Sabine Baring-Gould (London: Blackie & Son, 1890), p. 169.

defines PDE ‘berserker’ as ‘a wild Norse warrior of great strength and ferocious courage, who fought on the battle-field with a frenzied fury known as the berserker rage’.⁷⁷⁰ The emphasis is on violence and fury with no recognition of the other roles that *berserkir* appear to have played in Viking Age society. This concept of violence is reinforced by everyday usage of PDE ‘berserk’ in expressions such as ‘he went absolutely berserk’, and presents an immediate barrier to understanding the Viking Age *berserkr*, because our thought processes are channelled into a specific idea of who and what a *berserkr* was.

6.3 The general histories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

The discussions of the nineteenth-century authors have a logical progression in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century depictions of *berserkir* in general histories aimed at the interested amateur. *Berserkir* are described in the same way, and with the same range of explanations, as in the earlier works cited, especially in terms of their ferocity and the nature of *berserksgangr*, as will be demonstrated.

6.3.1 The rage of the *berserkr*

As I have previously shown, a range of causes for *berserksgangr* have been suggested, from mental illness and physical conditions to shamanic trances and the use of drugs.⁷⁷¹ As in the academic world, the cause of the ‘berserker

⁷⁷⁰ *OED Online*, sv ‘berserk’.

⁷⁷¹ See 3.2.

frenzy' has exercised the minds of the writers of general histories too. These general histories range from those by respected scholars of the Viking Age, such as Foote, Wilson and Arnold, to works by historians who are not specialists in the Viking Age like Griffith and Haywood, to titles produced for interested amateurs by non-specialist authors, like the works of Heath and Harrison. Of the works cited below, only Foote and Wilson are writing for university students as well as a general audience.

From the more academic general histories, Foote and Wilson describe *berserkir* as men 'who fell or worked themselves into a frenzy which gave wild increase to their strength and made them indifferent to blows'.⁷⁷² They suggest that this form of running amok was probably related to a state of paranoia and to lycanthropy, although it may have been induced by alcohol, but not by other drugs, and in some cases may have been an epileptic response. In doing so, they manage to cover most of the suggested means of undergoing *berserksgangr*, based on earlier research.⁷⁷³ Arnold states that *berserkir* were 'clearly psychopaths who could rouse themselves into what was called the berserker rage'.⁷⁷⁴

Haywood writes that 'berserkers worked themselves into a trance-like frenzy before battle which apparently left them immune to the pain of wounds'.⁷⁷⁵ In a later work, Haywood reiterates this point, and adds that they

⁷⁷² Foote and Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*, p. 285.

⁷⁷³ See 3.2.

⁷⁷⁴ Arnold, *The Vikings*, p. 38.

⁷⁷⁵ Haywood, *Historical Atlas*, p. 84.

achieved this state of frenzy by a process that involved ‘much howling and shield-biting’.⁷⁷⁶ Griffith dismisses the notion of using drugs and magic mushrooms to achieve frenzy, instead suggesting that *berserkir* were just violently psychotic.⁷⁷⁷ Pollington declares that *berserkir* entered ‘a state of mental ecstasy or exhilaration’ which enabled them ‘to rush forward in battle without thought of danger, whooping like a beast and biting the rim of his shield’.⁷⁷⁸ Like the others, who suggest an ecstatic trance as the cause of *berserksgangr*, Pollington suggests that this trance-state permitted them to take part in the battle, while also mentally distanced from it. Doing this would permit *berserkir* not to consider the possibility of their own deaths and thus not to feel the fear that might attend upon such thoughts.⁷⁷⁹

In a book firmly aimed at the wargaming market, Heath, an author and artist, describes *berserkir* as a mixture of psychopaths and sufferers of paranoia, lycanthropy and epilepsy.⁷⁸⁰ Harrison, writing for wargamers and re-

⁷⁷⁶ Haywood, *Encyclopaedia*, p. 31.

⁷⁷⁷ Griffith, *Viking Art of War*, pp. 135-36.

⁷⁷⁸ Stephen Pollington, *The English Warrior from earliest Times till 1066* (Hockwold-cum-Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2006), p. 80.

⁷⁷⁹ For other examples of ecstatic trance see: William R. Short, *Viking Weapons and Combat Techniques* (Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2009), p. 33; and Ewart Oakeshott, *Dark Age Warrior* (Guildford and London: Lutterworth Press, 1974), p. 108.

⁷⁸⁰ Ian Heath, *Armies of the Dark Ages 600-1066 2nd Edition* (Worthing: Wargames Research Group, 1980), pp. 92-93; and Ian Heath, *The Vikings*

enactors, suggests that ‘groups of alienated, landless young men who gathered on the fringes of society and made a living by banditry and warfare’ may have been the basis for Norse stories about *berserkir*, based on the depiction of groups of ‘vagabond outlaws’ in some sagas.⁷⁸¹ Thus Harrison believes they were just anti-social, following Ellis Davidson’s view that young warriors probably did not need much stirring up to be violent.⁷⁸² However, a later revision and expansion of Harrison’s work, while also including the previously cited text, adds a separate section declaring that they were suffering from a form of paranoia or possibly epilepsy, and that their symptoms were obviously hereditary.⁷⁸³ Canwell writes that they worked themselves up into a frenzy for battle and suggests that they became so worked up that they could not even take orders on the battlefield.⁷⁸⁴ She also states that *berserkir* were probably psychopaths or men with paranoid delusions. As an alternative to psychological dysfunction Wise, writing for the wargaming market, suggests that *berserkir* had a total disregard for their own lives, which gave them a

(London: Osprey Publishing, 1985), p. 47. See 3.2.3 for physical causes and 3.2.4 for psychological causes of *berserksgangr*.

⁷⁸¹ Mark Harrison, *Viking Hersir 793-1066AD* (London: Osprey Publishing, 1993), p. 6; R. Chartrand, K. Durham, M. Harrison and I. Heath, *The Vikings: Voyagers of Discovery and Plunder* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2006), p. 85.

⁷⁸² Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols*, pp. 87-88.

⁷⁸³ Chartrand et al, *The Vikings*, p. 102.

⁷⁸⁴ Haywood, *Historical Atlas*, p. 84; Diane Canwell, *The Vikings* (Ramsbury: The Crowood Press, 2003), p. 75.

psychological advantage in combat.⁷⁸⁵ In effect, they had a death wish insofar as they did not seek to protect themselves from harm.

It is rare to see authors suggesting that the fearsome abilities of the *berserkir* were not actually present, and the closest we come to this may be exemplified by Clements, who suggests that they were just ‘the brawlers who could be persuaded that standing at the front was a good idea’.⁷⁸⁶ Despite Clements’ dissenting voice, this short cross-section of *berserkir* in general histories shows that frenzy, rage or fury are the most popular explanations for *berserksgangr* in general histories. It may be a result of epilepsy, paranoia or an ecstatic trance but the end result is still that *berserkir* are explained as being violent psychopaths. Only Harrison provides a dissenting voice to suggest that *berserkir* were merely more naturally violent than their contemporaries, and even then his later work cites paranoia or epilepsy as causes. Foote and Wilson cover a range of explanations for this berserk frenzy, including the aforementioned mental illness and cite Grøn as their only source for *berserksgangr*.⁷⁸⁷ Grøn’s treatise is extensive, so it is not surprising that they

⁷⁸⁵ Terence Wise, *Saxon, Viking and Norman* (London: Osprey, 1979), pp. 37-38.

⁷⁸⁶ Jonathan Clements, *A Brief History of the Vikings: The last pagans or the first modern Europeans?* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2005), p. 26; see also Matthew Bennett, ‘The Myth of Viking Ferocity’, *Slingshot*, 116 (1984), pp. 47-48.

⁷⁸⁷ Grøn, ‘Berserksgangens vesen’, cited in Foote and Wilson, *Viking Achievement*, p. 445.

have managed to include most of the explanations given previously by other scholars as a result of relying upon his work.⁷⁸⁸ Of the other general histories, only a small number actually include bibliographies. All of these cite Foote and Wilson as a source, and it seems likely, based on their suggestions of similar causes for *berserksgangr* that they have drawn this information directly from Foote and Wilson.⁷⁸⁹ Griffith also cites Harrison, Heath and Wise in his bibliography, so it is possible he has drawn some ideas about *berserkr* from these authors too.⁷⁹⁰ Based on the descriptions in the other works that do not have bibliographies, it seems likely that they too derived their concepts of *berserksgangr* from Foote and Wilson. Thus, it can be seen that while the descriptions demonstrate a fascination with the frenzy of the *berserkr*, and few question its existence, in essence all are quoting the same source with the end result that all explanations of *berserksgangr* are similar.

6.3.2 Bear-shirt or bare-shirt?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that the etymology of PDE ‘berserk’ derives from the Old Norse for ‘bear coat’, although it also defines ‘baresark’ as meaning ‘bare shirt’ in a separate entry, so it may be taken that ‘wearing a bearskin’ is the dominant etymology today with only some attention paid to the

⁷⁸⁸ See 3.2.3 and 3.2.4.

⁷⁸⁹ Chartrand et al, *The Vikings*, p. 198; Griffith, *Viking Art of War*, p. 219; Haywood, *Historical Atlas*, p. 138; Haywood, *Encyclopaedia*, p. 221.

⁷⁹⁰ Griffith, *Viking Art of War*, pp. 219-221

form ‘bare shirt’.⁷⁹¹ Both versions have their proponents and there are still others who seem to believe that *berserkr* stripped completely naked before battle.

Heath states categorically that *berserkr* meant ‘bear-shirt’ and not ‘bare-shirt’ and that the name originated from the ritualistic wearing of animal-skins as a totem.⁷⁹² Foote and Wilson interpret *berserkr* as meaning ‘bear-shirt’ and likewise conclude that the term is related to the warrior’s totem animal.⁷⁹³ Chartrand et al, Griffith, Haywood, and others also agree with this.⁷⁹⁴

In contrast, Harrison informs us that ‘berserkers were alternatively called Ulfhednar’ and that ‘Ulfhednar’ meant ‘wolfskins’ but he definitively states that *ulfhednar* did not wear hides, and that attempts to show they did so have no basis in fact.⁷⁹⁵ By extension, he appears to be stating that *berserkr* did not wear hides either, but does not offer an alternative etymology or meaning. Oakeshott extends this concept, preferring ‘Bare Sark’ as a meaning,

⁷⁹¹ *OED Online*, sv ‘berserk’ and ‘baresark’.

⁷⁹² Heath, *Armies of the Dark Ages*, p. 92; and Heath, *The Vikings*, p. 47.

⁷⁹³ Foote and Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*, p. 391.

⁷⁹⁴ Chartrand et al, *The Vikings*, p. 102; Griffith, *Viking Art of War*, p. 135; Haywood, *Historical Atlas*, p. 84; see also: Canwell, *Vikings*, p. 75; Pollington, *English Warrior*, p. 77; and Martina Sprague, *Norse Warfare: The unconventional battle strategies of the ancient Vikings* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2007), p. 81.

⁷⁹⁵ Harrison, *Viking Hersir*, p. 20.

and describes how *berserkir* went into battle stripped to the waist, without a helmet even.⁷⁹⁶

A third position is adopted by Wise who concludes that both meanings are possible and that it is not possible to know, at this remove from the period, which is correct.⁷⁹⁷ Likewise, Buller opts to offer up both explanations, as does Hall, although both state that ‘bare shirt’ means that *berserkir* fought completely naked.⁷⁹⁸

The range of opinion expressed in general histories is an indication of the confusion attendant upon the topic. The idea of *berserkir* wearing bearskins seems to be more popular, but other meanings still survive, as do misinterpretations of the evidence, as demonstrated by those that believe *berserkir* fought naked.

6.3.3 Warriors of Óðinn

Berserkir as warriors of Óðinn is also a theme that is encountered. It derives almost entirely from Snorri’s description of Óðinn’s role in *berserksgangr*.⁷⁹⁹ Foote and Wilson state that both *berserkir* and the men that employed them

⁷⁹⁶ Oakeshott, *Dark Age Warrior*, p. 108.

⁷⁹⁷ Wise, *Saxon, Viking and Norman*, p. 38,

⁷⁹⁸ Laura Buller, *History Dudes: Vikings* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2007), p. 8; Richard Hall, *Exploring the World of the Vikings* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p. 70.

⁷⁹⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 17.

were Odinic initiates.⁸⁰⁰ Haywood writes that ‘the most feared Viking warriors were the berserkers, devotees of the war god Odin.’⁸⁰¹ Pollington writes similarly of *berserkir*.⁸⁰² *Berserkir* were almost certainly associated with Óðinn, but it is possible to over-emphasise this interpretation of their role, because little is known about the actual extent of their association, and it may have been solely one of belonging to a sphere governed by the god.⁸⁰³ These authors do not do so, because they only make a connection between *berserkir* and Óðinn without expanding greatly on it, but in some popular fiction, the connection is made more explicit and direct, as is discussed below.⁸⁰⁴

6.3.4 Non-existent *berserkir*

While the focus here has been on how *berserkir* are described in general histories, some authors prefer to reject previous research into *berserkir*, and even deny their existence.

Christiansen rejects previous interpretations of *berserkir* on the grounds that ‘if there were bands of braves in fur suits, or naked, among the Nordic raiders into Western Europe, it is strange that the annalists and preachers failed

⁸⁰⁰ Foote and Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*, p. 391.

⁸⁰¹ Haywood, *Penguin Historical Atlas*, p. 84.

⁸⁰² Pollington, *English Warrior*, p. 77.

⁸⁰³ See 3.3 and 4.4.

⁸⁰⁴ For examples of this see Nancy Farmer, *The Sea of Trolls* (London: Simon and Schuster UK, 2004); and Warren Ellis, *Wolfskin, 6 Issues* (Rantoul: Avatar Press, 2007); see 6.6.

to notice them'.⁸⁰⁵ While Christiansen dismisses the interpretations of *berserkir*, he leaves room for the existence of a class of warriors by that name, but probably with very different attributes from those usually cited. Stephenson goes further and denies their existence at all, although his approach may owe much to Christiansen, whom he cites in his bibliography.⁸⁰⁶ Stephenson sees in the *berserkir* of the sagas an idealised warrior construct that belongs only in literature, and dismisses the sagas themselves as evidence. Like Christiansen, he believes that the Christian chroniclers of Western Europe would have written about something as readily identifiable as a *berserkr*, and so they cannot have existed because there is no evidence for them.

Both authors' criticism is rooted in the traditional view of *berserkir* as frenzied warriors in bearskins or bare-skins, and fails to recognise that fighting without armour, as Snorri describes, is not the same as fighting naked. In rejecting *berserkir*, they are engaging in the same lack of a nuanced interpretation as the scholars whose works they critique. These authors are very much in the minority in this approach. Their use of *argumentum ex silentio* is weak and is only relevant if historical *berserkir* really did conform to the stereotypes of Old Norse literature and later interpretations thereof.

⁸⁰⁵ Eric Christiansen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p.33.

⁸⁰⁶ I. P. Stephenson, *Viking Warfare* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2012), pp. 23 and 116.

6.3.5 Conclusions

Although these are just a small selection of the general histories, the picture they present is broadly representative of the wider balance of interpretation. They demonstrate that there is no unified consensus about the appearance of *berserkir*. They either wore bearskins or they threw off their armour, or they fought stark naked. There is greater consensus regarding the causes of *berserksgangr*, but even there disagreement and alternative interpretations exist. *Berserkir* were either dangerously psychologically unbalanced or they were just violently aggressive young men. They fought in a frenzy inspired by drugs and alcohol or they did not. The description given by Snorri is readily recognisable in these works and the interpretations largely derive from his description of *berserksgangr* in *Ynglinga saga*.⁸⁰⁷ Some care needs to be taken here, because it appears that many authors of general histories have relied heavily upon Foote and Wilson for their interpretation, so they are not coming to their ideas completely independently.

While there are areas of disagreement within the general histories about how *berserkir* went berserk, all agree on frenzy as a defining element; if they did not go berserk then they were not *berserkir*. As I have argued, this is a fallacious starting point for writing about *berserkir*, but it has dominated the general histories and thence popular culture interpretations from the outset, as will be seen in the following sections.

⁸⁰⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, p. 17.

6.4 The traits of *berserker* in popular culture

In popular culture depictions, *berserker* have a limited number of defining traits, which generally reflect those described in general histories.⁸⁰⁸ These traits essentially define an archetype that is readily recognisable to the extent of being a trope in its own right. *TV Tropes* is a website that functions as a depository for tropes. Any story may be expressed by describing the interaction between its tropes, which are conventions or expectations that the writer can reasonably expect to be present in their target audience's mind. The *berserker* trope describes a figure recognisable from the general histories, and with a small number of variations:

The Berserker is a character who throws himself into a fight with such reckless abandon, it seems like he WANTS to die. It could be over-enthusiasm, overconfidence, Unstoppable Rage, or the desire to die (in battle). Whatever the cause, it's usually accompanied by a bellowing warcry. Sometimes with total obliviousness to whether he's actually fighting the enemy. And he never, ever retreats.

Berserkers are equally capable of being good or evil. If they're good, then out of battle, most will brood about whatever it is that causes their berserk fits, or show remorse about losing control of themselves. Most end up one of two ways: being taught by their teammates to control themselves after a particularly close call, or dying in a dramatic fashion while lamenting that they died without completing their mission. Good Berserkers are also very prone

⁸⁰⁸ See 6.3.

to Heroic Sacrifices, for very obvious reasons. When this is not played for drama, the Berserker may have a Boisterous Bruiser attitude when not in his battle rage. An evil Berserker, on the other hand, is generally just unrepentantly Ax Crazy and very often Chaotic Evil.⁸⁰⁹

While not every fictional depiction embraces the full version of the *berserkr* archetype, many of the traits described are readily recognisable in the fictional depictions discussed below.⁸¹⁰

6.4.1 The *berserkr* on screen

References to *berserkir* in films are few, but there are films that feature them. In those films where they do occur, they are generally prominent characters or protagonists. In *Berserker: The Nordic Curse*, *Berserker: Hell's Warrior* and *Sweaty Beards: The Quest for Rage*, they are lead characters.⁸¹¹ *Erik the Viking* features two *berserkir* as supporting characters within the main narrative.⁸¹² This section shows how they are portrayed and how their portrayal relates to Old Norse depictions.

⁸⁰⁹ <<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheBerserker>> [accessed 08 July 2013].

⁸¹⁰ 6.4.1 to 6.4.3.

⁸¹¹ *Berserker: The Nordic curse*, dir. by Jeff Richard (Moon Stone, 1987); *Berserker: Hell's warrior*, dir. by Paul Matthews (Tanmarsh Communications Ltd, 2002); and *Sweaty Beards: The quest for rage*, dir. by Joakim Jardeby (Sweaty Beards Film AB, 2010).

⁸¹² *Erik the Viking*, dir. by Terry Jones (United International Pictures, 1989).

Berserker: The Nordic Curse is an eighties slasher movie. It defines *berserkr* as psychotic killers who are kept chained up until needed. As the advertising text states:

Berserker is based upon an old Nordic legend. A berserker was a bloodthirsty warrior who was kept in chains and used as the first line of assault in Viking raids. Because they ate human flesh, they were cursed by the God Odin, forbidden a restful death, and fated to be reincarnated in their blood kin. Now, in present day America, the berserker has risen out of hell to stalk a mixed group of college students camping in the woods.⁸¹³

The *berserkr* in this film wears a snout mask. The mask gives the *berserkr* the physical appearance of a bear. The fur cape and loincloth that he wears are designed to accentuate that appearance. Apart from the snout, the cape and the loincloth, the *berserkr* wears no other clothes, and conforms to Snorri's declaration that they went without armour, while also tending towards the modern interpretation that they fought largely naked.

Although the bodycount in the film is not that high, this *berserkr* is intended to be a personification of carnage and death whose reign of terror has extended over generations. His motivation in the film is not investigated. He just exists to kill. In this regard he is a direct descendant of the *berserkr* described in general histories, a killer whose frenzy permits him no self-awareness.

⁸¹³ *Berserker: The Nordic curse* (1987) [DVD release].

In *Berserker: Hell's Warrior*, the *berserkir* resemble those of *Berserker: The Nordic Curse*, but instead of the snout, they wear bearskins with the mask attached on top of their heads. The pelt hangs down behind their backs and they wear bearskin loincloths. In this fashion, they resemble the bears that they have taken their pelts from. One other notable feature is that, apart from the chief *berserkr*, they are all filthy. The image is of people that are more animal than human.

In addition to their bestial mien, the *berserkir* are immortal. In a conflation of the *berserkr* myth and the vampire myth, *berserkir* are created when a human is bitten by a Valkyrie. At this point they are brought to Óðinn's service as undead *einherjar*, a situation that invites comparison with the concept of *berserkir* as an army of the dead.⁸¹⁴ In this form the *berserkir* 'fight with the zeal of fanatics, immune to pain and consumed by bloodlust and rage'.⁸¹⁵ The *berserkir* in this film are a law unto themselves and are seen as a menace. When the hero's father seeks to expand his dominion, he allies with them, and is criticised for it because they are dangerous and treacherous. In this respect, the *berserkir* mirror some aspects of outlaw *berserkir* from the sagas.

As with *Berserker: The Nordic Curse*, the *berserkir* in this film are largely killers whose sole motivation in life is to slaughter whatever they can. The only exception to this is their leader, Boar, whose goals are more complex. He wishes to have revenge on his brother, Berek, and uses his power to try to

⁸¹⁴ See 3.5 and 5.2.1 n. 546.

⁸¹⁵ *Berserker: Hell's warrior* (2002) [DVD release].

enact that vengeance. It may be that his name is intended to demonstrate his tenacity and destructiveness in pursuit of this vengeance, but no other name in the film has similar overtones, so this seems unlikely. Barek, in direct contrast to his brother, seeks to abandon his *berserkr* heritage, so that he may lead a normal life once more. These two characters do not act like *berserkir* and are more like standard rivals typical of film productions.

In both of these films, the *berserkir* are personifications of violence. Their role is to destroy. They kill unthinkingly and seem to have no other motivation. Although lip service is paid to Óðinn and his patronage of *berserkir*, it is barely evident in either film, appearing only to be present for the sake of verisimilitude. As a result, they lack any real character and could easily be replaced with a rabid beast or any other variation of the slasher psycho.

Erik the Viking adopts a different tack, and examines the notion that Vikings did not all conform to the stereotype of mighty warriors, and features a family of *berserkir*. Sven the Berserk and his father Ulf the Maddeningly Calm are *berserkir* descended from a long line of *berserkir*. Sven is unable to control himself, going berserk and destroying things at random, yet he is unable to go berserk in battle. Ulf his father can and does go berserk in battle. He even boasts of having been on Harald Fairhair's ship but despairs because being a *berserkr* is a family tradition, and it will die with Ulf if Sven cannot learn to control his temper. In the end, Sven does manage to go berserk when his best friend is killed, at which point he starts to foam at the mouth, before attacking the enemy. When the warriors reach Valhalla, they meet Sven's grandfather, who reveals that Ulf had exactly the same problem when he was younger. Although it is dealt with in a comic fashion, the standard image of the *berserkr*

is maintained in this film with the additional element of frothing at the mouth, a feature that is known from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*.⁸¹⁶

The *berserkir* in *Erik the Viking* are warriors and are shown to belong within their society. They are not outcasts or outlaws, but have instead been part of a king's retinue, much like the *berserkir* in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. They also lack the unreasoning drive to kill that is part of the *berserkir* in *Berserker: The Nordic Curse* and *Berserker: Hell's Warrior*. These *berserkir* may be closer to the probable historical reality, yet they still go berserk, thus conforming to the stereotype.

Sweaty Beards: The Quest for Rage presents another variant on the *berserkr* that cannot go berserk.⁸¹⁷ Oswald is an object of scorn in his home village but travels with his braver older brother to take revenge for the death of their father. When his brother dies, Oswald must become a *berserkr* or die. In the end, he finds in the love of Hildegund the power to go berserk. He begins to steam at the ears and becomes invulnerable to weapons so that he is able to kill the evil Finn Perset Olale. This film builds on the idea that *berserkir* require rage to gain their special powers. Oswald is too passive and not aggressive enough, so he has to be driven to the point of extreme anger by his love for Gunnhild before he can gain the invulnerability that is needed. Even then he does not go truly berserk. Of all the films examined, this is the only one where the *berserkr* gains invulnerability.

⁸¹⁶ See 4.3.6 and *Fornaldar sögur norðrlanda*, ed. by Rafn, I, 425.

⁸¹⁷ *Sweaty Beards* (2010).

The Scandinavian warriors in *Iron Lord* are mercenaries, fighting on the side of Yaroslav, Prince of Rostov, in the early eleventh century.⁸¹⁸ They are identified as *berserker* early in the film, when Harald, their leader, fights stripped to the waist as he carves a bloody swathe through the enemy. His face is fierce and he has thrown off his leather armour, but there is little else that marks him as other than a particularly fierce warrior, although he does later declare his affiliation to Óðinn. While the film uses bear imagery in the name and totem animal of the pagan tribe that controls the area where the action takes place, this is never linked to Harald, and thus may not be construed as an element of the attributes of *berserker* either. Thus, Harald is just a particularly skilled warrior with no obvious outward evidence for his status as a *berserker*, if we discount stripping to the waist to fight in one scene.

In *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, the agents are pursuing two members of a paganist hate group who have found part of an artefact called 'the Berserker Staff' which was brought to earth by an Asgardian warrior hundreds of years ago.⁸¹⁹ Possession of the staff fills its bearer with anger while endowing them with super-strength, and the pagans plan to use it to make their group more powerful, so that they can better further their agenda. The agents contact a Norse mythology professor, Dr Elliot Randolph, who tells them that the staff belonged to a soldier in the 'berserker army'.⁸²⁰ He states

⁸¹⁸ *Iron Lord*, dir. by Dmitriy Korobkin (Revolver Entertainment, 2010).

⁸¹⁹ 'The Well', *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, Season 1, Episode 8 (19 November 2013).

⁸²⁰ 'The Well', *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

that ‘berserkers had the strength of twenty warriors and battled like raging beasts, destroying everything in their path. Fighting with the staff put the warrior into a state of uncontrollable rage’.⁸²¹ The essence of the *berserkr*, as depicted in this programme, is rage. Through anger, the *berserkr* gains his other powers, although only strength is evident in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and the pagans are comparatively easily defeated in the end.

Taken together these show that the dominant traits of *berserkir* relate to PDE ‘berserk’, insofar as the primary requirement to be a *berserkr* is the ability to achieve frenzy. Even the comic *berserkir* have a significant uncontrollable violent streak. Other traits, like foaming at the mouth, are secondary. The secondary traits reflect some depictions in Old Norse literature, but the primary violent frenzy still dominates the depictions.

It is also notable that when the study sample is restricted to just those characters specifically identified as *berserkir*, there are few examples of films or television programmes that include *berserkir*, even though characters do go berserk. There are no *berserkir* in *The Vikings*, *The Longships* or even *Viking Women and the Sea Serpent*, for example.⁸²² It is tempting to suggest that the

⁸²¹ ‘The Well’, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

⁸²² *The Vikings*, dir. by Richard Fleischer (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1958); *The Long Ships*, dir. by Jack Cardiff (Columbia Pictures, 1964); *Viking Women and the Sea Serpent*, dir. by Richard Fleischer (Direct Video Distribution Limited, 1957).

level of violence associated with *berserkir* was not deemed appropriate for a general audience.

6.4.2 *Berserkir* in popular fiction

Popular fiction provides more examples of *berserkir* than films do. One of the classic depictions is the machine intelligence in Saberhagen's *Berserker* and the subsequent series of books that followed it.⁸²³ These interstellar sentient warships had been programmed to eradicate all biological life from the universe. They attacked remorselessly, without fear or concern for anything but their mission. The name given to them by their human opponents was that of the Norse warrior, who was supposed to have sought to exterminate his foes in a similar manner.⁸²⁴

In *Age of Odin*, Lovegrove describes the main character, Gideon Coxall, going berserk in a moment of extreme stress:

Just let my inner berserker have free rein and went along for the ride. ... I didn't feel anger or hatred or fear or regret. I didn't have any petty problems any more. Nothing bothered me or distracted me. I was pure purpose. I existed to do one thing and that was kill frost giants. ... I

⁸²³ Fred Saberhagen, *Berserker* (New York: Ballantyne Books, 1967); see also by the same author *Brother Assassin* (1969), *Berserker's Planet* (1975), *Berserker Man* (1979) and others.

⁸²⁴ Fred Saberhagen, 'Masque of the Red Shift', in Saberhagen, *Berserker*, pp. 154-77 (p. 169).

measured my progress through the world in terms of enemies exterminated.⁸²⁵

Coxall is not described explicitly as a *berserkr* except at this point, yet he undergoes battle madness at various points. His expressed emotions and feelings when going berserk are described in similar terms to the way veterans of the Vietnam War have described their own berserk fits in combat.⁸²⁶ The sense of insulation from the world is made clear both in Lovegrove's description of Coxall's berserk fit and in the accounts that Shay reports.

Lovegrove does include a brief acknowledgement that indicates that he has had his descriptions of both Old Norse subject matter and the military aspects of his book checked by others, so it is possible that he has drawn on the experiences of people like the Vietnam veterans that Shay interviewed to develop his concept of *berserksgangr*.⁸²⁷

Coxall's *berserksgangr* is redolent of the descriptions in many other books. Langholm describes the *berserkr* Bjarni Earthmover going into a berserk rage and attacking an iceberg, because he had lost all control due to the stress of the moment and did not realise that he would be unable to destroy it.⁸²⁸ Weber writes of one of the villains in *Crown of Slaves* that 'the twisted history of his subculture gave him a death wish which resembled those of the

⁸²⁵ James Lovegrove, *Age of Odin* (Oxford: Solaris, 2010), pp. 492-93.

⁸²⁶ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, pp. 82, 84, 86-89.

⁸²⁷ Lovegrove, *Age of Odin*, p. 587.

⁸²⁸ Neil Langholm, *The Vikings: Blood sacrifice* (Manchester: Sphere Books, 1975), p. 89.

ancient Norse berserks or the hardcore Nazis. Better to die heroically, in a glorious final battle, than to whimper away into oblivion ...'.⁸²⁹ Bjarni Earthmover's actions might also be interpreted in this way; he preferred to die fighting uselessly than not to fight at all. These ideas about *berserkir* give a different impression from the probable historical reality and bear little resemblance to even the medieval depictions in sagas, but they do correspond with some of the descriptions in the general histories, albeit that they develop the more lurid aspects of them.⁸³⁰

Other examples of *berserkir* in popular fiction include Linklater's *The Men of Ness* in which he describes how they howl, scream, chew their shields and are very ugly, which suggests that he was familiar with *Egils saga*, because Egill himself is ugly and some consider him to have been a *berserkr* because he was descended from *berserkir*, while howling and shield-biting are aspects of the behaviour of *berserkir* in the saga.⁸³¹ The king's *berserkir* wear wolfskin coats and are of intimidating appearance, and are thus *ulfheðnar*.⁸³² The Vikings in this story are for the most part prickly and wild, so it seems hardly surprising that *berserkir* should be exaggerated versions of the ordinary people. This image of Vikings generally, and *berserkir* in particular, harks

⁸²⁹ David Weber and Eric Flint, *Crown of Slaves* (Wake Forest: Baen Books, 2003), Location 5185, Kindle ebook.

⁸³⁰ See chapter 4.3 and 6.3.

⁸³¹ Eric Linklater, *The Men of Ness* (Aylesbury: Panther, 1959), pp. 35, 56 and 81; see 4.5.1 for Egill's family.

⁸³² Linklater, *Men of Ness*, pp. 51 and 79.

back to the image of them in Fleischer's *The Vikings* in that they both reflect the savagery and primitive simplicity of Vikings as portrayed for the 1950s audience.⁸³³ These Vikings are fierce when fighting, jovial in the hall and prone to outbursts of laughter at any moment, and yet, despite being great seafarers they can be reduced to quivering wrecks by fear of fog while at sea.⁸³⁴ As such they are savages whom civilised people may look down upon, and the *berserkr* is the epitome of that savagery, being wild and uncontrollable.

In *Wolfskin*, Marillier introduces the concept of the holy *berserkr* of Þórr, who is initiated into the cult in a ritual that involves him taking drugs and then going out to slay a wolf, naked and unarmed but for a knife.⁸³⁵ The initiate then wears the pelt as a mark of having killed the wolf. The wolfskins in this novel are a band of twelve serving their jarl. The fury that possesses them in battle is granted by Þórr, not by drugs or as a result of disease. Marillier has managed to incorporate all the major themes regarding *berserkir*: drugs and nakedness at the ritual; wearing a wolf's pelt as a mark of their special status; and also the ever-present berserk fury. The only element of artistic licence that she brings to the novel herself is the dedication of the wolfskins to Þórr, rather than to Odin. She states in the historical note that the

⁸³³ *The Vikings* (1958); see Mark Axel Tveskov and Jon M. Erlandson, 'Vikings, Vixens and Valhalla: Hollywood depictions of the Norse', in *Box Office Archaeology*, ed. by Julie M. Schlablitsky (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007), pp. 34-50 for a discussion of depictions of Vikings on film.

⁸³⁴ Tveskov and Erlandson, 'Vikings, Vixens and Valhalla', pp. 38-39.

⁸³⁵ Juliet Marillier, *Wolfskin* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2002), pp. 69-77.

common view of ‘a psychotic shield-chewing oaf, who rushes off into battle naked, is wrong’.⁸³⁶ She accepts the etymology of *berserkr* meaning "bear shirt" and relates that to *ulfhedðnar*, and sees in these pelts a badge of honour or office that marked the warriors out as a king's elite troops. She then declares that they were usually depicted as highly respected in saga literature, which is a view at odds with the berserk suitors and outlaw *berserkir*.⁸³⁷ In writing a novel about a *berserkr*, Marillier has engaged with many of the themes that have exercised scholars, and has incorporated them into her work, citing Griffith's *Viking Art of War* as a major influence.⁸³⁸ However, she still has at the centre of her *berserkr* the concept of an ‘insane, trance-like courage’, like the berserk fury that other authors employ in their descriptions.⁸³⁹

Severin introduces the idea of the female *berserkr*, Freydis. When she routs the skraelings, who are attacking the settlement in Vinland, she is described as a *berserkr* by the narrator of the story, who also informs us that ‘all agree that the word describes someone so brimming with fighting rage that he performs extraordinary deeds on the battlefield with no regard for his own safety’ and that the only armour a *berserkr* will wear is a bearskin shirt.⁸⁴⁰ Like Marillier, Severin has engaged with the body of common knowledge about

⁸³⁶ Marillier, *Wolfskin*, p. 565.

⁸³⁷ See 4.4.3 and 4.4.4.

⁸³⁸ Marillier, *Wolfskin*, p. 565.

⁸³⁹ Marillier, *Wolfskin*, p. 565.

⁸⁴⁰ Tim Severin, *Viking: Odinn's child* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2005), pp. 117-18.

berserkir, as evidenced by his inclusion throughout the text of encounters with characters from the *Íslendingasögur*, such as the episode involving Freydis mentioned above, or meeting Kari Solmundarson and Njal's burners.⁸⁴¹ He incorporates this knowledge into the text when he explains what a *berserkr* was, including the ideas that some thought *berserkir* foamed at the mouth, others that they howled like wolves and that they bit the rims of their shields before attacking. In *Viking: Sworn Brother*, Severin expands on his narrator's description of *berserkir* to depict a Gothlander, who is a *berserkr*. The man postures, grimaces, howls and bites his shield, as well as stripping off his armour and fighting half naked.⁸⁴²

Although not explicitly linked to the *berserkir* in the story, Severin includes an element of mumming where a Danish huscarl performs a weapon dance like that performed for Constantine Porphyrogenitos.⁸⁴³ The man is naked, wears a bird's head mask and carries a spear in each hand. He portrays Óðinn in a manner reminiscent of the images on Torslunda matrix D, the Gutenstein Scabbard mount, the Finglesham belt buckle and the various helmet plates discussed in Chapter 5.⁸⁴⁴ This emphasises the connection between elite warriors and the god. Based on his writing, Severin is aware of the theories

⁸⁴¹ Severin, *Viking: Odinn's child*, pp. 117-18, 131-32 and 134-37.

⁸⁴² Tim Severin, *Viking: Sworn brother* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2005), pp. 205-06.

⁸⁴³ Severin, *Viking: Sworn brother*, pp. 98-99; see 5.2.11.

⁸⁴⁴ See 5.2.1, 5.2.2 and 5.2.6.

about *berserkir* and employs them in his books, but he focuses on frenzy, as do the other authors discussed here.

In a similar vein, Low, who is also a Viking re-enactor, reports the same range of theories but qualifies his description by stating that ‘the truth is that a berserker is a frothing madman with a blade, a man who does not care if he lives or dies as long as he gets to you and kills you’.⁸⁴⁵ Low’s *berserkr* goes completely battle-mad and chops his opponent into pieces, not stopping even after the other is dead. His companions dare not move throughout this process, because the *berserkr* would attack them if they drew attention to themselves. Thus, for Low a *berserkr* is someone that loses all control and sense of himself in battle. Farmer’s *berserkir* are the same, although they require a concoction of bog myrtle to achieve their frenzy, as is Ellis’ *Wolfskin*, who uses mushrooms to commune with his god and achieve the full battle frenzy.⁸⁴⁶

Of all the mentions of *berserkir* in popular fiction, only Bernard Cornwell denies the frenzy. He discusses *berserkir* in the historical note to *The Last Kingdom*, but makes no mention of the bearskin-wearing tradition at all, nor does he mention *berserkir* who did not wear armour:

Much fanciful imagery has been attached to them, chief of which are the horned helmet, the berserker and the ghastly execution called the spread-eagle ... That seems to have been a later invention, as does the existence of the berserker, the crazed naked

⁸⁴⁵ Robert Low, *The Whale Road* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2007), p. 137.

⁸⁴⁶ Farmer, *Sea of Trolls*, pp. 55-56; and Ellis, *Wolfskin*, Issue 3.

warrior who attacked in a mad frenzy. Doubtless there were
insanely frenzied warriors, but there is no evidence that lunatic
nudists made regular appearances on the battlefield.⁸⁴⁷

Cornwell has been drawn in by the idea that *berserker* continued a tradition of fighting naked, for which Tacitus' *Germania* is the usual reference.⁸⁴⁸ He then sets out to debunk both that tradition and the very existence of *berserker*, assuming that they were frenzied warriors, and not, as I have argued, professionals with a set of ritual practices that were misinterpreted later.⁸⁴⁹ Thus, even in debunking *berserker*, he still defines them in the same manner as those that feature *berserker* in their works.

Although this has been just a short review of the examples available, many more may be found among the corpus of historical, fantasy and science fiction novels.⁸⁵⁰ Even within this small survey, it is noticeable that the full

⁸⁴⁷ Bernard Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2005), p. 332.

⁸⁴⁸ Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, pp. 138-39.

⁸⁴⁹ See 4.9 and 5.5.

⁸⁵⁰ See also, for example: Poul Anderson, *War of the Gods* (New York: Tor Books, 1997); Chris Carlsen, *Berserker: Shadow of the wolf* (Aylesbury: Sphere Books, 1997); D. A. Jacobson, *The Wulfstan Saga* (Kindle ebook); M. D. Lachlan, *Wolfsangel* (London: Gollancz, 2010); John P. Ribner, *Legacy of the Bear: Book 1 of the berserker's saga* (United States: [n.pub.], 2011); Judson Roberts, *Viking Warrior* (Springfield: Northman Books, 2011); Snorri Kristjansson, *Swords of Good Men: The Valhalla saga* (London: Jo Fletcher

range of attributes and roles depicted in Old Norse literature is rarely reflected in popular fiction.⁸⁵¹ There is variation in the secondary details of the modern depictions, such as the inclusion of wearing bear- or wolf-pelts, some use of drugs to induce the frenzy, and occasions of foaming at the mouth. However, no depictions eschew frenzy in favour of another defining attribute, even when the *berserker* themselves do not fit the usual mould, as in the case of Venables' undead *berserker* or the mutated troll *berserker* of Edginton and Land.⁸⁵² There is some evidence that authors are aware of the *Íslendingasögur* due to the inclusion of characters and events from them in the narrative, as happens in Severin's trilogy described above, but only one author, Marillier, cites a source for their inspiration. She states that her historical research drew on Griffith's *Viking Art of War*, which she described as 'excellent' without apparently recognising that it derives largely from general histories and translations of Old Norse literature, rather than engaging with the primary source material directly.⁸⁵³ The *berserker* in popular fiction is, as the examples show, defined by frenzy and loss of control, a definition which relates directly to and may

Books, 2013); and others. There has been a significant increase in historical fiction in recent years, with the Viking Age seeing its share of this fiction, so the quantity of books depicting *berserker* has likewise increased substantially.

⁸⁵¹ See 4.3 and 4.4.

⁸⁵² Ian Edginton and Greg Land, *Sojourn Volume 6: The berzerker's tale* (Dayton: Checker Group Publishing, 2007); and Toby Venables, *Viking Dead* (Oxford: Abaddon Books, 2011).

⁸⁵³ Marillier, *Wolfskin*, p. 565; Griffith, *Viking Art of War*, pp. 215-21.

have been shaped by PDE ‘berserk’. It is also noteworthy that these examples cross all genres of popular fiction from young adult to historical to fantasy and science fiction. There is little variation in the depiction despite this, which indicates that the image of the frenzied *berserkr* is firmly entrenched in the popular imagination.

6.4.3 *Berserkir* in games

Berserkir appear in a number of Viking-themed games of various types, such as miniature wargames, board games and computer games. They are almost a defining element of Viking wargames armies, providing the appropriate colour to differentiate a Viking army from, for example, a Roman army.⁸⁵⁴ They are present as a type of barbarian warrior in many role-playing games as played both with pencil and paper, and on computers.⁸⁵⁵ *Berserkir* are also present in some board games, such as the super-warrior *berserkir* in *Fury of the*

⁸⁵⁴ For examples see: Phil Barker and Richard Bodley Scott, *D.B.M. Army Lists For use with De Bellis Multitudinis Wargames Rules*, 4 vols (London: Wargames Research Group, 1994), III, 41; and Rick Priestley, *Warmaster Ancients* (Nottingham: Games Workshop, 2005), p. 121; see also 6.4.3.1.

⁸⁵⁵ Examples include: Roger E. Moore, ‘Character Conjuring: Berserker’, *White Dwarf*, 19 (June/July 1980), 16-17; Greg Stafford and Sandy Petersen, *Runequest: Vikings, gamemaster book* (Baltimore, MD: Avalon Hill Game Company, 1985), p. 18; see also 6.4.3.2.

Norsemen.⁸⁵⁶ By identifying a unit, figure or character as a *berserkr*, or by relating a game element to *berserkr*, the game designer seeks to evoke the mystique of the Old Norse *berserkr*, and bring a sense of danger to the proceedings.

6.4.3.1 *Berserkr* in miniature wargames

Wargames with miniature figures have been played since at least the early twentieth century, when H. G. Wells published the first set of commercial rules for governing the progress of a wargame.⁸⁵⁷ Since then, wargames have increased in diversity of subject matter and available range of miniature figures, with which to play them. Numbering among these are a wide range of rules for the conduct of games that include Vikings, and *berserkr* appear to be a defining element of those Viking armies, because they appear in most of them. The fantasy Vikings of *Rally Round The King* include *berserkr*, known as Death Dealers, who are fanatical and undisciplined as well as undergoing frenzy.⁸⁵⁸ These warriors have a low armour rating, which indicates that they are not wearing armour, and have a high combat skill. The authors of these

⁸⁵⁶ Kevin Hendryx, *Fury of the Norsemen* ([n.p.]: Metagaming, 1980); see also 6.4.3.3.

⁸⁵⁷ H. G. Wells, *Little Wars: A Game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girls who like boys' games and books* (London: Frank Palmer, 1913).

⁸⁵⁸ David Gray and Ed Texeira, *Rally Round The King* ([n.p.]: TwoHourWargames, 2010), p. 20.

rules have engaged with the idea of unarmoured, if not naked, warriors with no discipline and a willingness to fight until they die.

Barker and Bodley Scott include units of *berserkir* in the Viking armies for their rules. They states that ‘the existence of berserks, although disputed, is quite certain’, assume that ‘a relatively small number of berserks was swelled by imitators who had to behave the same way or lose face – in the same way as demonstrated by modern studies of Glasgow street gangs’, and identify *berserkir* as being uncontrollable warriors.⁸⁵⁹

Priestley sidesteps the issue of *berserkir* by declaring that the figures in the army represent particularly bloodthirsty Viking raiders as well as actual *berserkir*, whom he states would have fought in battle as individuals.⁸⁶⁰ He defines them as ferocious in combat, unarmoured and fanatical.

Patten writes that *berserkir* would ‘dash from the ranks of a lord’s following to single-handedly take on the enemy. So enraged were these berserkers that they seemed to onlookers to be totally oblivious to pain and had literally to be hacked limb from limb before they would stop fighting’.⁸⁶¹ He also describes them as fighting ‘in a frenzied manner’ and working themselves up ‘into a homicidal fury’.⁸⁶² Once more they are depicted as frenzied, uncontrollable and not wearing armour.

⁸⁵⁹ Barker and Bodley Scott, *D.B.M. Army Lists*, III, 41.

⁸⁶⁰ Priestley, *Warmaster Ancients*, p. 121.

⁸⁶¹ Stephen Patten, *Shieldwall: Warfare in the Viking Age: 790 – 1085 AD* (Nottingham: Games Workshop, 2002), p. 8.

⁸⁶² Patten, *Shieldwall*, pp. 9 and 13.

Hinshelwood states that *berserker* used drugs: ‘Before battle berserkers would consume intoxicants, such as Bog Myrtle, to fuel their battle frenzy’.⁸⁶³ Like the other authors quoted here, he writes that *berserker* fought in an unnatural frenzy, and that they either wore bearskins, or went into battle stripped to the waist or totally nude.

From these examples, it is clear that *berserker* are considered by modern miniature wargames authors to have fought in a frenzy and generally without armour. Their prowess is high compared to the ordinary warriors in the army, and they are considered uncontrollable and prone to attacking without thought for the consequences. They are not present in every wargames army, but where they are present, their characteristics are uniformly derived from the same stock as the TV Trope of *berserker*.⁸⁶⁴

6.4.3.2 *Berserker* in role-playing games

In role-playing games, players take on and play the role of characters in fictional settings. These settings are usually science fiction or fantasy worlds, and the characters are often defined as archetypes from the literature relating to that fictional setting, such as warriors or wizards.

Berserker were not an original element of the first commercially available role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons*, but they soon made an

⁸⁶³ Tom Hinshelwood, *Age of Blood*, 2nd edition ([n.p.]: www.rebelpublishing.net, 2005), p. 37.

⁸⁶⁴ See 6.4.

appearance.⁸⁶⁵ The *berserkr* for *Dungeons and Dragons* was described as not wearing much armour and able to undergo ‘battle lust’, a type of temporary insanity that resulted in them attacking their enemies without a thought for their own safety.⁸⁶⁶ This is, in essence, a variant description of the frenzy that so many modern references employ to describe *berserkir*. A later *Dungeons and Dragons* supplement on Vikings helpfully appends suitable adjectives to *berserkir* on many of the occasions that they are mentioned, hence: ‘murderous berserkers’, ‘vicious berserkers’ and ‘wild berserkers’.⁸⁶⁷ Cook wishes to make it clear that *berserkir* are uncontrollable and violent and emphasises this when he writes that ‘Berserkers are fearsome warriors who, in the heat of battle, tap powerful but dangerously unpredictable battle lusts. These wild passions liken them to savage beasts’.⁸⁶⁸ He also allots to them the ability to physically change into wolf or bear form, thus drawing on the small body of literature that relates *berserkir* to werewolves. Although Cook’s *berserkir* must explicitly work themselves up into a frenzy, they still belong to the recognisable archetype of the warrior that goes berserk and fights without a thought for his own safety.

⁸⁶⁵ Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, *Dungeons and Dragons: Rules for fantastic medieval wargames campaigns playable with paper and pencil and miniature figures*, 3 vols ([n.p.]: Tactical Studies Rules, 1974).

⁸⁶⁶ Moore, ‘Character Conjuring: Berserker’, 16-17.

⁸⁶⁷ David “Zeb” Cook, *HRI Vikings Campaign Sourcebook* (Cambridge: TSR, 1991), pp. 2, 13 and 14.

⁸⁶⁸ Cook, *Vikings Campaign Sourcebook*, p. 19.

Gold describes an even more lurid *berserkr*, when he writes that ‘Berserks drank blood and ate meat raw; to give themselves courage, berserks ate the hearts of large animals and monsters they had slain. They went into a frenzy at the prospect of a fight’.⁸⁶⁹ He also notes that they were immune to harm from fire or iron, that they were dedicated to Óðinn and that they fought in a frenzy until all their enemies were dead.⁸⁷⁰

Laws only states that *berserkir* are ‘those who fight with neither mercy nor care for their own fates’, and that they can go berserk.⁸⁷¹ He does not comment further on any other aspects of the *berserkr*. Davis writes that *berserkr* was a term used to describe ‘any warrior who was outside the mainstream of Viking society’.⁸⁷² He acknowledges the concept of the warrior that goes berserk, but does not limit his description solely to such warriors. In doing so, he adopts a radically different position from other games’ authors by not focusing on frenzy and lack of control.

Once more, the focus of these games is almost solely on the frenzy and ferocity of *berserkir*. Some demonstrate greater knowledge of Old Norse

⁸⁶⁹ Lee Gold, *Vikings: Background and adventures in the era of the Norsemen for Rolemaster and Fantasy Hero* (Charlottesville, VA: Iron Crown Enterprises, 1989), p. 6.

⁸⁷⁰ Gold, *Vikings*, pp. 6-7 and 52.

⁸⁷¹ Robin D. Laws, *Rune* (Roseville, MN: Atlas Games, 2001), p. 50-51 and 65.

⁸⁷² Graeme Davis, *GURPS Vikings: Roleplaying in the world of the Norsemen* ([n.p.]: Steve Jackson Games, 1991), p. 22.

literature than is present in popular fiction and also a more judicious approach to interpreting it, but sensationalist elements such as drinking blood and eating raw flesh are still present. *Berserker* are also presented almost uniformly as heedless of their own safety to the point of insanity, and it is the frenzy and ferocity that is the unifying thread through all of these depictions, as it is in other games.⁸⁷³

6.4.3.3 *Berserker* in board games

Compared to their presence in the other games examined here, *berserker* are poorly represented in modern board games.⁸⁷⁴ Board games that have a Viking theme are popular, as a simple search of the BoardGameGeek website shows, with thirty-two games identified containing ‘viking’ in the title and more to be found in the ‘geeklists’ of games with a viking theme.⁸⁷⁵ Games themed around *berserker* are less common, with only three recorded, and two of those are about Saberhagen’s Berserkers.⁸⁷⁶ However, some Viking-themed games

⁸⁷³ For other examples, see also Stafford and Petersen, *Runequest: Vikings, gamemaster book*, p. 18; Geoffrey C. Grabowski, Jason Langlois and Roman A. Ranieri, *Wolves of the Sea* (Clarkston, CA: White Wolf Publishing, 1999), p. 77; Greg Spyridis, *Valherjar* ([n.p.]: Game Monkey Press, 2004), p. 127.

⁸⁷⁴ See 5.2.13 for the Lewis gaming pieces as an example of a medieval games set.

⁸⁷⁵ BoardGameGeek s.v. *viking* <<http://www.boardgamegeek.com>> [accessed 29 October 2013]

⁸⁷⁶ See 6.4.2.

include *berserker* as elements of that which gives them their colour. In *Fury of the Norsemen berserker* are warriors that are twice as powerful as normal Vikings.⁸⁷⁷ Similarly, in *Ragnarok*, they are also a more powerful version of the ordinary warrior, although less well armoured in this case.⁸⁷⁸ *Fire and Axe: A Viking Saga* includes a card called 'Berserk Fury' which makes the players' force more effective when attacking.⁸⁷⁹

Although examples of *berserker* in board games are rare, these three examples still demonstrate that *berserker* are seen as super-warriors, whose attacks are difficult to withstand. Other elements of their attributes are totally lacking here, so the focus is purely upon the effectiveness of their assault.

6.4.3.4 The *berserkr* in computer games

As with board games, *berserker* are a regular element of computer games and the emphasis is once more solely on the frenzy and lust to kill. *Berserker* as a character class in *World of Warcraft* have a range of abilities that focus on attacking opponents.⁸⁸⁰ *Berserker* are quicker and stronger than most and will continue to attack instead of retreating, even when dying. Many monsters in

⁸⁷⁷ Hendryx, *Fury of the Norsemen*.

⁸⁷⁸ Darrel Esakof and Redmond A. Simonsen, *Ragnarok* (New York: Simulations Publications, 1981).

⁸⁷⁹ Steve Kendall and Phil Kendall, *Fire and Axe: A Viking saga* (Loyalhanna: Asmodée éditions, 2004).

⁸⁸⁰ *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004).

the game are called ‘berserkers’ (Amani Berserker, Shadowword Berserker, Skeletal Berserker, etc.) and have the same attributes of a fast and frenzied attack.

Guild Wars features a skill ‘Berserk’ that enhances the damage done by an attack. This is an attribute of four types of Minotaur: the Berserking Aurochs, Berserking Bison, Berserking Minotaur and Berserking Wendigo.⁸⁸¹ *Guild Wars 2* amends the ‘Berserk’ skill so that only creatures that have taken a certain amount of damage will gain the benefit of it.⁸⁸² It also has a larger list of creatures with this attribute. The term ‘Berserker’s’ or ‘of the Berserker’ is applied to in-game items that enhance a character’s ability to do damage.

Rome: Total War includes elite troops in its German warbands who disdain armour, and calls them ‘berserkers’ even though *berserkr* were a Viking Age and not a Roman era feature of society.⁸⁸³ They are depicted wearing a bear’s pelt and can go berserk, frightening enemy troops but sometimes charging without orders. *Berserkr* also appear in its sister game, *Medieval Total War: Viking Invasions* with the same effects and abilities.⁸⁸⁴ In both of these games, the *berserkr* does not wear armour and is prone to rashly charging just because the enemy is there. They are able to sweep the enemy

⁸⁸¹ *Guild Wars: Prophecies* (ArenaNet, 2005); *Guild Wars: Factions* (ArenaNet, 2006); *Guild Wars: Nightfall* (ArenaNet, 2006); and *Guild Wars: Eye of the North* (ArenaNet, 2007).

⁸⁸² *Guild Wars 2* (ArenaNet, 2012).

⁸⁸³ *Rome: Total war* (Activision, 2004).

⁸⁸⁴ *Medieval Total War: Viking invasions* (Activision, 2003).

away when charging, but do not have any protective armour and are thus more easily wounded.

The main focus of these games is combat, so the *berserkr* they feature are presented in terms of their combat abilities; *berserkr* are fierce when attacking but poor at defending themselves, and can be hard to control. As with the other depictions, the emphasis is on frenzy and ferocity with no reference to other interpretations or their roles within society.

6.5 Conclusions

When compared with the *berserkr* of medieval Iceland and Norway, the modern *berserkr* is a one-dimensional character. As I have shown, the medieval understanding of ON *berserkr* was more nuanced than is usually thought.⁸⁸⁵ Despite this, popular fiction is focused almost solely on berserk frenzy and bloodlust. *Berserkr* still bite their shields and howl, but not all do this and these traits are secondary, being easily ignored where they do not fit the narrative function of the *berserkr*. The popular fiction *berserkr* appears to be a construct built from a limited range of general histories, which in turn derive their definition of *berserkr* primarily from Foote and Wilson, because *The Viking Achievement* is the only source cited by those that have bibliographies that discuss *berserkr*. The similarity to these descriptions in those general histories without bibliographies suggests that they too derived much of their information from Foote and Wilson. This means that most depictions of *berserkr* after 1970 trace their information through Foote and

⁸⁸⁵ See 4.9.

Wilson's book to just one study, that of Grøn which was published in 1929 and is Foote and Wilson's only source for *berserksgangr*.⁸⁸⁶ As a result, these works have not assimilated the latest research and are limited in the extent to which they have engaged with the concept of the *berserkr*.

Earlier depictions, like Linklater, seem to have greater knowledge of the *Íslendingasögur* and some *fornaldarsögur*, because they include detail that is present in those texts, such as the ugliness of the *berserkir* or the king's *ulfheðnar*. Linklater, as an Orcadian, may have grown up with these stories, or he may have read the sagas and histories available while studying English literature. At this remove it is not possible to know, but *The Men of Ness* does reflect episodes and characters from Old Norse literature.

Exceptions to the general trend are: Severin who appears to have included much material and many characters from the *Íslendingasögur* in his trilogy, creating a patchwork series of saga episodes; Clements who suggests that *berserkir* were just more willing to put themselves in harm's way; and Stephenson who denies their existence outside Old Norse literature, borrowing much of his argument from Christiansen. Cornwell appears to have adopted Christiansen's view, but does not cite his source for his analysis of *berserkir*.

On-screen *berserkir* are similar to the popular fiction versions. They are defined by violence and frenzy, and can be animalistic and dirty. It has not been possible to identify what influenced the depictions, but they are so similar

⁸⁸⁶ Grøn, 'Berserksgangens vesen', cited in Foote and Wilson, *Viking Achievement*, p. 445.

to popular fiction, that it seems likely they derived from the same modern general histories.

In games, *berserker* are also defined by violence and frenzy, although this is certainly a function of the types of games in which they appear. These games are largely rooted in combat, so the focus is on the abilities of *berserker* as warriors, and there is no need to develop their characters beyond that. As with on-screen *berserker*, it is not possible to determine what sources the designers of the games have used to create their *berserker*.

Given that frenzy is the defining characteristic of *berserker* in popular culture, and that the general histories all emphasise this aspect of their nature, the primary traits of modern *berserker* are clearly derived from the meaning of PDE ‘berserk’. The definition of PDE ‘berserk’ also lends a spurious familiarity to the idea of the *berserker*; we all know what ‘berserk’ means, so we must, by extension, know what a *berserker* is. This means that it is harder to question the conclusions that have been drawn, because the language used to discuss *berserker* guides the thought processes. It is here that there is potential for further work on this area. Due to the large body of available study material, it has not been possible to include every modern English source in this chapter, but analysis of a broader spectrum of source material would permit more rigorous testing of the hypothesis that research into *berserker* has been conditioned by PDE ‘berserk’ and its analogues in other languages to such an extent that no one has previously questioned whether *berserker* actually went berserk.

7 Conclusions and further work

I have sought to demonstrate in this thesis that the conventional paradigm of the literary *berserkr* can be interpreted differently from the usual interpretation of a battle-mad warrior who goes berserk when under stress. I have shown that the authors of the sagas probably did not believe that *berserkir* went berserk in the modern English sense of the word. I have also demonstrated that the meaning of ON *berserkr* was more nuanced than has hitherto been thought and that its best translation is PDE ‘champion’. In doing so, I have created models for three *berserkir*: the *berserkr* of Old Norse literature; the probable Viking Age historical reality; and the modern popular culture conception.

The literary *berserkr* is more complex than most analyses allow. The presence within Old Norse literature of a multiplicity of *berserkr* archetypes shows this clearly. At the time that the sagas were written down, Scandinavians could accept and assimilate simultaneously the concepts of *berserkir* as members of a king’s bodyguard, *berserkir* as *hólmgongumenn* and *berserkir* as Christian champions. While pagan *berserkir* may have been decried for their heathenism, they were still connected conceptually and semantically to the Christian *berserkr* of *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* or to the usage of ON *berserkr* to translate OFr *champion*. Whether their lord be a terrestrial king or a heavenly one, they all protect and fight for him, fighting duels or battles as needed to defeat his enemies. It would require further research to determine if the two men with the byname *berserkr* mentioned in *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* were champions in this mould, but their connection to the Church, the burial of one of them within St Hallvarð’s church and the lack of censure in the documents indicates that they were

accepted members of society. Thus, the connotations of ON *berserkr* in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were not wholly negative. Although these types are not negative, the *hólmǫngumaðr* is a clearly negative archetype that is one of the most common encounters with a *berserkr* in the *Íslendingasögur*. The role of *berserkir* includes fighting duels, hence the *hólmǫngumaðr* is described as a *berserkr*, although it is not certain that he was a member of a warband, and such warriors are more feared than respected for their prowess. Nevertheless, *hólmǫngumenn* act within the letter of the law to achieve their ends and their actions may be understood within the context of a ritual fight that a young man had to undergo in order to be accepted as an adult, even though in the literary duel the *berserkir* are usually killed. Although this has been interpreted as an initiation ritual, it is likely that it had evolved into a simple rite of passage analagous to a knight's vigil by the Viking Age with the role of the *berserkr* being taken by a suitable member of the family.

The negative depictions existed simultaneously alongside the positive in the medieval consciousness. The image of the *berserkr* that Old Norse literature creates is that of a warrior whose job included fighting duels and fighting for his lord. He may have used the legal pretext of the duel to acquire property or those warriors that did this may have been labelled *berserkir* because they fought duels. The *berserkr* may have been bare-shirted or bear-shirted, and possibly both simultaneously, if by bare-shirted one understands 'not wearing a mail coat'. In this case, wearing a bearskin could be construed as bare-shirted too but the literature does not make this clear, because it does not make explicit the ursine connection, except in the case of warriors like Böðvarr bjarki. Nevertheless, an etymology meaning 'bear-shirted' is to be

preferred grammatically and for reasons of lexical symmetry with ON *ulfheðinn*.

The image of the *berserkr* painted by Old Norse literature is not generally that of a warrior that is out of control, but rather that of a warrior who has a specific role in society and performs it well. His plundering derives from the warband economy that required a constant input of gold with which a leader might reward his followers. His howling and shield-biting are not presented as such in the sagas, but it is probable that they were actual pre-battle rituals designed to encourage warriors and bolster their courage. It is possible that *Hávamál* (156) reflects the real action which was chanting a spell from behind the shield to strengthen one's resolve and ensure one survives the battle whole rather than actual biting of it, although this element requires further research.

Once the link between *berserkir* and the wolfskin-clad warriors of the pre-Viking Age archaeological evidence has been established, understanding the context for *berserkir* is significantly easier. Those people that have been buried with artefacts whose iconography depicts *ulfheðnar* are among the richest graves that have been excavated. This suggests that *ulfheðnar*, and *berserkir* by extension, or those connected to them who might wear these artefacts, belonged among the elite in society as is the case with the *berserkir* of Haraldr hárfagri and Hrólfr kraki which also accords with depictions of the king's *berserkir* in the sagas. The depictions on helmet plates of images that may represent tests of a warrior's courage correspond to the presence of similar episodes within Old Norse literature, supporting the theory that *berserkir* were integral to the formal induction into a warband of young

warriors, although initiation is unlikely to have been to a *Männerbund* or secret society of warriors because these are more associated with tribal societies. This theory of induction is bolstered by the close links to a horned-helmeted numinous power on bracteates and helmet plates. This horned-helmeted power appears to be analagous to Óðinn, because it appears with only one eye on Torslunda matrix D and because it is most often depicted with a spear. This reinforces the impression of a close connection between Óðinn and the elite of society, which in turn reinforces the close link between *berserkir* and the elite of society. As a result of the obvious close connection between Óðinn and the social elite, it is tempting to suggest that the immediate male members of a lord's retinue, and perhaps the lord himself, were all *berserkir*, as is implied by the close relationship between the *kappar* and the *berserkir* in the hall of Hrólfr kraki. When considering that ON *berserkr* translates best as 'champion' this interpretation seems more likely than if it meant a frenzied warrior.

In contrast, depictions in modern popular culture owe more to the meaning of PDE 'berserk' than they do to the medieval *berserkr* or to the probable historical reality of *berserkir*. They draw on the imagery of Old Norse literature such as shield-biting and howling, but they depict out-of-control warriors who cannot differentiate friend from foe, and who will even attack inanimate objects when the frenzy comes over them. They also depict *berserkir* as dangerously out of control at other times, liable to go berserk with no real trigger. Furthermore, the popular culture depictions demonstrate a preoccupation with the *berserkr* as the ultimate killing machine. Thus, *berserkir* are shown as full of bloodlust on the screen, in books and graphic novels. This image of *berserkir* lacks the nuances of the medieval depictions

and appears to be based upon a very limited range of secondary texts resulting in a version of the berserkr that emphasises frenzy and battle-madness almost to the exclusion of all else.

In all of these depictions, the vocabulary used to translate and discuss *berserkir* devolves to the concepts of frenzy and battle madness. Translating ON *berserkr* as PDE ‘berserker’ immediately suggests wildness and frenzy, because that is the meaning of the English word. A better and less semantically loaded translation would be PDE ‘champion’, a word that encompasses many of the historical roles of *berserkir*. Similarly, ON *berserksgangr* is always translated as ‘berserk fit’ or ‘berserk frenzy’ and it is difficult to find an alternative translation that fits the sense of the component elements of ON *berserksgangr* without straying into the realms of the overly mystical with translations like ‘way of the *berserkr*’. While ‘berserk fit’ may be appropriate in some cases, when *berserksgangr* is used to refer to illness rather than the activities of *berserkir*, a better and again less semantically loaded translation may be ‘the champion’s movements’. It cannot be doubted that the choice of vocabulary can steer the analysis subconsciously and thus alternative modes of expression need to be found if further research into *berserkir* is to be pursued effectively. This thesis has begun that process with its three models of *berserkir* at different periods in time and a further research project specifically examining modern English usage of ‘berserk’ and ‘berserker’ could reinforce this conclusion.

vigrar rjóða, es til vígs koma;

þeim es þar sist saman.

Áræðismönnum einum, hygg ek, þar undir felisk

skyli sá inn skilvísi, þeim es í skjöld hoggva.⁸⁸⁹

(They are called wolfskins those who carry bloody shields into battle;
they redden spears who join the fight; they who sit together there. The
wise ruler entrusts himself there to courageous men alone, I think,
those who chop at shields)

⁸⁸⁹ 'Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)', ed. by Fulk, pp. 114.

Appendix 2 Dating the sagas

The following tables provide the raw data from which the analysis in section 4.8 was undertaken. Although I produced a database of all extant sagas, I have only included *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur* here, because those are the sagas analysed in section 4.8.

Dates are those taken from the Íslenzk fornrit editions or from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* as discussed in section 2.3.1.1. Dates of the *fornaldarsögur* have been taken from the editions of those works or from critical literature related to them. The list of dates is incomplete due to the difficulty of calculating the dates of composition of sagas, many of which only survive in later recensions.

Where sagas can only be assigned to a given century, a date in the middle of that century has been given in the table. Otherwise, most sagas are assigned dates of beginning, early, middle or late, and these dates have been represented by assigning dates of xx00, xx25, xx50 and xx75 respectively in their given century.

Fornaldarsögur

Title	Likely date of composition	Are <i>berserkir</i> present?
<i>Áns saga bogsveigis</i>	1350	No
<i>Ásmundar saga kappabana</i>	1325	No
<i>Bosa saga ok Herraud's</i>	1350	No

Title	Likely date of composition	Are <i>berserkir</i> present?
<i>Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana</i>	1350	Yes
<i>Eireks saga ins Víðförla</i>	Unknown	No
<i>Frá Fornjóti ok hans ættmönnum</i>	Unknown	No
<i>Friþjófs saga ins frækna</i>	1350	No
<i>Gautreks saga</i>	1350	Yes
<i>Göngu-Hrólfs saga</i>	1350	Yes
<i>Gríms saga lóðinkinna</i>	1350	Yes
<i>Hálfðanar saga Brönufostra</i>	1300	Yes
<i>Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar</i>	1325	Yes
<i>Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka</i>	1350	No
<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs</i>	1250	No
<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks</i>	1350	Yes
<i>Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis</i>	1350	Yes
<i>Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar</i>	1300	Yes
<i>Hrólfs saga kraka</i>	1400	Yes
<i>Hrómundar saga Gripssonar</i>	1250	No
<i>Hversu Noregr byggðist</i>	Unknown	Yes
<i>Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra</i>	Unknown	No
<i>Ketils saga hængs</i>	1350	No

Title	Likely date of composition	Are <i>berserkir</i> present?
<i>Norna-Gests þáttr</i>	1300	No
<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i>	1350	Yes
<i>Ragnars saga loðbrókar</i>	1250	No
<i>Sagan af Hálfðáni Barkarsyni</i>	Unknown	No
<i>Sörla saga sterka</i>	Unknown	Yes
<i>Sörla þáttr eða Hedins saga ok Högna</i>	1375	No
<i>Sturlaugs saga starfsama</i>	1350	Yes
<i>Völsunga Saga</i>	1250	Yes
<i>Yngvars saga víðförla</i>	1150	No
<i>Þiðriks saga af Bern</i>	1250	No
<i>Þorsteinns saga Víkingssonar</i>	1350	Yes

Íslendingasögur

Title	Likely date of composition	Are <i>berserkir</i> present?
<i>Bandamanna saga</i>	1275	No
<i>Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss</i>	1375	No
<i>Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa</i>	1300	No
<i>Brennu-Njáls saga</i>	1275	Yes
<i>Droplaugarsona saga</i>	1250	No
<i>Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar</i>	1225	Yes

Title	Likely date of composition	Are <i>berserkir</i> present?
<i>Eiríks saga rauða</i>	1225	No
<i>Eyrbyggja saga</i>	1250	Yes
<i>Færeyinga saga</i>	1225	No
<i>Finnboga saga ramma</i>	1325	No
<i>Fljótsdæla saga</i>	1400	No
<i>Flóamanna saga</i>	1325	Yes
<i>Fóstbræðra saga</i>	1275	No
<i>Gísla saga Súrssonar</i>	1275	Yes
<i>Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar</i>	1400	Yes
<i>Grænlandinga saga</i>	1225	No
<i>Gull-Þóris saga</i>	1350	Yes
<i>Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls</i>	1400	Yes
<i>Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu</i>	1275	Yes
<i>Hallfredar saga</i>	1225	No
<i>Harðar saga ok Hólmverja</i>	1375	No
<i>Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings</i>	1325	No
<i>Heiðarvíga saga</i>	1250	No
<i>Hrafnkels saga</i>	1300	No
<i>Hænsa-Þóris saga</i>	1275	No
<i>Jómsvíkinga saga</i>	1225	No
<i>Kjalnesinga saga</i>	1350	No
<i>Kormáks saga</i>	1150	No

Title	Likely date of composition	Are <i>berserkir</i> present?
<i>Kristni saga</i>	1250	Yes
<i>Króka-Refs saga</i>	1375	No
<i>Laxdæla saga</i>	1250	Yes
<i>Ljósvetninga saga</i>	1275	No
<i>Ölkofra saga</i>	1275	No
<i>Orkneyinga saga</i>	1225	No
<i>Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu</i>	1275	Yes
<i>Svarfdæla saga</i>	1375	No
<i>Valla-Ljóts saga</i>	1300	No
<i>Vápnfirðinga saga</i>	1275	No
<i>Vatnsdæla saga</i>	1300	Yes
<i>Víga-Glúms saga</i>	1225	Yes
<i>Víglundar saga</i>	1400	No
<i>Þórðar saga hreðu</i>	1375	No
<i>Þorsteins saga hvíta</i>	1300	No
<i>Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar</i>	1325	No

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Notes:

The bibliography uses the following conventions additional to MHRA guidelines:

1. Icelandic personal names are listed in alphabetical order by forename both when referring to authors and publishers.
2. The titles of books are listed alphabetically based on the real title and ignoring any preliminary matter.
3. Primary source material is listed in alphabetical order of title for ease of reference, except where the author is known.
4. Abbreviations used in the bibliography are those given earlier in the preliminary list of abbreviations.
5. Letters with diacritics (ä, ö, ü) are listed together with the regular forms of those letters. The letters þ, æ, å, ø, q are listed at the end of the bibliographical list in that order.

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