

ANATOLY LIBERMAN

In Prayer and Laughter

Essays on Medieval Scandinavian and Germanic

Mythology, Literature, and Culture



**Anatoly Liberman**

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## Chapter 3

# Óðinn's Berserks in Myth and Human Berserks in Reality

The Old Icelandic word *berserkr* (plural *berserkir*) has made its way into many European languages. In English dictionaries, it appears as *berserker*, but below I will be using the Icelandic form without final *r* and the plural *berserks*. Berserks are mentioned for the first time by the skald Þorbjörn Hornklofi in a poem commemorating Harald Fairhair's victory in the battle of Hafrsfjörðr ca. 872. These are the relevant lines: “Grenioðo berserkir / guðr var þeim a sinom / emioðo úlfheðnar / ok ísarn glumdo” (*NIS* I:25–26, lines 5–8 of strophe 8, ‘the berserks roared, / the battle was in full swing, / the wolfskins howled / and shook the irons’).

The skalds, who, unlike the singers of epic lays, described contemporary events, embellished the truth only within limits, and for this reason their poetry has always been treated as a reliable source of information. Unfortunately, we learn nothing from Þorbjörn about the berserks except that they roared. The wolfskins (or wolf-coats) behaved in a similar way: they howled; both the berserks and the wolfskins were warriors able to make a lot of noise while fighting. From the text it is even impossible to tell whether they belonged to the same (and then whose?) army and whether *grenioðo berserkir* is a poetic synonym of *emioðo úlfheðnar*, in which case *berserkir* means the same as *úlfheðnar*.

Compounding was a productive way of word formation in the Old Germanic languages. Þorbjörn may have coined the noun *berserkr* himself, but in view of its later popularity this is unlikely. In the eddic lays, *berserkr* occurs only two times

and only with reference to the heroes of old. In *Hárbarðslióð*, 371–2, Þórr boasts of having fought *brúðir berserkia* ‘berserks’ brides.’ These words gave rise to the idea that women could also ‘go berserk’. Even Grøn 1929:300 thought so, but the other interpretation, according to which *brúðir berserkja* is a kenning for ‘giantesses’, deserves more credence.

The next piece of evidence on berserks comes from Snorri. In *Heimskringla*, Chapter 6, he describes Óðinn’s skills. The last lines of the chapter run as follows (quoted from Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson’s edition, 1941:25–26):

“Óðinn kunni svá gera, at í orrustu urðu óvinir hans blindir eða daufir eða óttafullir en vápn þeira bitu eigi heldr en vendir, en hans menn fóru brynjulausir og váru galnir sem hundar eða vargar, bitu í skjöldu sína, váru sterkir sem birnir eða griðungar. Þeir drápu mannfólkið en eldr né járn orti á þá. Þat er kallaðr berserksgangr.” (‘Óðinn could cause his enemies to be blind or deaf or fearful in battle, and he could cause their swords to cut no better than wands. His men fought without armor and acted like mad dogs or wolves. They bit their shields and were strong as bears or bulls. They killed people, and neither fire nor iron did them any harm. This is called berserk rage [= going berserk].’)

Finally, the sagas, recorded, like *Heimskringla*, in the thirteenth century, tell numerous stories about berserks. In the legendary sagas, berserks are the choicest warriors, kings’ bodyguard (*Hrólf’s saga kraka* is an especially noteworthy example: see the discussion in Olrik 1903:201–222), but elsewhere they appear as marauders. Most episodes have identical ‘morphology’. Around Christmas, a big strong man, often with eleven companions, comes uninvited to a farm, ready to take away as many valuables as possible and force the women to cohabitation. If the farmer is at home, he is sick or weak and is unable to drive away intruders. But usually he is away in a distant province of Norway. The chief berserk (and the visitors are berserks) is eager to prove his right in a duel with anyone who will risk to fight him. A brave Icelander happens to be visiting at this time and either accepts the bandit’s challenge or outsmarts the gang. The result is the same: all the miscreants are killed. At this juncture, the farmer returns and lavishes praise and gifts on the rescuer of his family’s honor and property. The deed is recounted in a *vísa* and becomes famous.

Berserks tolerate no resistance. Every attempt to oppose them makes them furious. They begin to howl, foam at the mouth, and bite their shields. As a rule, swords and fire can do them no harm, though a Christian missionary can break

the spell laid on fire (berserks are pagan). Luckily, they live up to the formula of their magical invulnerability: unafraid of swords and flames, they can be cudged to death. Blaney followed Güntert 1912 and Huchting-Gminder 1933, examined this material in a dissertation (1972), and summarized his findings in a 1982 article. A broader, and therefore less focused, account of berserks in the extant sources is Beard 1978. Ninck 1935:34–67 also offered a useful survey of the saga material.

Research into the berserk question developed along two main lines: religious (association with Óðinn) and psychological (the origin and symptoms of the rage); they trace to the obscurity in which the meaning of the word *berserkr* is enveloped. The element *-serkr* means 'shirt', while *ber-* can be understood as 'bear' or as 'bare'. The whole comes out as either 'bearshirt' or 'bareshirt'. Those who favor the first interpretation connect berserks with the well-attested bear cult. Supporters of the bareshirt theory stress the role of nudity in Germanic warfare. Those lines occasionally cross, because nudity was also endowed with religious significance and because, according to Snorri, berserks were strong as bears and fought without armor.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, students of Scandinavian mythology did not doubt that *berserkr* means 'bareshirt' (see a typical high-flown description of the 'Wuotan-Rudra' army in Leo 1853:61). However, as early as 1847 even amateurs, such as C. F., rambling among Celtic and Germanic words, suggested that it was "very unlikely... that the inhabitants of those northern climes should go to battle naked—for shirts in our acceptation of the term they certainly had not." When Sveinbjörn Egilsson (*LP*) expressed his preference for 'bearshirt', most scholars followed him. It took over seventy years for the pendulum to swing again in the opposite direction. In 1932 Erik Noreen offered a near complete survey of the attempts to etymologize *berserkr* and argued for 'bareshirt'. Since then opinions have been divided. For example, Hans Kuhn 1949:107 and 1968:222, von See 1961:129–135, and McCone 1987:106, to mention the authors of particularly influential works, supported Noreen, while Huchting-Gminder 1933:239, Lid 1937:23, and Breen 1997:8, note, cont. on p. 9 sided with Höfler (see more about him below), who insisted all his life that *ber-* means 'bear'. I will not go into a detailed discussion of Breen's argument (p. 9) but note that *berserksgangr* is not parallel to *Wolfgang* or *Gangulf*, for *\*bergangr* has not been attested; 'going' like a berserk is quite different from 'going' like a wolf. The recent find of a red tunic with a wedge sown in does not tip the scale in this discussion (Näsström 2006:120).

Since *úlfheðnar* (plural) is a bahuvrihi compound of the *Redcap* type, it is tempting to take *berserkir* in Þorbjörn's verse for another bahuvrihi, namely

'bearshirts'. As already mentioned, the parallelism between *grenioðo berserkir* and *emioðo úlfheðnar* is obvious, but it is unclear how far it goes. The troublesome thing is that *\*berr* 'bear' did not occur in Old Icelandic outside the compound *berfjall* 'bearskin' (cf. Kommentar 3, 169–170), so that *berserkr* must be either a partial borrowing of German *Bärenhaut* or a relic of ancient usage. However, *berserkr* does not turn up in runic inscriptions, and there is no certainty that Þorbjörn knew the word *berfjall* or some other word(s) like it that would have allowed him to associate berserks with bears. When we hear the phrase *bare one's teeth*, we do not begin to think of bears, even though the gesture may signify anger.

Contrary to *\*berr*, the nouns *bera* 'female bear' and *bersi, bessi / bassi* 'bear' have been recorded in Old Icelandic. *Ber-* is the historic stem of *björn* (< *\*bernu-*); *bessi* is from *\*bersi*. Their existence does not prove that *\*berr* was also current in early Scandinavian. From the semantic point of view *úlfheðinn* 'wolfskin' is not an exact counterpart of *berserkr*, because wolves have skins, whereas bears do not wear shirts. *Serkr* 'timber' in addition to 'shirt', designated a certain number of skins (whence the Russian numeral *sorok* 'forty'), but we do not know when *serkr*, a technical term of fur trade, was coined. If it is contemporaneous with the Viking age, the ancient bahuvrihi *berserkr* 'bearskin' can hardly be posited. The main difficulty with *berserkr* 'bareshirt' is that it presupposes the unrecorded substantivized adjective *\*berserks* 'bareshirted'; however, compound adjectives of this type were rather numerous. Although the bearshirt hypothesis is hard to disprove, it cannot serve as a solid foundation of any theory of berserks. Of importance is also the following consideration. The word *berserkr* must have been ambiguous for centuries. As noted, I gravitate toward the theory that its original meaning was 'bare-shirt'. But folk etymology may have suggested understanding 'bare-shirt' as 'bear-shirt', and, once it began to compete with 'bare-shirt' (assuming that it did), it could serve as the foundation of *Björn-* in the names of real and fictional berserks (cf. Breen 1997:14).

Berserks attract historians of religion because of Snorri's reference to them as Óðinn's men. Lily Weiser 1927:43–85 and Otto Höfler 1934:269–275, 324–329 looked on Óðinn's retinue, whose activities they took for granted, as one of many Germanic secret unions. The wild hunt (a procession of dead bodies), military bands like *Jómsvíkingar*, fallen warriors fighting and feasting in *Valhöll* (*einherjar*), groups of adolescents preparing for initiation, and even such couples as Sigmundur and his son *Sinfjötli* from *Völsunga saga* were cited in Weiser's and Höfler's books along with berserks as examples of such male unions. Their ideas are known far beyond the circle of Scandinavian scholars (cf. Ivantchik 2005:188). According to Höfler, Óðinn's disparate functions stem from his role as leader of a union, and

under his pen the word *union* became almost a synonym for *society*. I expressed my skeptical attitude toward Höfler's idea while discussing Óðinn's role in the wild hunt (Chapter 1, above) and will here confine myself to a few remarks. The *einherjar* were not a union, and nothing in their activity was secret. The wild hunt, known only from folklore, need not have had its roots in the ancient organization of Germanic tribes, and a fast flying procession of corpses, even with a leader at their head, is not a cultic league. Sigmundur and Sinfjötli roam the woods as wolves after, not before, the youngster's initiation. No secrecy surrounded berserks either. In the legendary sagas, they are elite troops, and in the family sagas they are represented as plundering, raping gangs.

The first to bring forward these considerations was von der Leyen 1935:164–165, who even risked the conjecture that Höfler had been partly inspired by the latest events in Germany (secret unions, the *Führer*, and so on). Von der Leyen's review and Höfler's long-winded but unconvincing rejoinder (1936) are now forgotten. Höfler 1936:48 denied the influence of 'the latest events' on his conception, but everybody in Germanistik was aware of his political views. Mees 2003:42–43 wrote: "Höfler's professional thesis *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (1934) is quite clearly a manifestation of the *völkisch* enterprise championed by National Socialist academics in the German university system at the time (in the 1930s his publisher, Diesterweg's, was a leading source of *völkisch* antiquarian works)... And although Höfler was subsequently declaimed as a leading Nazi Germanist, he did not substantially change his approach to the interpretation of ancient sources when most of the rest of his peers sheepishly purged their writings of overtly fascistic leanings after the war." Höfler was unrepentant; yet in his 1976 contribution to the *RGA*<sup>2</sup> nothing is said about berserks as a secret cultic union, though the Óðinn connection is made much of, and the word *Verband* 'union' occurs twice in the entry.

It may be useful to separate two alleged characteristics of berserks: their participation in (secret) unions and their religious significance. Peuckert 1957:93–100 rejected both, while Eliade 1961:142–147 (not surprisingly) and Hornung 1968:270–271 followed Höfler. Closs 1968:301 accepted berserks' *bündische Grundlage* (base in a union organization) but dissociated them from religion. He pointed out that in their aggression they do not merge with the transcendental and that their ability to act like and turn into wild beasts (the latter ability is exemplified by Þoðvarr Bjarki, who fought Hrólfr's enemies in the shape of a bear while his human body slept) is incompatible with a shaman's merger with the spirit of an animal as it is known from northern Asian shamanism. Compare it with what is said about shamanism in Chapter 1.

However, for objectivity's sake I will quote a passage from a book by Ralph Metzner 1994:76–77:

“In her paper ‘The Transformed Berserk’, Jungian scholar Marie-Louise von Franz suggested that the berserker trance was a kind of visionary state, an out-of-body experience in which the soul of the warrior, sometimes in animal form, raged in battle, while the physical body lay as if asleep. This would be comparable to what shamans and some yogi adepts report as combat in *nonordinary reality* or the *spirit world*. There are indications that combat in the spirit world was an aspect of the experience of the berserker warriors, as it is in Eurasian shamanic traditions. Shamanic warriors might have a spirit ally, in animal or humanoid form, who helps them in battle with hostile spirits and also foresees and warns of danger. Such a spirit ally was referred to as *fylgja* in Old Norse and as *fetch* in archaic English. In regard to von Franz’s thesis, it is my belief that such out-of-body spirit battles did take place, particularly in the training and preparation of the berserkers and the wolfskins. But there was obviously also actual physical combat, which sometimes took place in a profoundly altered state of consciousness, involving superhuman feats of strength and endurance.”

I find nothing in von Franz’s article (1988) or in Metzner’s commentary that has not been said in some form before and that advances our understanding of berserks or their origin. Reference to *fylgja* and *fetch* strikes me as fanciful. Von Franz (whose article is a translation of a conference paper; I did not consult the German original) was in general not interested in things Scandinavian. She analyzed the vision of the Swiss saint Brother Niklaus of Flüe in Jungian terms. Her pronouncements do not go beyond the following: “For the old German to wear a bearskin means to be a beriserkr [sic]—a berserk” (p. 23). She, naturally, agreed with Jung that World War II was a Wotanic experiment and that the world was preparing for another Wotanic experiment (p. 27). St. Klaus’s vision, she says, “is trying to show him... that the spiritual pilgrim and the Beriserkr are both Christ.... The Christ-Berserk of Brother Klaus’s vision thus unites irreconcilable opposites, subhuman wildness and Christian spirituality, the rage of the warrior and Christian *agape*—love of mankind” (pp. 23–24). I must admit (not without regret) that I have as much difficulty understanding Jung and the Jungians as I have understanding Steiner and his adherents (see the beginning of the previous chapter). Both say great things but in a language I am unable to comprehend. In

the best-known compendia of Germanic and Scandinavian religion and in the monographs written after the war (for example, Helm 1946, Turville-Petre 1964, and Å. Ström 1975), berserks are not even mentioned. De Vries 1956–1957, I:454–455 was partly supportive of Höfler; his position did not change in the twenty years that separate the first and the second edition of his book. The dictionaries and encyclopedias of the Scandinavian Middle Ages and Scandinavian mythology contain guardedly 'objective' entries on berserks. Höfler's own entry (1976) is a predictable exception.

Berserks' fury has often been equated with religious ecstasy, another subject touched upon in Chapter 1, but, although Þorbjörn's wolfskins and berserks howled, not every type of frenzy is of religious origin. Warriors often key themselves up to the highest pitch of excitement. *Furor germanicus* was famous, and so is *furor heroicus* in general (see the examples from Irish and Germanic sources in Henry 1981; Güntert 1912:29–32 believed that the Irish had borrowed their description of battle frenzy from the Scandinavians). Berserks also screamed while fighting. It seems that in trying to understand the nature of berserks no reference to religious ecstasy, be it their own or Óðinn's, is needed. This conclusion is compatible with what I said about *Wut* as the root of Wodan's name: scholars of Germanic religion tend to refer to ecstasy as something self-evident and fraught with meaning. See also p. 455, below.

We now have to answer the question why Snorri decided that berserks were Óðinn's men, that they fought without armor, behaved like wild beasts, were invulnerable, bit their shields, and killed people (what people?). Ever since Mogk 1923 developed his 'novellistic' theory, it has been customary to accuse Snorri of taking great liberties with his material. But a medieval writer's freedom 'to lie' was limited. Snorri interpreted his sources, expanded short cryptic statements, and added comments. However, he would not consciously invent facts or fabricate evidence, and this is why the passage about berserks in *Heimskringla* causes surprise. In his *Prose Edda*, Snorri retold all the tales he knew. Óðinn never appears in it surrounded by berserks. At Baldr's funeral, four berserks were present: it is said that they could not hold fast the steed of the giantess Hyrrokkin; *berserkir* here means 'the strongest warriors'. Snorri's Óðinn, like the Óðinn of old lays, performs his deeds unaided. Occasionally he travels in the company of two other gods. We have to conclude that Snorri did not know any myths of Óðinn's retinue. As pointed out at the end of Chapter 1, Snorri must have used *Historia Norvegiae*, for portraying Óðinn in *Heimskringla*, and, most probably, he borrowed his description of berserks from contemporary folklore. He projected these outcasts and their behavior to the mythological past and assigned them to Óðinn, the supreme war god,



partly perhaps under the influence of legendary tales like *Hrólfs saga kraka*. In myths, berserks did not form Óðinn's bodyguard (nor did he need any).

Even if Snorri erroneously equated the berserks of the family sagas with some mythic warriors, we are left wondering what caused their frenzy, which no one would have mistaken for religious ecstasy. The word *berserkr* developed along the same lines as did the word *vikingr* 'viking': both became terms of abuse. When the activity of the vikings came to an end, professional soldiers lost their occupation and status and degenerated into riffraff preying on farmers. The plundering rabble of the Icelandic sagas is fact, not fiction. The near formulaic nature of the episodes notwithstanding, bands of able-bodied men in their prime, unused to agricultural pursuits and trade, wandered all over Scandinavia and made life of farming communities miserable. Earl Eiríkr Hákonarson outlawed berserks in 1012, as is told in Chapter 19 of *Grettis saga*, and this may have been the reason they migrated to other countries, including Iceland. The Icelandic *Jus Ecclesiasticum* (1123) and the law code *Grágás* made berserks subject to the lesser outlawry.

Perhaps these vagrant bullies were smart enough to appropriate a name famous in legend, but *berserkr* may have become slang for 'gang member'. In any case, a berserk described in the sagas traditionally challenged a farmer to a duel, killed him, and robbed the dishonored survivors of their possessions, a behavior uncharacteristic of royal retainers (cf. *Kommentar*, 132). Three of the Hebrides chessmen found at Uig are shown biting the top rim of their shields. The set is dated to the twelfth century. Most likely, by the time the figures were carved the berserk scare had become part of history and folklore. (See a reproduction of such a chessman in Konstam 2002:119.)

The homeless unmarried men in their prime were not sweet-tempered. Many of them became psychopaths, flying into a rage at the slightest provocation. When thwarted, they immediately lost control of themselves. Shield biting and the rest were part of a well-rehearsed performance, an *effektnummer*, as Axel Olrik called it. Feigning hysteria is a dangerous game; its symptoms become the actor's second nature (Güntert 1912:25-26; Grøn 1929:44-45, 49; Lie 1946:203; Reichborn-Kjennerud 1947:139-150). Grøn stressed the epidemic character of such medieval psychoses as St. Vitus's dance, flagellants' movement, and children's crusades and dwelled on the psychotic nature of the frenzy caused by resistance. He cited several examples of this disease transmitted from father to son (Kvedulfr-Skallagrímur-Egill is a classic case), and discussed berserks against the background of lycanthropy and beliefs in shape changing, beginning with Ancient Greece.

Other people thought of different explanations of *furor bersericus*. Saxo Grammaticus, for whom every deviation from the norm was the result of magic, believed



that a trolls' drink caused berserks' rage. In the sagas, no psychotropic drugs are mentioned. But in 1784 Samuel Ödman referred to the experience of some East Siberian peoples and suggested that berserks used a poisonous mushroom, *fly agaric*, to arouse themselves. Since no evidence supports this hypothesis, it could be expected to die at once, but this did not happen. Grøn surveyed all the literature on berserks and mushrooms and dealt Ödman's theory a strong blow. Yet it lives on. Its supporters are Fabing 1956 and Leuner 1970:280–282. Huchting-Gminder 1933:239–240 and especially Reichborn-Kjennerud 1947:150 dismissed mushrooms as nonsense, though the latter believed that intoxication played a role in berserks' fury. One can only repeat that running amuck and going mad after eating mushrooms or smoking hashish are striking parallels to *berserksgangr*, but no source mentions alcohol or drugs as causing berserks' frenzy. Further discussion of berserk mycology and related issues looks like a waste of time.

As stated above, the uncertainty of the meaning of the word *berserkr* (bearshirt? bareshirt?) resulted in two lines of research: berserks have been examined in connection with the cult of the bear and with the nudity of Germanic warriors. In Scandinavia, the Eurasian cult of the bear is mainly known from medieval literature and folklore; the evidence of burials is not unambiguous (Petré 1980; Å. Ström 1980). Old Germanic names like *Björn* also testify to the veneration of animals (this material has been investigated in minute detail: see Breen 1997 and the literature cited there). The relevance of all such facts for understanding berserks depends on whether *berserkr* means 'bearshirt'. Assuming that this is a correct gloss (not a strong assumption!), it should still be admitted that no one would be able to fight with a hot and heavy skin on one's shoulder (E. Noreen 1932:251–252). However, there is a consensus that men fought only with animal masks on (Höfler 1940:110–120; 1976:299; G. Müller 1967:200). Given this explanation, *berserkr* turns into 'one wearing a bear mask', hence 'bear' and, by implication, 'bearshirt'. This semantic string is not improbable but less than fully persuasive. Among 169 names of Óðinn, only two (*Bjarki* and *Björn*) mean 'bear' (Falk 1924:4); neither is prominent in his mythology.

We have every reason to take Tacitus's *more patrio nudis corporibus* at face value, but going to battle without coats of mail, in one's 'bare shirt', is not the same as fighting in the nude, even if Jost's ingenious etymology of OE *orped* 'brave' is correct (1934:81; *orped*, allegedly from *ōr-pad* 'without clothes' and thus 'ready for battle; brave'). Nudity does not seem to supply a clue to the understanding of berserks. Whether bearshirts or bareshirts, Þorbjörn's berserks must have fought without armor because they believed in their magical invulnerability or at least in their immunity to 'iron'. This belief survived the heroic age and burst into bloom

in the sagas, in which fire was also said to do berserks no harm. Beard 1981 suggested that the topos of a hero invulnerable to iron and being able to blunt swords does not antedate the first encounters between Germanic tribes and the Romans, since this was the period when the need for a charmed life against iron arose for the first time. By the epoch of Þorbjörn, to say nothing of Snorri, the phrase *á þá bitu engi járn* 'no iron could "bite" them' had become a worn-out formula. The berserks of the eleventh and twelfth centuries inherited the verbal paraphernalia of old and spread rumors that they could dull swords with their eye. The sagas swallowed these fantastic details hook, line, and sinker; yet there must have been a grain of truth in the legend: according to Grøn and others, people really may not feel pain in the heat of battle.

With Óðinn, the bear cult, and magical invulnerability out or almost out of the picture, only one religious detail remains to be mentioned. According to the sagas, berserks preferred to attack farms at Christmas. To be sure, in life bandits could strike at any time, but since in the sagas berserks were represented as pagan, they felt particularly unhappy at Yuletide. This is also the season when the Icelandic *huldufólk* 'hidden people' (fairies, elves, and others) become restless and change their abode. Nothing at all follows from the timing of berserks' attacks about their nature or origin.

The study of berserks is based on an unsafe foundation. Serious research competes with wild guesses and cavalier attacks on the subject (cf. Peeters 1957). It may, therefore, be of some use to offer a short conclusion. At the end of the ninth century, some warriors were still called *berserkir* (the word is probably old). They either resembled or were identical with *úlfheðnar* 'wolfcoats'. Both groups roared and howled when they fought. They may have worn animal masks, but this need not be the reason they were called *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar*. Despite the closeness of the words *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar*, *berserkr* more probably meant 'bareshirt' (= 'fighting without armor') than 'bearshirt' (= 'fighting with a bear mask / bearskin on'). No evidence supports Snorri's statement that ancient berserks were ever thought to be Óðinn's associates. The berserks of the family sagas resembled the berserks of old only in name, and nothing in their behavior can be used for reconstructing the institution of the past. At no time did berserks form unions, and, to become a berserk, no initiation was required. The way from elite troops to gangs can be demonstrated with some confidence. All the rest (cultic leagues, eating poisonous mushrooms, and so forth) is (science) fiction.

A short supplement is in order here. My investigation of berserks began by chance. In 2002 I got a call from the History Channel, where soon after 9/11 a program on untraditional warfare was being put together. The caller asked whether

I could speak on berserks, by all accounts, untraditional fighters. I answered that we had no information on 'original' berserks. However, I agreed to participate in the program and began to read everything on the subject. The more I read, the more involved I felt because I had been putting together my thoughts on Óðinn for years. My reading confirmed my negative attitude toward some of the basic ideas popular in modern religious studies. I could not accept Dumézil's treatment of the Germanic pantheon, observed few traces of Höfler's or Weiser-Höfler's Germanic secret unions, and found the role of initiation in Scandinavian myths exaggerated; I also refused to classify every deviation from rational behavior with ecstasy. To make matters worse, after nearly half-a-century in linguistics (with a strong structuralist bias) I resisted the attempts to extend the principles of linguistic (especially phonological) structuralism to the rest of the humanities: from geography (as Trubetzkoy suggested) to mythology (in the spirit of Lévi-Strauss and Dumézil). In similar fashion, I have no enthusiasm for discerning syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations in myths (cf. Schjødt 2008:353). May phonologists deal with them. Those ideas had occupied me for decades (see the opening pages of Chapter 1, above); a study of berserks served only as a catalyst without which I may not have offered a full-length contribution to Óðinn's mythology.

I found myself in opposition to several most influential students of Scandinavian myths, though I cannot complain of preaching in the wilderness or having no allies. In 2003 I went to the saga conference in Bonn and gave a talk on berserks. It did not pass unnoticed. The text from the materials of the conference was reprinted in Brazil, and I was asked to contribute to an American *Festschrift* and to a Moscow miscellany. Since that time I have run into several neutral or sympathetic mentions of my publications and a critical response from J. P. Schjødt 2007. He is an advocate of Dumézil, views Lévi-Strauss's achievement in a positive light, admires Höfler (even though he is ready to detect weaknesses in Weiser's reasoning: see Schjødt 2008:352–353), and bases his theories on the idea of initiation, understood very broadly. Schjødt looks to the cult of the bear as the clue to the nature of berserks. Here everything is a matter of chronology (as always, in dealing with Óðinn, the result depends on where we start). We cannot know whether Snorri and his contemporaries thought of bears when they wrote about berserks. Folk etymology is a powerful factor. Germans tend to believe that squirrels (*Eichhörnchen*) prefer to build nests (they are called dreys) in oaks, and some may even think that those rodents have tiny horns. Be that as it may, squirrels do not favor oaks and are hornless. It is more probable that the original berserks were *bare-shirts* rather than *bear-shirts*—more probable, but not certain.

I would make a clear distinction between the early (legendary) berserks and those described in sagas and not depend on the 'vague' echoes in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. To my mind, Óðinn on a tree is not an initiate (see Chapter 1), and I refuse to equate war bands with *secret* unions (to repeat, I do not see such unions anywhere in early Germanic history). It appears that 'real Óðinn' is the god we know from the *Eddas* and the skalds rather than from *Ynglinga saga*. But having spent the whole of my professional life reconstructing the past, I realize that our most imposing edifices are houses of cards and that in the war of arguments and counterarguments victory is often granted to the weaker warrior. Too bad, we do not know which one of us represents the weaker side, and Óðinn is in no hurry to act.

#### A Note added in proof

Long after this book was sent to the publisher, I became aware of Samson 2011. Now I have read the book but will quote only DuBois's summary:

“As Samson outlines in his study's opening chapter, scholarship on the ambiguous and often contentious topic of the berserkir has tended toward opposing extremes (p. 28). On the one hand are 'excessively enthusiastic' scholars who readily combine evidence from differing eras, geographic contexts, and textual traditions to arrive at a unified, transcendent image of a persistent berserkir institution. At the other extreme are 'hypocritical' scholars who emphasize the fragmentary nature of the evidence regarding the berserkir.... Samson aims to situate his analysis between these extremes...” (p. 368)

(Bearshirt or bareshirt?) “Both terms would represent Norse adaptations of the concept of animal-costumed warriors attested more broadly in the Migration era and having ancient Indo-European antecedents” (p. 369).