HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
Hugvísindasvið

Berserk for *berserkir*:

Introducing Combat Trauma to the Compendium of Theories on the Norse Berserker

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í 2015

Lily Florence Lowell Geraty

May 2015

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ABSTRACT: English

This thesis attempts to provide a brief overview of major pieces of the English-language scholarship concerning the Norse berserker. It tries to demonstrate consistent flaws in scholarly treatment and the hollow nature of many major theories and attitudes. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate the importance of brining in outside scholarship on the berserker, specifically the work of Jonathan Shay, who's book *Achilles in Vietnam*, demonstrated a strong continuity of experience between Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, and the experiences of American soldiers in the Vietnam War. I believe his work can be equally applied to the Norse berserker, and hope to introduce Shay into the conversation.

ABSTRACT: Íslensku

Í ritgerðinni er veitt stutt yfirlit yfir helstu rannsóknir fræðimanna á norrænum berserkjum sem birst hafa á ensku. Færð eru rök fyrir því að margar þeirra kenninga um berserki, sem verið hafa áberandi, séu annað hvort ófullkomnar eða risti of grunnt í viðhorfum og forsendum. Það er ætlun höfundar að sýna fram á nauðsyn þess að veita nýrri sýn á efnið úr annarri átt, utan fræðasviðs norrænna fræða en innan berkerkjafræða, og víkka þannig sjóndeildarhringinn. Sérstaklega er tekið mið af kenningum Jonathans Shays, en bók hans *Achilles in Vietnam* ber saman og tengir bersekjahefð *Ilíonskviðu* Hómars við reynslu og vitnisburði bandarískra hermanna í Víetnamstríðinu. Höfundur rökstyður að kenningar Shays séu gagnlegar við greiningu á norrænum berkserkjum og vonast með því til að fræði hans hljóti frekari athygli þeirra norrænufræðinga sem um efnið fjalla.

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Introduction: The Idea of Berserk

This paper will present a general overview of the existing English-language scholarship surrounding an old Scandinavian puzzle, a the subject of debate for many many years: the berserker. Berserkers appear all over the place in the medieval Scandinavian literature, and are best recognized as the animalistic warriors who would fly into great, murderous rages. Berserkers have been a subject of scholarly discussion for centuries and a few stable lines of thinking have developed and remained fairly well in play, for instance: the idea that the berserker was somehow responding to the effects of an ingested substance, a hallucinogenic mushroom in particular; the idea that they were ritualistic or cultic figures, involved in some sort of warrior band or cult; the change and implementation of the berserker in the sagas as an antagonistic figure; and, of course, a debate over exactly what "berserk" (*berserkr/-ir* in Old Icelandic) meant in the first place.

In presenting some of the basic English scholarship surrounding this figure, I hope to demonstrate the inadequacy of these previous theories to explain the berserker as a whole, including the appearance of the berserker in other cultures, to make room for another theory on the berserker which has arisen outside the field of Scandinavian studies: combat trauma and battle madness. It is outside the scope of the current project to provide anything more than a survey of the previous scholarly literature and a light introduction to the idea of combat trauma. The berserker is a figure which exists at the crossroads of many complicated and often conflicting ideas, and straying off the path here, no matter how well-intended, will get one very off-track very quickly, and if there were any easy answers on the berserker, we would not be here now. I will also keep primary source citations to a minimum: the sheer number of primary source examples makes any kind of comprehensive inclusion a massive project, and the main focus here is really the theories themselves. Primary sources will be mentioned, but by and large they are common knowledge sagas and anyone in the field of Scandinavian studies would be familiar with them enough to be going on with. Berserk scholarship is also quite a tangle. While there has been a chronological progression of ideas *into* the field,

which could be tracked, but, once introduced, they ricochet all over the place and never fully leave the discussion; these are cumulative, not progressive, ideas. Therefore, I have attempted to organize the scholars I include by theme but there is no way to do this smoothly, and the reader will have to keep rather on his toes.

In English, both “berserk” and it’s thematic cousin “amok” have the additional connotation of warfare beyond basic madness and violence. “Berserk”in particular has come to use as a psychological term descriptive of battle induced psychosis. One of the pioneering scholars of this usage was Jonathan Shay in his 1994 book, *Achilles in Vietnam*, which compares Achilles’ descent in the *Iliad* with modern combat veterans, and it is Shay’s approach to the berserker which we will be examining later on in contrast to the previous scholarship on the Norse berserker.[1] Shay's observations were a breakthrough for understanding the continuity of the effect of warfare on the human psyche. The one downside of Shay is its scope: Shay restricts his comparisons to the Greek tradition and, within that, specifically to Achilles.

It is my belief that Shay has tapped into something much wider here. The experiences of Shay’s veterans and Homer’s “account” of Achilles do not reflect a link exclusive to these two sets of examples. Despite obvious differences in cultural values and military practice and procedure, the resulting trauma may occur at any given point in time, in any culture with militaristic elements, and to any individual involved; it will not happen to everyone every time, but it may happen to anyone, anytime. If the berserker phenomenon can be identified in cultures who either did not share this outlook or had developed methods for incorporating the phenomenon into the regular fabric of their society, as I believe the medieval and early-medieval Scandinavians did, it may be possible to extrapolate their example into better pre- and post-exposure therapy for modern combat troops.

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[1] Jonathan Shay. Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character. New York: Simon and Schuster, (1994). Shay later writes *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, but unfortunately that will not be part of this discussion.

Important concepts and definitions

Although it may be unusual to tackle a historiographical study thematically instead of chronologically, the latter implies that progress has been made over the years. This is misleading, and it is in fact more useful to see how the old theories have been upheld and blended into the new ones when asking what has stalled the berserker. The major trends in berserker scholarship have been laid out succinctly by Anatoly Liberman and, as any reasonable analysis would end up looking much like his anyway, I will operate from his basic categories and these are useful to know up front.[2]

Before we get started, however, let me briefly introduce some of the major primary source examples which the scholars below will be referencing. To my knowledge, *berserkir* specifically and berserk figures generally appear in every type of written primary source – all genres of saga, both eddic and skaldic poetry, and even in law codes like *Grágás*.[3] Most of those references are, really, redundant to the main points and the different interpretations are better exemplified though specific texts. Common examples of saga examples are drawn from *Egils saga*, whose main character comes from a line of violent tempered bestial men, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, in which the hero Bǫðvar bjarki appears to have a bear alter ego, and *Vǫlsunga saga*, in which heroes Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli don wolf-skins. Among these primary sources, only one provides any kind of attempt at defining a berserker and it comes from Snorri Sturluson in *Ynglinga saga*, where he essentially describes the *berserkir* as wild, animalistic, violent, and invulnerable.

It is frustrating to say the least that the oldest extant usage of *berserk/berserkir* does not correlate with Snorri's later definition, and in fact nudges a completely separate additional line of investigation. This earliest extant example comes is from a skaldic

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2 Anatoly Liberman, "Berserkir: A Double Legend." In *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of the 12th International Saga Conference, Bonn/Germany, 28th July–2nd August 2003*, edited by Rudolf Simek and Judith Meurer, 337–40. Bonn: Hausdruckerei der Universität Bonn, (2003).

3 Berserkish iconography has also been identified in archaeological finds, although this does depend on the interpretation of the scholar in a way that direct written reference does not. "The passage from the Old Icelandic law book Grágás which specifically punished *berserksgangr* with *fjǫrbaugsgarðr* – banishment, usually for a period of three years," Blaney, "The Berserkr: His Origin and Development in Old Norse Literature," 19.

poem attributed to Þórbjǫrn hornklofi which was composed on behalf of king Harald Fairhair's victory at Hafrsfjörðr around 872.[4] Þórbjǫrn's poem says:

greinoðo ***berserkir***	"the berserks roared,
guðr var þeim a sinom	the battle was in full swing,
emioðo ***úlfheðnar***	the worlfskins howled
ok ísarn glumdo	and shook the irons"[5]

This stanza does have some elements in common with Snorri's definition, the howling and iron-shaking, but its use of *úlfheðnar* raises questions. *Úlfheðnar* here is usually interpreted in one of two ways: either as essentially a synonym for *berserkir* (or perhaps vice versa) or as a related but ultimately separate classification of warriors. Some scholars, Kris Kershaw and others, have even taken it so far as to speculate that *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar* are actually two different stages of the same process, a sort of warrior death cult in which the initiate progresses from *úlfheðnar,* to *berserkir,* and ultimately to *einherjar*. Leaving that idea aside though, and Kershaw with it, the introduction of *úlfheðnar* into the *berserkir* equation has been the source of much scholarly disagreement and has made the largest mess in discussions on vocabulary and become one of the most basic questions, and the most basic distractions, surrounding the Norse berserk: not, what is a *berserkr*, but what does *berserkr* mean? How is/was the word itself understood?

This philological questions is one of the most over-beaten horses, so over-beaten that it now cannot be avoided. There have been two major interpretations, and they both agree on one thing: the word is a compound, *ber* + *serkr*. The translation of both elements in this compound, though, has been hard to pin down. -*Serkr* is usually translated as some sort of external covering, a "shirt" or a "skin," although some have used "pelt" in place of "skin," and none of these possibilities really affects the interpretation. *Ber*-, however, has been taken to mean both "bear," the large mammal of the *Ursidae* family, and "bare," lacking in some expected form of covering to the point

[4] Liberman, "Double Legend," 337.

[5] Anatoly Liberman, "Berserks in History and Legend." *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 32, no. 3–4 (Fall-Winter 2005): 401–11. Translation Liberman's.

of nudity.[6] Of these two possible translations, thankfully only the latter has caused any further discussion on the English side of things. Bare of what, exactly? Bare of armor? Bare of everything, i.e. naked? Michael Speidel is one who seems to have interpreted both possibilities in their widest possible forms, particularly the question of "bare"/ nudity. To him, soldiers naturally wearing fewer pieces of clothing, say in the tropical heat of the Indian peninsula, are the same as soldiers throwing off their heavy furs in North Atlantic settings, literally borderline Arctic, and the same as soldiers posturing their nudity to advertise the lack of a threat they perceive, functioning as a taunt, insult, or threat. This seems somewhat generous. Leaving aside the issue of Speidel, the debate over "bear" or "bare" is quite tired, at this point. Philologists have searched into all manner of related vocabulary and language family cognates for an answer to this question, and by the early 1990s, everyone seems to have tired of the quest. This does not mean that the debate does not rage, however, and it is not unusual to read publications from the past quarter century which clearly state that modern scholarship is trending in favor of [scholar's own interpretation] and then to read the exact opposite from another scholar.

Centuries of debate I think cloud the issue more than they help, and it's time to take a logical step back. There are two basic (and obvious) questions being asked here. First: which of the two possible interpretations is more likely to represent the original understanding, and second: does our surrounding knowledge and vocabulary help tip that scale in any particular direction? The problem trend with this is that one of those questions ends up leading the other around by the nose; whatever interpretation of the word itself a given scholar agrees with, then those are the only pieces of external evidence he or she sees and, vice versa, a scholar particularly interested in a particular type of external evidence will often choose the version of *berserkr* which fits that type of research. I should say that I look on this as a subconscious trend, not as a deliberate system of selection on the part of past scholars, and really such a trend of opposition is

[6] Although not technically relevant to this analysis, we should take a moment and appreciate that this distinction is still very slim in English. It is also worth noting the fact that one interpretation relies on the presence of significant clothing and that the other relies on the significant absence of clothing is also almost too elegant to be a coincidence.

to be expected after so many years of debate, and choosing a side becomes one's first impulse after exposure to debate.

Apart from being hazardous to conscientious scholarship, this distracts from the reality of the word *berserkr* as presented in the Old Norse sources, and as represented by the concept of a berserk phenomenon in human history at large, and I therefore propose a compromise: you are both right. Both interpretations of *ber–*, as "bear" (the ferocious, indomitable and inhuman beast) and "bare" (lacking in protective or culturally expected coverings) are in fact key elements of the *berserkr*. They are not *just* running around without armor or clothing, nor are they *just* behaving monstrously – they are doing both at once, and doing so pretty consistently across time, space, and even transcending changes in culture and religion. There is, of course, natural fluctuation in the percentages of each element described and emphasis placed thereupon, but the trend is unmistakable.

Also oddly absent from discussions *berserkr* vs. *úlfheðnar* is *berserksgangr*, which unsurprisingly means "fury of the berserkers," according to Zoëga.[7] To my knowledge, there are no extant instances of **úlfheðsgangr.* As Jens Peter Schjødt is fond of saying, one wants to be careful drawing arguments from silence and he is exactly right. However, given the number of extant examples of *berserksgangr*, it is frankly hard to believe that, if **úlfheðsgangr* existed on any sort of scale comparable to *berserksgangr*, the word would have been the unfortunate victim of history every single time. This implies a couple of important points about the conceptuality behind *berserkr* vs. *úlfheðnar*, and we do have to assume that there is a reason why the alternative does not appear, exclusively or in tandem. *Berserkr* and *úlfheðnar* are both nouns, but *berserksgangr* – although technically also a noun – implies a state of being rather than a classification for both *berserkr* and *berserksgangr*. At the very least, the *berserkir* are defined by their fury and that fury is so unique and identifiable that it can only be theirs. While not an irrefutable argument, next to everything else the presence of *berserksgangr* and the absence of **úlfheðsgangr* strongly imply both that *berserkr* not

[7] Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. (2004) 50.

úlfheðnar was the fundamental term, whatever other role they may have fulfilled, and that *berserkr* was understood to be a both a transgressive and transformative fury, and that such a fury would have been quite recognizable.

Moreover, the Vikings were many things but linguistically simple-minded was not one of them. Viking poetry, the complexity of the kennings, the elegance and precision of the poetic meters, the harsh penalties imposed on poetic slander, and even the use of language for magic all point to a society which could probably have come up with a more direct compound noun, if that was so important. Next to the clarity of *úlfheðnar* (and more on that word later) it is very hard to believe that *berserkr* would be such a headache by accident. I admit that it is flimsy logic to assume that our misunderstanding would also have been their misunderstanding; it is more than possible for a specific piece of vocabulary to have a clear understanding in cultural usage and reference even if it seems ambiguous when removed from it's usual context. When it comes to the chicken and the egg, I will say that, yes, in Þórbjörn hornklofi's stanza *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar* seem to be functioning as synonyms, I think the importance of that fact is overstated. Even if we could be sure that Þórbjörn did not just develop those two terms himself or did not poetically combine to slightly different things, which I am not sure that we can, the question should not be "Which is right?" but, "Why did *berserkir* defeat *úlfheðnar* in the long run?"

All language has to come from somewhere, and it all adapts and changes over time. There is a sort of natural selection about vocabulary which directs the lifespan of a particular term, its offspring, changes in usage, etc. which is far more interesting here. What is it about the word *berserkir* which was so significantly different from *úlfheðnar* that it has outlasted its partner for something like a thousand years and been transitioned into future languages? Some might say it was the luck of the draw, the way later medieval writers used *berserkir*, but that does not answer the question, Yes, but why choose one word when you have two words? Why does one "go berserk" and not "go ulfhed" these days? I think it was this duality, *bear* and *bare*, both of which represent key components of what we now recognize as the berserker. *Úlfheðnar*, whatever else it might have meant, was a good word but *berserkir* was perfect, its natural flexibility

allowing it to survive changes in the ideas of the *berserkir* at essence. We also want to be careful of assuming something accidental, and the fact that both elements of *berserkr* are such a perfect match for the actual description of a berserker is almost suspicious. For such a linguistic society, we cannot rule out the possibility that we have all been duped by a twelve hundred year old poetic play on words. If we return to our original question – which interpretation is more likely? – we find that it is more a question of which word has the better chance at linguistic longevity, and that is *berserkr*, which means a combatant removed from every element which could have marked him as human: his violence is vicious, his actions bloodthirsty and unpitying, his fear and moral self-awareness are nonexistent, his approach and appearance are terrible, monstrous, and animalistic, and, in rejecting his clothing or armor, he has rejected the technological intelligence of his age, the identification with his comrades, and his mark of civilization.

Berserk for *berserkir*: Historiographical Overview

As discussed previously, the history of berserker scholarship, and therefore the history of berserkers, such as it is, is something of a tangle. Ideas are introduced but they rarely go out of fashion and are still mentioned as possible explanations for the berserker phenomenon in the Norse tradition. Moreover, much of this history has been conducted in languages other than English, and therefore my ability to report on the historiography from a chronological perspective is quite limited. Therefore, I intend to present a summary of berserker historiography from a thematic perspective, looking at the different trends of scholarship rather than the progression thereof. To do this, I will be following the summary presented by Anatoly Liberman, a Russian professor at the University of Minnesota in the Department of German, Scandinavian, and Dutch, in his article from 2003.[8] Liberman broke down trends of berserker scholarship into seven categories, which covers all bases of which I am aware. I do not want to put Liberman

[8] Liberman, Anatoly. "Berserkir: A Double Legend." In *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of the 12th International Saga Conference, Bonn/Germany, 28th July - 2nd August 2003*, edited by Rudolf Simek and Judith Meurer, 337–40. Bonn: Hausdruckerei der Universität Bonn, 2003.

on a pedestal here or make him out to be some sort of special expert of supreme enthusiast, but the fact remains that his summary is the most on-point, rational, and complete that I have yet come across. I have taken his seven points and trimmed them of their commentary, organizing each point as a simple case of primary source observation, followed by the resulting conclusions and lines of inquiry. It should also be noted that, while I am essentially following Liberman in these points, Liberman's observations are not exactly original, just well-organized, and all of this is basic knowledge for anyone research berserker historiography.

As a result, we have the following points; needless to say, in practice these theories are not nearly so tidy, and they tend to weave back into each other:

Observation 1: One of the two interpretations of *berserkr* is "bare-shirt," and the warriors are said to be unprotected.

> *Result 1.1*: Snorri Sturluson's explanation regarding the discarding of protective gear is often examined, particularly in combination with the "bare" interpretation. The two are often considered to prove each other. From the "nudity," examples from Tacitus' *Germania* and similar sources are often cited.

Observation 2: The second of the two *berserkr* interpretations, "bear-shirt," and the memorable bears of *Hrólfs saga kraka*.

> *Result 2.1*: This has led to all manner of bear investigations, bear cult, bear wear, bear everything. The problem, as also observed by Liberman and easily applicable to the first point, is that the reasoning here is often circular. If *ber-* means "bear," then bears must be somehow related; if bears are somehow related, *ber-* must mean "bear," and so forth.

Observation 3: *Berserkr* and *úlfheðnar* are mentioned, as Liberman notes, in the same breath by Þórbjǫrn hornklofi; it is therefore reasonable to assume the two have some intimate relationship.

> *Result 3.1*: *Úlfheðnar* is not nearly as ambiguous a compound as *berserkr* and have opened the door for all sorts of wolves, in addition to all sorts of bears. This has led to speculation around the tales and theories of the werewolf, but particularly around the wolfiest of Norse characters, Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli

from *Vǫlsunga saga*, a story which lends itself very well, it must be said, to initiation analysis.

Observation 4: Berserkers tend to appear in groups.

Result 4.1: A great interest in Germanic secret unions as being a basis, or at least a harbor for, berserker-type warriors.

Observation 5: In *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri refers to *berserkir* as being Óðinn's own men.

Result 5.1: This has led to speculations on, unsurprisingly, Óðinn's role as a leader or master of warriors, from the *einherjar* of Valhǫll to the Germanic wild hunt.

Observation 6: The strange description and behavior of the *berserkr* is easily their most noticeable and memorable aspect of the berserker, and has diverged into two lines of explanation, both focusing on external causes.

Result 6.1: The first behavior-based explanation sees the berserker as what amounts to an intentional choice by the men involved. For some, this is a matter of military tactics, choosing wildness and crazy behavior to frighten the enemy or spur on their own men; in this respect, some have brought up the idea of the *furor teutonicus*, although exactly how this is not simply a germanic synonym for *berserksgangr* has never been made explicitly clear to me. For others, I would estimate the majority of others, this takes the form of intoxication. There has been much speculation about exactly what was intoxicating them, but mushrooms (specifically the *Amanita muscaria*) and simple alcohol are the most common speculations; these are often thought to be taken communally or as part of a ritual.

Result 6.2: The second explanation we could call more spiritual, perhaps, and ties into practices of religious ecstasy and shamanism. This explanation can get very anthropological, as it well should, and often borrows heavily from the shamanism of other circumpolar traditions. The idea of religious ecstasy hardly needs introduction at this day in age, and is often tied to Óðinn, who, of course, is the leader of this faction. Many reference Adam of Bremen's line *Odin est furor* (Óðinn is fury), as well as more detailed discussions on the possible

etymology of Óðinn's name relating to the furies of nature, like a storm/"storm." Of course this does not preclude rituals or communal acts being involved in some way, nor does it preclude the use of foreign substances from 6.1. In some ways, the two are almost the same explanation but from two different sides of the spectrum of choice and cultural directive.

Result 6.3: This is the blank space on this outline where my argument would go. Like the rest of the sixth observation's sub-points, I seek to understand the berserker through an analysis of his behavior but, unlike 6.1 and 6.2, I do not believe that it ultimately has an external source or is somehow a choice made by the soldier or practitioner. It is my belief that berserk behavior is due to a psychological breakdown due to heightened exposure to extreme violence, otherwise known as post-traumatic stress disorder. To me, the beauty of a psychological explanation is that there is no need to trace a specific source – it is always there, waiting to be activated – and there is also no reason to expect that people would have been aware of such a thing happening, or of its effects. Therefore, all the different interpretations and subsequent embodiments of the berserker could all have a common root source but need not have a common result. I do not *dis*believe most of the above interpretations (more on that to follow) but I believe they are looking at the trees when I am looking at the roots. I am also aware that psychological explanations for all sorts of things are very vogue, they have been since Freud and are no doubt over-employed in many cases. However, this does not mean that every case is a stretch and in the specific case of the berserker, on the one hand we have previous interpretations which are rather poor and strong corroborating evidence on the other.

General Academic Background and Germanic Secret Societies

Anatoly Liberman has two articles with very similar content. The first article had organized berserker historiography into the list of approaches upon which I based the list provided above, while the second, dealt with below, fleshed out more the contents of these debates. Even though Liberman is not chronologically the earliest

scholar, his knack for evaluating and categorizing previous information and approaches, and laying out basic information make him the perfect introductory material to the rest of the scholars and here I will present some of the more detailed background information for the points above. One of the main points of debate around *berserkir* is the meaning of the word itself, bare-shirt being the oldest, and he goes on to explain some of the linguistic technicalities which have complicated this debate, including the basic assumptions many make, that it only really makes sense next to *úlfheðnar,* wolf-shirt, to have *berserkir*, bear-shirt.

A detailed linguistic overview is not nearly as relevant to our current purposes as the simple fact demonstrated above, that this debate has been going back and forth, often spurred on by scholars in a rush to agree or disagree with the newest publication, and in all my research I have not found the Achilles' heel of either point. I do not believe there will ever be absolute linguistic certainty on this point, nor do I believe this point is nearly important enough to the central question to justify the level of scholarly obsession it has created. Moreover, most of the arguments I have read rely to a large extent on cultural assumption but, to summarize some of the main contentious questions: *-serkr* is less ambiguous (although Liberman tries to tie in usages of the fur trade when it comes to "skin"), but of *berr-*, did that word exist during Þórbjǫrn's time in a way that meant bear/bare? Which parts of speech are at play, and how does that sort of classification affect the interpretation? What sort of contemporary linguistic parallels exist in other languages in the Northwestern European area, and what sort of words can we find as cousins and grandparents to *berserkir*? And, the classic problem question, how much should we infer non-existent from non-extant? For his part, Liberman comes down on the side of *bare*-shirt.

Debates from the field of history of religions do not stretch back nearly as far as *bare-/bear*-shirt, but their clear starting point is both interesting, and problematic. Lily Weiser and Otto Höfler started this trend in the first half of the twentieth century, when studies of religion and anthropology were all the academic rage. This theory has been both helped and hindered by its parent scholars, particularly Höfler, who's work is both farthest reaching and most notorious; being a card-carrying academic for the Nazis will

do that to you. However, Höfler's Nazi ties seem to be relatively ignored when it comes to the application of his work, and his political alliances have been largely reduced to an academic anecdote, and how one feels about this is largely related to the question, Does his work further my argument? and, Do I believe that a scholar's personal situation is relevant to or can affect their work? Höfler's work has nonetheless had a major impact on *berserkir* scholarship, and Liberman notes that much of these points are related to ideas of secrecy and secret unions, which is plainly ridiculous because, as Liberman says with reference to the *einherjar* in particular, "nothing about them is secret."[9] (This idea of secrecy also comes up occasionally in pro-mushroom arguments, discussed later, to explain the otherwise complete absence of any evidence for mushrooms: it was a cultic secret.) Other problems with this list include the fact that "a fast flying procession of corpses, even with a leader at their head, is not a cultic league. Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli roam the woods as wolves after, not before, the youngster's initiation."[10]

Some have tried to separate the secret unions idea from religious belief and practice, often using Böðvarr bjarki of *Hrólf saga kraka* as a discussion point, and Liberman has a good run-down of some of the scholarly alliances on this point.[11] Religion also necessarily circles back to the *berserkir* as Óðinn's men, but Óðinn is almost an equally debated figure. As mentioned previously, Óðinn's name possibly being related to "storm" or "fury" is involved in this discussion, and even Óðinn's position as a god to poets. On this point Liberman says, "[a] tie between *Óðinn* and poetic ecstasy is unlikely, because to the medieval Scandinavians a good skald was like a skillful shot or swimmer, even if poetic inspiration were a gift from God or the gods," and I have to wonder how much the Greek Muses have been affecting these connections.[12]

Of the *berserkir*, there are always two main questions everyone wants to try and answer: how, why, and into what did they transform, what is this business of bear-/wolf-

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[9] Liberman, "History and Legend," 405.

[10] Liberman, "History and Legend," 405.

[11] Liberman, "History and Legend," 406.

[12] Liberman, "History and Legend," 407.

and skin-shifting, and how do we explain their madness? Much has been made of madness being a religious fury, but Liberman points out that "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…."[13] Others have sought an external explanation, primarily the mushroom theory. Although this theory will be dealt with later on, Liberman does discuss it and is the only scholar I have found who properly considers this theory "a waste of time."[14]

However, just because Liberman firmly rejects the mushroom explanation does not mean that he has a better one to provide, which is probably one of the many reasons that theory has been indefatigable so far. Liberman's explanation is very dismissive, lying somewhere between, They were just violent and, They were acting. Liberman's rejection of pretty much every previous theory is well-founded in both the primary sources and in basic logic. However, his refutation of pre-existing theories suffers greatly from not really having a replacement hypothesis. It has also made him quite the professional enemy in the form of Jens Peter Schjødt, introduced later, who never misses an opportunity to butt heads with Liberman.

To jump back in time, contemporaries of Höfler's built on his work, including the famous French philologist and comparative mythologist Georges Dumézil, who for our purposes made the last major step in the development of new dominant understanding of the berserker, even beyond the Norse *berserkir*.[15] In his introduction to the 1979 reprint of Dumézil's *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, Strutynski says,

> [A]nthropologically oriented scholars helped Dumézil's investigations by providing a link to the social life of the ancient Germans which let Dumézil to the discovery of corroborative religious structures in Germanic cult and ritual practices…. Dumézil was able to adduce further correspondences between initiation rituals, connected to the Germanic bands of wild warriors such as the *Berserks*, and their counterparts in the Indo-Iranian *Gandharvas* and the Greek

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[13] Liberman, "History and Legend," 407.

[14] Liberman, "History and Legend," 409. "Fly-agaric" is the common name for *Amanita muscaria*, and scholars overall refer to the mushroom by both names.

[15] Georges Dumézil. *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*. Edited and translated by Einar Haugen. Los Angeles, California, (1979) xxvi (Strutynski's introduction)

> *Kentauroi*, and between Germanic and Indo-Iranian tales of the kill of the great bear, boar, or giant.[16]

The scholarship from the second half of the twentieth century is positively lousy with ideas stemming from such connections. This is not to imply that such conclusions are invalid but dominance often skews perspective. The detailed actions of cultic practices and rituals are not the subject of this paper and, to be quite honest, I have yet to find a well-developed analysis of exactly what the *berserkir* did or what their cult entailed, although it is certainly possible that this is stashed away in the German sources. The basic trend is that the two strangest and most iconic aspects of the berserker – the behavior and the animal identification – were both aspects of cultic ritual and practice. One embodies the animal, becomes ecstatic, and maintains identification with their animal, all in the name of warrior brotherhood and religion, et cetera. These two aspects are so easy to imagine in such a context, that they are often cited as the finishing flourish on an argument without a great deal of direct development.

Easily the most useful aspect of Dumézil's breakthroughs for our current purposes is the cross-cultural comparisons. Indo-European studies is a indescribable asset in getting one's foot in the door for cross-cultural validity: if scholars can demonstrate that something is spread throughout the spectrum, it can be used to prove that the thing in question is both so deeply entrenched and enduring aspect of society that it cannot be shaken despite time and space, and the precise opposite, that our thing in question is so necessary to the related societies that it cannot help but pop up. For berserkers, both are true, and both extend beyond the bounds of European or Indo-European societies – something that is latent in *all* cultures because it is latent in all people. However, the traditional disciplinary background of Indo-European studies, particularly philology, makes such initial connections permissible and realistic, and not simply metaphoric. Dumézil's structural parallels are, of course, quite valid but we can extrapolate beyond that. The structuralist argument for the berserk phenomenon is not inherited tradition, belief, or more literally social structure, but the building materials of the structure – humans and violence.

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[16] Dumézil, *Ancient Northmen*, xxvi (Strutynski's introduction)

Óðinn is one of the oldest and easily the most pervasive gateway interests for berserker studies, and such a dominant subject with a very well-synched pattern of reasonable certainty, total mystery, and contentious but plausible speculation make Óðinn and berserkers a perfect match. The one problem with this match is the presumed hierarchy of interest: Óðinn is undeniably a leading man in Norse studies, while berserkers are just part of the supporting cast, and this inevitably creates assumptions in scholars' minds that berserkers are an Óðinnic subset, following Óðinn and conforming to his patterns, and unable to fully exist without his lead. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Dumézil's berserker mentions are really about Óðinn.

Dumézil introduces Óðinn directly, and then pulls the *berserkir* into the discussion as a military subset. When he does get to the berserkers specifically, Dumézil introduces them as Óðinn's men explicitly and calls them, "bands of… warriors, who seem to share [Óðinn's] powers of shape-changing and magic, and who… degenerate into companies of brigands, without morals and without shame…."[17] This is about as in-depth as Dumézil goes here, specifically on the *berserkir*. He does provide, for future reference in this paper, an excellent summary of Jan de Vries' linguistic analysis of Óðinn's name in a *berserkir* context:

> … even [Óðinn's] name, which is not obscure, obliges us to put at the center of his character a *spiritual* concept from which the most effective action issues. The Old Norse word from which it derives, *óðr*, and which Adam of Bremen translates excellently with *furor*, corresponds to German *Wut* "rage, fury" and to Gothic *wōds* "possessed." As a noun it denotes drunkenness, excitation, poetic genius …, as well as the terrifying movement of the sea, of fire, and of the storm. As an adjective, it means something "violent, furious," sometimes "rapid." Outside of Germanic, related to Indo-European words refer to violent poetic and prophetic inspiration: Latin *vates*, Old Irish *faith.*[18]

It must be said that Óðinn is far from an irrelevant figure in all this. While I am trying to frame the berserker as essentially a social phenomenon, causally unrelated to religion and ritual. This does not mean, as we shall see later with Jonathan Shay, that religion or religious figures/functions are not relevant to the discussion. God(s),

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[17] Dumézil, *Ancient Northmen*, 29.

[18] Dumézil, *Ancient Northmen*, 37.

spirituality, divine intervention, etc., something which Jonathan Shay addresses, are major players in the berserker experience, regardless of the different concepts of and relationships to one's divine world, particularly when it comes to explaining – or being unable to explain – some of the consistent experiences in war.

Jens Peter Schjødt, a Danish professor in the Department of Religion at Aarhus University, briefly mentioned as Liberman's academic nemesis, has written three English articles dealing with berserkers as a relevant component, although the *berserkir* sections in all three papers are largely the same and all three directly and extensively attack Liberman. His major work, *An Initiation Between Two Worlds*, addresses berserkers very briefly but no more substantively than he does in his individual papers, so that work will not be addressed; it is a major work for him, but not for berserkers.[19] Here, I will address two of those three *berserkir*-relevant papers; "The Notion of Berserkir and the Relation Between Óðinn and Animal Warriors" was published two years before *Initiation Between Two Worlds* and is the paper we take first.[20]

Schjødt takes issues with Liberman's rejection of the Óðinn-*einherjar*/wild host-*berserkir* triangle (hardly surprising for a historian of religion who writes on initiation and seems to have been influenced by the early twentieth-century Germanic scholars) and he chooses *Hrólfs saga kraka* as the site of his debate.[21] Schjødt's reasoning in this argument is a wonderful example of how we've all gotten into this mess; emphases – except for the words in Icelandic – are mine.

> Thus it seems as if the *berserkir* and the [king's men] are somewhat mixed up, which is probably because the *berserkir* at the time of the saga could not be pictured in a positive way. But Liberman… accepted that it is likely that they were elite troops. What *he did not accept* was that they had any religious

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[19] Jens Peter Schjødt. *Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion.* Translated by Victor Hansen. Vol. 1. The Viking Collection Vol. 17. The University Press of Southern Denmark (2008).

[20] Jens Peter Schjødt. "The Notion of Berserkir and the Relation Between Óðinn and Animal Warriors." *In The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles, The 13th International Saga Conference.* Sponsored by: The British Academy, The Viking Society for Northern Research The Royal Norwegian Embassy, Moscow, edited by Donna McKinnell, John; Ashurst, David; Kick, 2:886–92. Durham, England: The Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Durham University (2006), 1.

[21] Schjødt, "The Notion of Berserkir," 2.

> foundation, that they should be related to Óðinn, or that *ber-* may mean bear, at least in the way it was perceived in pagan times.
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> However, if we take a closer look at the entire saga, it seems obvious that, firstly, *bears play a prominent role* and that, secondly, *Óðinn too has a major role*…. Now all this is certainly *best explained by accepting that these elements are not just coincidences* – that they represent a pattern which *fits the traditional way* of looking at the *berserkir*, namely as warriors who in some way were associated with bears.[22]

Now, I am perfectly willing to compromise with Schjødt here that Liberman probably went too far in concluding that the *berserkir* had nothing to do with religion; firstly, I think they did become entangled in religion, possibly early on (which will be more fully dealt with in Shay's section later on) and, in any case, such a long-standing and varied phenomenon as the *berserkir* would logically have found itself relevant in different circles at different points in time. However, Schjødt is not talking about religious relevancy or involvement, he is talking about a "religious foundation," which is rather a large assumption to be so sure about. We also see a major logical hiccough in Schjødt's framing of the *Hrólfs saga kraka* content when he says that, because bears and Óðinn are both big pieces of the saga, that means that they are definitely closely involved with each other, which also means that the *berserkir* have to be part of their dynamic. Each of those steps is logically faulty, but the worst part of Schjødt's thinking is the fact that his argument really boils down to "this is traditional thinking and therefore it is more correct."[23]

Schjødt tries to establish, in a rather confusing way, a connection between "initiate" warriors fighting *berserkir* and fighting bears as evidence for a relationship between bears and *berserkir*, which is a little thin. Even more thin is the fact that his evidence is not necessarily even a bear, "if the monster that [hero] 'kills' in the saga was actually a bear, this may be a variation or a supplement to fighting with a real *berserkr*," and he goes on to relate this to Óðinn and *berserkir* much as he did before, by proximity: "Thus there *are* (his emphasis) indications that *berserkir*, as groups of

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[22] Schjødt, "The Notion of Berserkir," 3.

[23] For the record, I am not trying to pick on Schjødt here. I think his type of thinking is far more pervasive than it might appear, but Schjødt walks into it more than most with his direct refutation of more rebellious scholars like Liberman and his own forward style.

warriors, on the one hand had a relation to bears in some metaphorical way, which was probably most clearly expressed during their initiations, and, on the other hand, had a relation to Óðinn."[24]

Schjødt does, however, make a good point that Óðinn had initiates, and that initiates are often expected to pass through a trial of some sort. He summarizes his point thusly:

> Those who venerated Óðinn were those who were initiated (in a more or less spectacular way) to the god. And they were those who could expect to go to Valhöll after their death. This means that being initiated to Óðinn was also a way of securing an ideal life in the beyond. Being initiated, however, always means passing through some kind of liminal sphere, a sphere in which the semantic properties of the society are turned upside down (cf. Turner 1969) compared to their everyday use.[25]

I do not refute this at all and think that he has a valid point, a point which could be related back to the *berserkir* farther down the line, as we shall see with Jonathan Shay. I also do not doubt that one very plausible element of that initiation could have been animal transformation or identification, as Schjødt argues. It was likely to have been an element of initiation to a military god, like Óðinn, at various points in time.

The second Schjødt paper relevant to this topic is actually more of a work on Óðinn and his relationship to his soldiers and their battlefield livelihoods. In many ways, this is actually a far more relevant discussion to Shay's concept of the berserker than Schjødt's actual, Liberman-baiting discussion of the *berserkir* above.[26] Much of the work in this second paper of Schjødt discusses the relationship between Óðinn, his living warriors, his dead warriors the *einherjar*, and discussions about the different

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[24] Schjødt, "The Notion of Berserkir," 3, 4.

[25] Schjødt, "The Notion of Berserkir," 5.

[26] Schjødt also does this a third time, in an article from 2011 called "The Warrior in Old Norse Religion." He starts out by trying to compare and contrast the function of Óðinn vs. Þór when it comes to violence – both are associated with violence, but very different kinds – but spends most of the article refuting Liberman with the exact same arguments and examples he has just used twice before. If one is really looking for an article like that, this last one is the most extensive, but his arguments have not really changed or improved. The one addition to the conversation worth mentioning from that article is a fairly extensive section interpreting Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli from *Vǫlsunga saga* as initiatory figures, and this section involves our old *berserkir* friends, Lily Weiser and Otto Höfler.

abodes (Hel and Valhǫll), and the longstanding scholarly idea that Óðinn was a god of the nobility in some way, and therefore that social status must have played a part in entry to Valhǫll. His section on berserkers is almost identical to the one from his pervious article, although he adds a saga or two, and a review of that material is redundant. In his conclusions, Schjødt has become somewhat sidetracked from [what at least I perceive as] his original question, and talks about initiation rituals, who was initiated, how they were initiated, the exclusivity of initiation and correlating social functions, etc., and what we can learn about Óðinn's powers, the worship of Óðinn with associated who/what/when/where/why/how, Óðinnic knowledge, and Óðinn himself from his relationship to warriors and death. Óðinn is wonderful but he can really dominate a paper.

As we will see later with Shay, however, there is the potential for a much deeper function here between Óðinn and warriors, both living and dead. Schjødt wanders close to these points but, as described, has a tendency to veer off. The following are the relevant portions of his discussion for Shay later on, with my emphasis added:

> It is often emphasized in scholarly work that Óðinn was *not a god who could be trusted*. He sometimes let down his chosen heroes, and he was often directly involved in their deaths…. This fact is usually explained with reference to *Eiríksmál*, where it is said by Óðinn himself that the reason for taking the great kings to Valhǫll is that the gods must be prepared for Ragnarǫk. Although this mythological explanation may reflect the ways pre-Christian Scandinavians actually conceived of the unreliability of the god, *it does not explain why Óðinn sometimes turned against his chosen heroes*. First and foremost, of course, the myth is *etiological in the widest sense*, since it was a common experience that great kings and warriors, who were supposed to be great exactly because they were favorites of Óðinn as war god, *at some point would be defeated and killed*. This, in the internal logic of the relation between man and gods, *meant that god had abandoned them*. As already mentioned, it seems likely that the explanation which referred to Ragnarǫk played a part; but this in itself would create a problem since not all great warriors died in battle.[27]

Without getting ahead of myself, the elements of Óðinn's perception and behavior above are very similar to Shay's analysis of the berserk phenomenon. The idea

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[27] Jens Peter Schjødt. "Óðinn, Warriors, and Death." In *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, edited by Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills, 18:137–51. Brepols, 2007, 139.

of an unreliable higher power, the seemingly nonsensical selection of the dead, the inevitability of death, and the idea of having been abandoned by god all come up as key points of Shay's berserkers. There are also pieces of Schjødt's comments above which point to scholarly perceptions which may be hampering our berserker efforts. The assumption that Ragnarǫk was a reason, a justification for a death is an interesting one to keep in mind – both the idea of a justification being necessary and the fact that that justification is future warfare – and the abandonment by god. The abandonment Shay speaks of later on is of a Judeo-Christian god specifically. This abandonment is deeply rooted in the ideology of "just war" (*jus ad bellum*, to medievalists) and would not necessarily have applied to Óðinn in a pagan period, but it is so very much a part of our thinking that it seems to genuinely not occur to most scholars that this ideology is affecting even the way they interpret gods to whom it never would have applied.

Arnold Price, a German-born professor in European studies, is aware of the problems inherent in a strictly historical approach and his approach is consistently well-thought out and culturally aware; his is definitely the work of the next generation. His work is primarily cultural and concerned with fleshing out and revising the Germanic warrior clubs, and this is not our focus. These warrior clubs – assuming one, they existed, and two, existed more or less as we picture them – are often taken as synonymous with berserkers, which I think is an oversimplification of both parties, and, to his credit, Price does not make such copy and paste assumptions. Our ideas of Germanic warrior clubs probably has some correlation to reality, but boiled down this simply means that there were probably warriors of special social status and identification in a particular place and time. This, itself, is hardly surprising, and using the Germanic warrior clubs to "prove" the *berserkir* or trace the *berserkir* back to these tribes as an origin point is narrow-minded for our current interpretation. If we are looking at berserkers as a naturally occurring phenomenon, their antecedents do not need to be proved and they are not necessarily subject to whatever warrior culture and style came before. However, even though something occurs naturally, this does not mean, by any stretch, that humans do not take it and interpret it in their own mind. Price seems to have similar ideas, although he does not have the distance to conceptualize this

assent in quite the same way. Price writes, "The Germanic warrior clubs were neither typical nor unique. Not every tribe had them, and a strong case can be made that warrior clubs existed elsewhere in antiquity."[28] Price goes on to try to frame the clubs' existence in the Germanic area as an imported tradition akin to a religious conversion, which is missing the point again. However, Price's deliberate removal of twentieth century Germanic paganism from the picture is a step in the right direction for berserkers, not to mention a very valuable step in cleaning up after the mess Höfler and his ideology left in his field. I have no problem with the idea that the berserker phenomenon was incorporated into the Germanic warrior clubs, but I see it as simply a reversed relationship: the Germanic warrior clubs do not prove or disprove the berserker, and the berserker is not affected by the strength or weakness of its ties to the Germanic warrior clubs, but through cultural and historical investigation and conjecture we can see another demonstration, another face of the berserker at work.

In that vein, Price's observations about these warrior clubs is quite interesting, and is worth keeping in mind when it comes to Jonathan Shay later on. Price writes:

> Membership meant acquiring a new, almost magical identity not just adulthood plain and simple, but becoming a different persona and assuming a total commitment to a deity, and with such acceptance adopting a new way of life…. Tacitus reports, that the warriors inflicted such terror by their frightful appearance that they were perceived as an 'army of ghosts.' In a similar way, by wearing pelts, such as bearskins, they would identify themselves with such beasts, assume their identity, and literally go berserk."[29]
>
> Initiation into the club meant joining the 'army of the dead'. A possible rationale may be that the warriors 'died' upon joining the club and that physical death did not involve a change of status, so to speak."[30]

In Price we see valuable speculation on the harnessing of an unavoidable reality, taking control of an uncontrollable situation. Certain aspects of Price's observation we will see again in Shay, for example, the idea of a warrior or soldier being "dead" before their

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[28] Arnold H. Price, *Germanic Warrior Clubs: An Inquiry into the Dynamics of the Era of Migrations and into the Antecedents of Medieval Society*. Germany: Universitats Verlag Tübingen (1994), 28.

[29] Price, "Germanic Warrior Club," 28.

[30] Price, "Germanic Warrior Club," 55-56.

death, becoming a different person assuming a completely new persona, and the combination of psychological warfare and a theatricality of sorts, whatever the reason – group identification, adopting of new identities, terrorising images – all these pieces Price so nicely draws out of the Germanic warrior clubs are exactly in line with Shay's berserks.

Military Studies

One of the most comprehensive studies of the berserk are those from Michael Speidel, a historian specializing in Greek and Roman history, the Roman military, and epigraphy at the University of Hawai'i Mānoa. Speidel published two pieces, an extensive article in 2002 and a book on the same subject in 2004. Speidel is clearly a military historian and his work is definitely rooted in military studies. However, he is one of the only scholars who treats the berserker as a truly cross-cultural phenomenon, including berserkers from Mesopotamia through Scandinavia and even speculates berserks from cultures as geographically distant as South America, although his focus is the Indo-European area. His berserker is simply identified by fury and/or nakedness in battle.[31] Without straying too far off the cultural focus of this particular paper, it is worth noting that Speidel is not making loose generalizations with his comparisons. For example, an epic poem commissioned by an Assyrian named Tukulti-Ninurta, who was victorious against the Babylonians in 1228 B.C., "claims not only that Tukulti-Ninurta's gods struck his foes with fear and blindness and blunted their weapons, but that his warriors turned into furious shape changers…" and contains the following stanza:

> They are furious, raging, taking forms strange as Anzu.
> They charge forward furiously to the fray without armor,
> They had stripped off their breastplates, discarded their clothing,
> They tied up their hair and polished (?) their … weapons,
> The fierce heroic men danced with sharpened weapons.
> They blasted at one another like struggling lions, with eyes aflash (?),
> While the fray, particles drawn in a whirlwind, swirled around in combat.[32]

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[31] Michael P. Speidel, "Berserks: A History of Indo-European 'Mad Warriors.'" *Journal of World History* 13, no. 2 (2002), 254.

[32] Speidel, "Mad Warriors," 255.

All of this sounds very familiar, no? The one consistent problem with Speidel's work is that he seems to wholeheartedly support the inherited cultural tradition theory for all of this, even speculating at times essentially that such military customs need not be restricted to one language family because they would have simply been observable. His reasons for sticking so tightly to such a belief are somewhat beyond me, but they seem to rest in the assumption that such actions – the nudity, bestiality, and madness – were all fully intentional acts of war, methods of war, if you will, and as such must obviously have been learned somewhere along the line. He also seems to look at this "fighting style," as he consistently refers to the berserkers, must be either a brilliant piece of tactical evolution or a cultural backtrack from civilization with the obscure remark, "Without incoming foreigners… cultural and military change as radical as the appearance of berserk warriors is unlikely. Complex, disciplined societies with a stable population like that of Assyria do not turn wild again on their own: there are no examples of this in world history."[33]

Not long after, however, he goes on to explain how these berserk troops must have been an essential tool in the new military arsenal, specialized troops to take down chariots, which would have been an intense job, and needless to say a handful of charging armored warhorses dragging a speeding chariot with armed men inside is rather intimidating. It is into this framework that Speidel first introduces his idea of the "berserk mind," the necessary brave and reckless and etc. spirit which would allow these new weapons/warriors to function, and to his credit Speidel sees this quality as the most important.[34] However, when he later returns to the idea after having demonstrated the spread of berserk-warriors, he does not seem to quite know what he himself means by the berserk mind/spirit, and this is also the section where he tries to fit all the pieces together. He tries to talk about berserk warriors revving themselves up for madness, with ritualistic dances, for instance. He also tries to discuss things like the shape-shifting, madness (including fairly consistent Indo-European linguistic ties to fury/madness-like concept), invulnerability/insensitivity to pain, as individual issues but

[33] Speidel, "Mad Warriors," 257.

[34] Speidel, "Mad Warriors," 259.

doesn't get very far on any of them. Speidel is also not unaware of physiological and psychological realities, but his implementation is scarce. "To do deeds of berserk daring," Speidel writes, "one had to be raging mad."[35] Statements like this are often made by scholars, this madness is something many do seem to deeply sense but, like Speidel, often do not know what to make of them or where to look for information, as traditional avenues like literature, religion, archaeology, military history, etc. do not seem to be offering a suitable answer.

As for the body of Speidel's paper, his attempt to demonstrate berserker-continuity, the combination of believing that berserks were a type of tactical-cultural hybrid and his reliance on visual material really land Speidel in trouble. He spends a great deal of time tracing these berserkers through the Bronze, Iron, and Middle Ages and across the Indo-European area, looking for any familiar markers, including what seems to be anything animal-like and anything naked-like, including a lot of images and carvings. A particular favorite of his is Trajan's Column, a gigantic piece of "Roman triumphal art" with a great many carvings of "half-naked northern Europeans."[36]

All in all, Speidel's work is invaluable to understanding the Norse berserker anew for two reasons: first, he expands the berserker firmly beyond the bounds of Scandinavia and Germany, unfortunately for Höfler and others, all the way across the Atlantic. Despite his rather overeager use of sources, he definitely makes the point that this subject is going to need a bigger boat. He also demonstrates this expanse along traditional lines of scholarship, he speaks their language, with archaeological evidence, linguistic evidence, evidence of historical change which correlates with his point, all the things most culturally-, historically-, or religiously-based scholars in this area have used to study berserkers. This is quite valuable. Speidel's work is just rather wandering and chaotic without Shay and with his somewhat overzealous evidence-gathering.

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[35] Speidel, "Mad Warriors," 273.

[36] Speidel, "Mad Warriors," 266.

Speidel's article turned into a book, *Ancient Germanic Warriors: Warrior Styles from Trajan's Column to Icelandic Sagas* a couple years later.[37] Speidel has certainly organized and expanded his ideas, and I do quite like his book, but despite the title, it not very applicable to the current investigation. Throughout he references Norse sources, but often as a casual support of a larger point. When he does have a section on Icelandic material specifically, it is not really about berserkers as we are looking at them. Even for animal warriors, for specifically Icelandic animal warriors, his discussions are far more ritualistic than psychological. The book as a whole, unsurprisingly, is an elaboration on his topics from the article, such as animal warriors (including bears and wolves, but also slightly less threatening animals like martens and bucks), strong warriors, and frightening warriors, and ends up functioning as a study of the idea of ancient fighting styles in a cultural (and sometimes fashion) sense, rather than a tactical sense. For this, the book works perfectly and, like his article, is a fantastic jumping-off point for further cross-cultural study, and in the book Speidel has been able to further develop links to societies much farther removed from the Indo-European zone, like North and South America. For these reasons, and because he really adds nothing to the conversation we have not already heard, we will not delve into the rabbit hole of this book any further here.

One of the few scholars to take *berserkir* on directly in the past 50 years or so was Benjamin Blaney, an American who wrote his doctoral dissertation for the University of Colorado in 1972 about the Norse berserker and later developed his findings into an article on what he calls the "berserk suitor" ten years later.[38] Blaney's approach to the berserker in both pieces is exhaustively informed (particularly, and unsurprisingly, in his dissertation) and quite level headed, possibly thanks to Blaney's

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[37] Michael P. Speidel, *Ancient Germanic Warriors: Warrior Styles from Trajan's Column to Icelandic Sagas*. London: Routledge ; New York, (2004).

[38] Blaney, Benjamin. "The Berserkr: His Origin and Development in Old Norse Literature." PhD, University of Colorado, 1972; Blaney, Benjamin. "The Berserk Suitor: The Literary Application of a Stereotype Theme." *Scandinavian Studies* 54, no. 4 (1982): 279–94. As Blaney's later article is far more tightly focused on the literary trope of the berserk suitor. These later literary berserks are relatives of our berserk, but are not the focus of the current work and are outside its reasonable scope; they will have to wait for another day.

main subject matter, the berserkers of the later sagas (who confront farmers, abduct women, make boasts and challenges, and are subsequently killed by the saga hero).

According to Blaney, the first comprehensive attempt at anything berserker was in 1773 by Jon Erichsen, who included in his edition of *Kristni saga* a collection of references to the berserk, in which Erichsen seems to have made not attempt at analysis, simply establishing the scope of the "motif;" a very literary approach.[39] Blaney says that Erichsen was a proponent of the "bare" theory, although of course at that time there would have been no established theory in either direction, but Erichsen's reasoning is very similar to the "bare" theory: Blaney reports that Erichsen paints "bare-shirt" as a parallel construction to *berbrynjaðr* but does not make the same observation with regard to *úlfheðinn*.[40] It is not long after, in 1784, that the Swede Samuel Lorenzo Ödman publishes a far more influential berserker theory: the berserk rage was caused by mushrooms, *Amanita muscaria* to be precise.[41] This mushroom, called the fly-agaric in English and the *flugsvamp* in Swedish, is probably the most famous mushroom in Western culture and easily recognizable with it's red cap and white spots.[42] Blaney describes this theory as an "especially tenacious" one, and he is precisely right; the mushroom theory has proven to be the most popular, and yes, even the most theoretically viable, of all the "intoxication" theories of 6.1.[43]

Another collection of berserker examples came from Konrad Maurer in the late 1880s.[44] According to Blaney, Maurer was much more analytical with his collection than Erichsen a hundred years prior. He "[emphasized] his relationship to the shape-shifter, especially to the werewolf and the werebear. Maurer listened to the stories of *berserkir* together with those of shape-shifters, yet he felt that they should not be confused with one another," and made a number of linguistic arguments regarding the

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[39] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 9-10.

[40] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 10.

[41] Blaney, "Origin and Development" 10.

[42] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 10.

[43] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 10.

[44] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 14.

language of shape-shifting and skin-changing, which Blaney finds erroneous.[45] As Blaney notes, the tie to shape-shifting caught on quickly, and Blaney cites Sveinbjörn Egilsson and Cleasby-Vigufusson's dictionary, with their idea of *ber* as "bear," as important elements in this development.[46] Blaney discusses Wilhelm Golther, who first linked the berserker to the werewolf, although Blaney notes that he did so "with some reservations, because, while the werewolf really became a wolf, the berserk remained a man in a rage."[47] This is not too distant an analysis from the conceptualization of Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, that a berserker is more like a "wild animal in the shape of a man."[48] The discussion between *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar*, if they are the same thing and if that thing could be considered a werewolf, goes on and involves a great deal of linguistic discussions surrounding the words for both animals, and the nature of skin- and shape-changing. Again, we gloss over a detailed discussion but following Blaney, Eugene Mogk, Nils Lid, and Walther Müller-Berström are all proponents of the ((*berserkir* = *úlfheðnar*) = werewolf) idea.[49]

Blaney is evidently just as aware of the fact that berserker linguistic theories are often based in their conclusions. Erik Noreen of Sweden "used this method and return to the older derivation of *berserkr* from the adjective *berr* 'bare'."[50] Noreen uses Snorri's reference that the berserkers fought without armor as the basis for his "bare" interpretation and, Blaney says, included the names of half a dozen scholars with the same interpretation and based in source as himself, ranging from the late seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth.[51] Blaney takes the opportunity to argue against Noreen,

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[45] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 13. Unfortunately this paper cannot address such a detailed analysis, but anyone interested in words like *hamr* and *hamask* is encouraged to look into Blaney's thesis and Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir's "Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature."

[46] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 14.

[47] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 14.

[48] Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir. "The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106, no. 3 (2007), 282.

[49] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 18.

[50] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 20.

[51] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 20.

and says essentially that the word for "bear," believed by the Bear-Shirt supporters to have once been **berr*, did not exist as such by the time Snorri came around, having given way (if it ever existed) to *bjǫrn*, ergo Snorri's "bare-shirt" was the only possible interpretation for such a word at the time, with the implication, therefore, that his conclusions are irrelevant.[52] Noreen also redirects one of the key Bear-Shirt arguments, that *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar* share a parallel construction (animal + skin/shirt), and says that *berserkir* is a parallel construction, just not with *úlfheðnar*, which was itself actually reserved for werewolves.[53] Hans Kuhn tends to agree with Noreen.[54]

Another member of the Bear-Shirts was Klaus von See, who took a different approach, and a rather less productive one. Von See considered the gap in time between Þórbjǫrn hornklofi's use of *berserkir/úlfheðnar* and what he considered the next recorded skaldic use, *Örvar-Odds saga*, a distance of some two to three hundred years.[55] According to von See via Blaney, this distance can only mean that there was no such word as *berserkir* or *úlfheðnar*, although there may have been bear/wolf warriors, and that those words and the associated figure(s) were later developments; von See does not offer any alternative suggestions for what such figures might have been called, according to Blaney.[56] Blaney observes, with examples, that this is not necessarily accurate, as von See does not take proper names into his count of the words' appearances, including cognates in Old High German, some which might have been contemporaries to Þórbjǫrn hornklofi's *berserkir/úlfheðnar*.[57]

Even leaving Blaney's point regarding personal names and cognates, which in theory could be argued against, von See's point makes no sense and does nothing. It is bluntly illogical to assume that something never existed because it appears not to exist anymore. Moreover, it is a meaningless argument. If the words did not exist, von See is

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[52] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 21.

[53] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 21.

[54] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 22.

[55] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 23-24.

[56] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 23-24.

[57] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 24-25.

correct in assuming that the existence thing itself may not have been (in fact, could not have been) affected. However, without the words there appears to be no point in continuing to look for an answer, either, at least judging from the implications in von See's argument, that we simply pass over Þórbjǫrn hornklofi and skip right to the supposed literary inventions of the twelfth century, and the way Blaney immediately rushed to disprove von See's point. Even in their disagreement, neither can imagine a berserker investigation without the fundamental participation of philology. Philology is important, to be sure, but there is something slightly eyebrow-raising about it being such an integral part of the discussion that such a discussion cannot exist without it.

To this end, it is worth observing, as Blaney does, that the philological approach was the one and only approach throughout most of the berserker's scholarly history, with the one exception of Ödman's mushroom theory, which was rather remarkably early in the great scheme of things.[58] To Blaney, however, and to many modern scholars, this means moving to the fields of archaeology and folk traditions, and this development kicked off between the two World Wars.[59] It was Lily Weiser in 1927 who first started this trend, examining initiation rituals of the Germanic *Männerbünde* by examining the Germanic societies in light of the research being done on primitive peoples and incorporated saga examples (*later* saga examples, Blaney is careful to note) into this framework.[60] From this, Weiser "concluded that the berserk was originally a cultic figure in the early Germanic *Männerbünde*."[61] However, Weiser's work was quickly overtaken by the infamous Otto Höfler, soon-to-be National Socialist, who built upon Weiser's ideas particularly, Blaney notes, through the addition of archaeological material showing warriors dressed in what appear to be wolf paraphernalia.[62]

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[58] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 25.

[59] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 25.

[60] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 25-26. Lily Weiser's name has been variously spelled, including Lilly/Lily and Weiser, Weiser-Aalls, Weiser Aalls, and just Aalls. Throughout this paper, I will stick with the spelling "Lily Weiser," her maiden name and author's personal spelling preference. Blaney uses "Lilly Weiser."

[61] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 26.

[62] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 26.

Since Höfler's book, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen*, he has become one of the heavyweight scholars for berserkers and Germanic warrior fraternities, and Lily Weiser is almost always mentioned as an introduction to Höfler. Not being able to read their German publications personally, it is hard to explain exactly why Hölfer has superseded Weiser so thoroughly. The general scholarly consensus on his work, apart from its application to Nazi ideology, seems to be that he made significant contributions and it is quite true that the inclusion of archaeological material took off like wildfire. It is now almost impossible to read anything about berserkers or *berserkir* without reference to such animal-warrior images, particularly the Torslunda plates, and many publications include photographs. I have a number of reservations about the new dominance of archaeological material in the berserker conversation, to be discussed later, but for now it is worth observing Weiser's overshadowed legacy and raising an eyebrow that a woman in the 1920s who makes a truly original connection is less important to future scholarship than a man in the 1930s who built on her ideas and became a Nazi.

Literary

Like Blaney, D.J. Beard approached the *berserkir* examples from a perspective which allows for more variations on a theme, and who recognizes a medieval pop-culture stereotype. Beard immediately separates the berserker of legend and the berserker of demonstrable saga evidence, by saying:

> The berserker of popular tradition is the frenzied fighter of the viking period who, impervious to pain and scorning armour, went into battle in a furious rage, screaming like a madman and hewing down all before him while swinging his sword or battle-axe with both hands. The berserkr of the Sagas, however, is presented in a number of different guises. He may vary in status from king's chosen retainer to wondering robber, and he may be presented as a human being or as a magical, semi troll-like figure.[63]

Beard comes down quite firmly on the bear/bare debate, and his explanation is very practical, bringing in many different strains together with apparent rationality. He introduces the idea of "bare"-*serkr* as the original scholarly explanation, but outdated and now "generally considered erroneous."[64] His basic explanation for this is a rare example of a purely linguistic argument, apparently in no way predicated on cultural presuppositions, saying that " 'serkr' is a substantive, not an adjective."[65] However, I fail to see how that makes a difference on two points. First, whether *serkr* is a substantive or an adjective – and I see no reason to doubt this – how does "bear" work any better with a substantive than "bare"? Even though "bear" and "bare" are a substantive and an adjective, respectively, both compounds seem to function as nouns via metonymy, describing and identifying particular men by clothing, whether bear pelts or a significant lack of clothing. Secondly, language usage is more than its technical classification, particularly once a specific word has changed form and function. Regardless of what *serkr* originally was – a substantive or an adjective – *berserkr* is a

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[63] Beard, D. J. "The Berserkir in Icelandic Literature." In *Approaches to Oral Tradition*, edited by Robin Thelwall, Repr. of (1978), 99–114. Occasional Papers in Linguistics and Language Learning, 4. Ulster: New University of Ulster, (1980), 99.

[64] Beard, "The Berserkir in Icelandic Literature," 99.

[65] Beard, "The Berserkir in Icelandic Literature," 99.

different word with a different function. New words need not follow so narrowly in their parents' footsteps; language is smarter than that, and so are language-users.

Beard also ties the berserkers to bands of "frenzied" Germanic warriors, more because they both exist than because there is reasonable and direct evidence. Many scholars seem to think that the two are implicitly linked: berserks must be an inherent part of the Germanic warrior [cults, tribes, groups, *Männerbünde*, etc.] because, what else could they be? Therefore, because they are somehow [causally] linked to the *berserkir*, information about these Germanic warriors are also evidence for the *berserkir*, and these Germanic warriors usually take two forms: the spiritual, religious figures and the violent cultural elite. Beard takes the second route, and connects berserkers to Óðinn and his frenzied following.

Now that we are with Óðinn, Beard's logical connections start to become more straightforward. He examines the chain of logic which starts at Óðinn's superpowers – often referenced in the primary sources and scholarly literature, and in both cases those superpowers leave the strong impression of a longer list of options than provided. Óðinn's prowess is commonly liked to one famous aspect of the *berserkir* – their inability to feel pain. This inability to feel pain, as Beard rightly points out, extends to "the belief that they were actually invulnerable to weapons."[66] However, these assumptions seem to be stronger amongst scholars than in the primary source material. Beard seems aware of that and examines this idea keeping the oft-quoted *á þá bítu eigi járn* (iron would not bite them) with the fact that iron isn't the only way to kill someone.[67] Beard doesn't go too far into this but he starts to develop the type of idea related to a folkloric Achilles' heel – that something's invulnerability does not extend all the way down to the fine print. He mentions the armor Guðrun makes for her sons in *Vǫlsunga saga*, supposedly "a þá bítu eigi járn," which does not prevent stoning and a

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[66] Beard, "The Berserkir in Icelandic Literature," 101.

[67] Beard, "The Berserkir in Icelandic Literature," 101. *Á þá bítu eigi járn* and its translation is cited by Beard here, but also by everyone else everywhere. The line and translation are general knowledge within the field.

fight between Gunnlaug and a berserk in *Gunnlaugs saga*, which involves a berserker blunting weapons just by looking at them.[68]

Beard points out that the berserkers are always outsiders, either by choice, by social position, or by outlaw exile.[69] Sometimes they serve real social functions, such as protection, while at other times being the exact opposite, a violent disrupter of the peace.[70] This transition from important and functional to troublesome, dangerous, and destabilizing is often interpreted as evidence of the disintegration of pagan social structures and social roles by an increasingly dominant Christianity.[71] "In some examples from the Sagas the berserkr appears as the very embodiment of paganism, almost as an Anti-Christ figure…," and Beard's following discussion of the berserker in a Christian context is useful for our later discussions of battle rage.[72] Beard says:

Beard goes on to point out the fact, as mentioned previously, that *berserksgangr* was subject to outlawry punishments.[73] However, Beard continues, it is not that simple, and it is an open question to what extent such Christian ideologies penetrated the mind of saga-writers. Beard acknowledges that "the pagan associations of the berserkir may have prejudiced the saga writers against them," but that "this fact alone would appear to be insufficient to account for the way the berserkr is portrayed in some of the sagas," and goes on to point out that most of the sagas were written by laymen, unlike other literary corpuses of contemporary Northwestern Europe.[74] Beard partially connects this gap in what we might perhaps expect, given other medieval literature, to the famously flexible role(s) of Óðinn, who has a particularly strong link to soldiers and heroes (and therefore to berserkers) and was also god of poetry.[75] Beard also points out that many

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[68] Beard, "The Berserkir in Icelandic Literature," 101.

[69] Beard, "The Berserker in Icelandic Literature," 103.

[70] Beard, "The Berserker in Icelandic Literature," 103.

[71] Beard, "The Berserker in Icelandic Literature," 103.

[72] Beard, "The Berserker in Icelandic Literature," 103. See Beard, 104 for further information on Christianity.

[73] Beard, "The Berserker in Icelandic Literature," 104

[74] Beard, "The Berserker in Icelandic Literature," 104.

[75] Beard, "The Berserker in Icelandic Literature," 104.

saga heroes (not labeled specifically as *berserkir*) are not exactly calm, gentle men – Skalla-Grímr from *Egils saga* is Beard's example – and he speculates that it is not unreasonable to deduce that ire as a sin did not take foothold very well or very quickly in the saga-verse and relevant historical periods.[76]

Beard further develops this idea that the craziness of the *berserkir* might be more us than them by connecting his berserker traits to the familiar saga-hero traits. Beard also mentions the magical invulnerability of the berserker as an element of a larger pattern of magical aids in general, and he mentions specifically the magical shirts by magical beings worn by some heroes.[77] He summarizes, quite reasonably, that "[t]he existence of such parallels between the saga hero and the berserkr makes it extremely unlikely that a mere change in attitude could bring about so drastic a change in the portrayal of one, apparently without effecting the other."[78] Beard develops a focus comparing and contrasting the saga berserker and the heroes who go up against them, and he develops two extensive parallel lists detailing these traits. In the end, he lists fifty-one traits for the berserkers and thirty for the heroes, and summarizes these points.[79] From these lists and comparisons, Beard draws out a few specific points, although it should be said that most of these are not exactly original observations, but there are almost no new original observations about the literary berserker.

Beard then compares the berserker versus hero debate to Einar Haugen's diagram of the structure of Norse Mythology. Here, Beard's analysis goes far more into fully literary comparisons of the hero/berserker archetype, which is far less relevant to our current purposes. I am fully willing to stipulate that berserkers have a literary function which is subject to the same sorts of structures as any other literary function. However, his analysis is worth it to anyone doing a classic literary analysis.

Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, an associate professor of Folkloristics at the University of Iceland, wrote an excellent article on a *berserkir*-adjacent topic, the

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[76] Beard, "The Berserker in Icelandic Literature," 104.

[77] Beard, "The Berserker in Icelandic Literature," 105.

[78] Beard, "The Berserker in Icelandic Literature," 105.

[79] Beard, "The Berserker in Icelandic Literature," 105-107.

werewolf, which does include some material relevant to our purposes. The werewolf has been tied to the berserker numerous times, but Aðalheiður mentions Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Wolfgang Golther in particular, both with similar points. Einar looked at the werewolf motif as having two variants, an older and a newer. She makes a number of observations contrasting the different elements of berserker versus werewolf, including what it really meant to shape-shift, and further discussions on the *berserkir/úlfheðnar* debate. Not getting into the various examples of *úlfr-* (and, for this article, *vargr*), Aðalheiður conceptualizes her berserkers as the flip-side of *úlfheðnar*, both "animal-warriors," based off the stanza in *Haraldskvæði*.[80] It is perhaps unsurprising that Aðalheiður interprets *berserkir* as bear-shirt, and she points to *Haraldskvæði* as explaining that "*úlfheðnar* were berserkers who had distinguished themselves in battle, i.e., warriors. Accordingly, the word "berserkir" is the name of a category and "úlfheðnar" a subcategory."[81]

Aðalheiður's linguistic analysis is less useful than her notes on the concept of shape-shifting. Watch any werewolf movie and one will easily observe that, while the beginning state (human) and the end result (animal) are fairly interchangeable, we vastly oversimplify what it means to transform. The physical means of transformation, and the extent of that transformation can tell us a lot about the conceptualization of human and animal. Aðalheiður is one of the few to pull these out for discussion and, in doing so, accidentally develops the best definition of the berserker which I have ever found, a wild animal in the shape of a man.[82] We are distracted by the end result and the basic parallels: yes, there are animals and there are humans and they are being all mixed up. Particularly with the berserker we are also desperate for any information and overreach. As Aðalheiður says, and to my knowledge, the Norse berserkers never *actually* physically transform, even the roaming thug berserkers. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that two of the Norse corpus' best animal transformations, consistently interpreted as berserkers because they are warriors who take animal form at

[80] Aðalheiður, "Werewolf," 280.

[81] Aðalheiður, "Werewolf," 281.

[82] Aðalheiður, "Werewolf," 281-282.

various points, and are full and rich depictions of animal/human crossovers, are not actually berserkers. I am speaking, of course, of Böðvarr bjarki in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and Sigurdr and Sinfjǫtli in *Vǫlsunga saga*. Just because something is going on with those two figures does not mean that that something is *berserkir*, which Aðalheiður also believes.

> In the literature, we have cases where individuals actually undergo a transformation, or where their souls depart from their bodies and take on the form of an animal. The latter possibility, perhaps a form of shamanism, is illustrated, for example, by Böðvarr bjarki in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, whose body lies quiescent in his tent while a bear fights on the battlefield.[83]

The attempts to force Böðvarr bjarki and Sigmundr/Sinfjǫtli into the berserker mold – even the generic berserker mold which includes everyone from the berserk thugs to characters like Egil, Skalla-Grímr, and Kveld-Úlfr from *Egils saga* is the scholarly equivalent of Cinderella's stepsisters trying to fit into her glass slipper. I understand the desire but it simply does not work, and hampers attempts to study those characters, those episodes, those sagas, the *berserkir/úlfheðnar*, and all the cultural and religious arguments derived from those moments.

Ármann Jakobsson, a professor in Old Icelandic Literature at the University of Iceland, is one of the few scholars to make a nod to the idea of battle trauma. In response to the conflicting information presented to us in the primary sources, he says:

> "The lack of scholarly consensus on the nature of *berserkir* might also reflect a lack of consensus in the Middle Ages as to what these somewhat frightening creatures actually were. We should not exclude the possibility that there may have been some in *Egils saga*'s original audience who believed the *berserkir* were ordinary humans enraged in battle to the point of madness. On the other end of the interpretive spectrum, others might have believed them to be shape shifters who metamorphosed into beasts in the midst of battle."[84]

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[83] Aðalheiður, "Werewolf," 282. And she has in footnote 19, same page: "Similar types of shape-shifting are also described in Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga*, which states that Óðinn takes on the forms of various animals while he sleeps."

[84] Ármann Jakobsson. "Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in Egils Saga." *Scandinavian Studies* 83 (2011), 34.

Ármann brings up an important point to keep in mind when examining the berserker: how do we define transformation without defining humanity?[85] There can be no real debate in academic society that *we* do not believe in physical transformation, although the argument could be made that, due to development in psychiatric fields, we do believe in mental transformation. Details aside, Ármann is exactly right. In the berserk warrior, we are dealing with a transformation from humanity to something else, usually identified as animalistic or bestial, but transformation is irrelevant without a clear starting point – humanity – while the end point can afford to be more vague, as the main transformation is *from* not *into*. Unfortunately, this paper does not have the space to elucidate the possible conceptions and boundaries of "human." Lacking such a study, we should also be wary of over-inferring such a definition, as it is very difficult to do so without our own personal assumptions and our take on the Viking Age filtering in. Indeed, it is easy to see how attitudes have changed, from Howard Fabing's characterization of berserks as "hoodlums" in 1956 through the nuanced representations of Viking Age religion and mentality by Neil Price in 2002.[86] But whether we see the Vikings as brutes, or the classic and highly problematic "noble savage," or actually treat them like people, similar, different, and mysterious to us now, we do not know how the Vikings understood humanity and we cannot be sure how exposure to and participation in organized violence was received by the individuals and the community.

Mushrooms

There is a longstanding theory in berserk scholarship that the berserker could have been the result of an ingested substance with physical or mental side-effects. Alcohol is one such substance – it is no secret that the Scandinavians enjoy beer – but easily the most popular suspect is a hallucinogenic mushroom called the *Amanita muscaria*, or "fly-agaric," easily recognizable throughout folk art and popular culture for it's bright red hood with white spots. Although the mushroom theory was first

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[85] See Ármann "Beast and Man," 34.

[86] Fabing, Howard D. "On Going Berserk: A Neurochemical Inquiry." The Scientific Monthly 83, no. 5 (1956), 232–37; Price, Neil S. *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. Uppsala, (2002).

proposed by Samuel Ödman in 1784 as mentioned by both Liberman and Blaney, the father of this theory for the modern generations is Dr. Howard Fabing, a psychiatrist and neurologist, who presented a paper in May of 1956 which was subsequently published in two separate medical journals: the *Scientific Monthly* and the *American Journal of Psychiatry.*[87] This study tested the mushroom theory with the *Amanita muscaria*, a theory which at that point in time seems to have been something of an academic old wives' tale, mixed with a strong dose of European and Scandinavian folklore surrounding the mushroom.

His study is quite interesting, and absolutely invaluable: the tested one of the few berserker theories we are actually capable of testing and, although I am not a trained scientist, he seems to have done so with a well-planned and well-executed experiment, scientifically solid. The one problem, the one massive, gaping problem with Fabing's paper is that he is wrong: the medical evidence he collects simply does not describe a berserker, although Fabing concludes that it does. By itself, this is understandable. Fabing is certainly an outsider to the field of berserkers, Norse/ Scandinavian studies, and the humanities in general; he was writing rather soon after the resurgence of berserker scholarship set off by Lily Weiser and Otto Höfler, which would presumably have been rather difficult for an American to come by between the 1930s and the early 1950s; and he was writing during the early years of the sweeping American social and political overreaction to anything related to non-pharmaceutical drugs. What is completely shocking is the number of professional Norse scholars who seem to have overlooked the fact that, while Fabing proved that the *Amanita muscaria* was definitely a hallucinogenic mushroom, it was also definitely could not have "caused" berserkers under any definition of the term. The mushroom theory chapter of berserker historiography should have been *closed* with Fabing's article, but somehow, he made it almost indestructible.

Fabing's experiment did not involve the consumption of actual mushrooms. The active ingredient, if we can call it that, in the *Amanita muscaria* was identified in 1953

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[87] Fabing, "On Going Berserk, 232–37; Liberman, "History and Legend," 409; Blaney, "Origin and Development," 10.

as bufotenine, also an active compound in *muscaria*'s cousins, *Amanita mappa* and *Amanita pantherina*, and "first isolated and defined chemically… in the skin of poisonous toads."[88] Fabing – and others – were injecting volunteer inmates from the Ohio State Penitentiary with bufotenine, slowly increasing the size of the dose and observing the effects as part of a larger study into schizophrenia.[89] All the test subjects were "healthy young [men]….well above the normal intelligence level, all had been college students, none were recidivist criminals, and all were considered to be relatively stable emotionally."[90]

> A dose of 1.0 milligram of bufotenine produced only a sensation of tightness in the chest and paresthesias of the face. Two milligrams produced a "tightness in the stomach" plus flushing and a purplish hue of the skin of the face. Four milligrams produced a sensation of tingling in the face and neck, a sense of chest oppression, a subjective report that "a load is pressing down from above and my body feels heavy," and "a very pleasant Martini feeling." This was followed by visual hallucinations of vivid red and black blocks moving before the visual field, inability to concentrate, and a feeling of great placidity and less anxiety than before the onset of experiment. The face appeared lividly purple for 13 minutes.[91]

The experiment continues through to sixteen milligrams, with reports of relaxation, more visual hallucinations, the purpling of the face became darker and longer-lasting.[92] At sixteen milligrams, Fabing observes that "[t]ime and space perception were grossly impaired, and [the subject] expressed depersonalization feelings with such statements as 'I am here and not here.'"[93] Physical symptoms such as nausea (which worsened with the dosage), rapid movement of the eyes, and pupil dilation "occurred in all cases."[94] Fabing also reports "that they felt a lack of drive rather than a sense of fatigue" and that,

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[88] Fabing, "On Going Berserk," 233.

[89] Fabing, "On Going Berserk," 235.

[90] Fabing, "On Going Berserk," 235. Exactly how many milligrams of bufotenine per serving, whatever that may be, of *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms is not really addressed.

[91] Fabing, "On Going Berserk," 236.

[92] Fabing, "On Going Berserk," 236.

[93] Fabing, "On Going Berserk," 236.

[94] Fabing, "On Going Berserk," 236.

"[a]s the dose is increased, distortion of time and space perception occurs, as do depersonalization and bodily restlessness."[95]

Fabing places this evidence from his study alongside the anecdotal accounts of those who have consumed *Amanita muscaria* and notices a "striking" similarity between all these accounts up to and including the descriptions of berserk rage:[96]

> It would appear, then, that recent observations on the human being tend to support the Ødman-Schübeler hypothesis that the Norse giants ate *Amanita muscaria* to produce the ecstatic reckless rage for which they are renowned, and which was a culturally accepted temporary psychotic aberration in their group.[97]

Looking at Fabing's observations, however, it is evident that the symptoms of *Amanita muscaria* consumption unequivocally do not describe a berserker, and the obvious reasons are well summed-up by Benjamin Blaney in his dissertation:

> Virtually anyone familiar with the character of the berserk should be able to see that a man under the influence of bufotenine bears little resemblance to the Old Norse figure…The only similarities between Fabing's subjects and the berserk seem to be the discolouration of the face and the rolling of the eyes, and this is hardly enough to identify the two types as the same. Moreover, none of the subjects reported feeling the rage and fury so typical of the berserk. Dr. Fabing's conclusions merely indicate his unfamiliarity with the nature of the berserk.[98]

If there was one theory on the berserker which we could firmly and absolutely reject, it is the idea that mushrooms caused the berserk rage and, whatever he himself might have thought, Fabing has done just that.

Now, it should be said that there is another branch of the mushroom theory: shamanism and entheogenic customs. There is a parallel tradition of scholarship surrounding mushrooms, with a similar pattern of substance-searching to the berserker, surrounding shamanistic practices and religious frenzy/ecstasy. As discussed previously, religious frenzy/ecstasy has often popped up as a berserker theory, and it is therefore unsurprising that this triangle of mushrooms/substances-berserkers-shamans/religious

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[95] Fabing, "On Going Berserk," 236.

[96] Fabing, "On Going Berserk," 236.

[97] Fabing, "On Going Berserk," 236.

[98] Blaney, "Origin and Development," 12.

ecstasy has become entangled. I have stayed away from incorporating a discussion of shamanism into this paper for three simple reasons: one, shamanism is almost as complex of a subject as the berserker itself; two, the shamanistic angle is fairly redundant, as it is basically a hybridized version of the mushroom/ecstasy theories and the cultic/ritualistic theory; and three, I do not believe that the berserker is organically connected to shamanism any more than it's two parent theories.

However, shamanism itself is a different story. The use of mushrooms and other hallucinogenic substances for a wide range religious purposes is real and widespread, and I think that Fabing's article demonstrated very well that *Amanita muscaria* was very likely to have been used. Just because the *Amanita muscaria* was not used to create berserkers does not mean that it was not used for other things, presumably even within a single culture at times. The extent of mushroom usage in Scandinavia, as well as related cultures and geographies, is an ongoing discussion. The reboot-father of this, as Fabing was for mushroom-berserkers, is probably R. Gordon Wasson, a self-taught American ethnomycologist and contemporary of Fabing's who published an extensive book claiming that he had identified *Amanita muscaria* as the legendary *Soma,* the divine drink of the Vedic Indians as detailed – very detailed – in the *Rig Veda*.[99] Wasson's book is joined by two articles, one by anthropologist Reid Kaplan, which adds Scandinavian archaeological evidence to the mix, and a second by Matthew Bennett Nichols, who tries to expand on the idea of a mushroom cult in Scandinavia surrounding the *Amanita muscaria*.[100] All three are very interesting proposals and I have no reason to doubt that there is some level of validity to the importance of the mushroom for North Atlantic and circumpolar cultures, or Wasson's identification of *Amanita muscaria* as *Soma*. There are moments, particularly when it comes to identifying mushroom-imagery and

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[99] Wasson, R. Gordon. *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*. Ethno-Mycological Studies ; 1. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, (1967).

[100] Kaplan, Reid W. "The Sacred Mushroom in Scandinavia." *Man* 10, no. 1 (March 1975): 72–79. Nichols, Bennett M. "L'agarico Muscario E L'antica Religione Scandinavia / The Fly-Agaric and Early Scandinavian Religion." Edited by Johnathan Ott and Giorgio Samorini. *Eleusis: Piante E Composti Psicoattivi / Journal of Psychoactive Plants and Compounds, Nuova serie / New Series*, no. 4 (2000): 87–119.

iconography in archaeological sources, such as carvings and stone-shapes, where the mushroom-cult theory falls off the deep end just as Speidel did.[101]

It is outside the scope of this paper to deal with the mushrooms themselves and their other possible relevance to the cultures in question. Those who have examined the mushroom in-depth tend to agree that the berserker is an unrelated phenomenon. Kaplan does not mention berserkers at all and Nichols, who does not seem to quite know what to do with them, does not consider berserkers worth his time:

> Although the Berserks were affiliated with the cult of [Óðinn] and were shape-changers that wore bear-skins and engaged in what appears to have been a form of shamanic warfare, I am omitting them from this study, for their addition here is an unnecessary source of complication.[102]

"Unnecessary source of complication" is right. Wasson, on the other hand, is unapologetically direct. He repeatedly and explicitly rejects the notion that the *Amanita muscaria* had anything to do with the berserker rage, and even goes so far as to provide an appendix of sorts with the original arguments from the eighteenth and nineteenth century proponents of the theory, some of which have been mentioned previously: Samuel Ödman (1784), Fredrik Schübeler (1886), Carl Mörner (1919), and Rolf Nordhagen (1930).[103]

The Berserker Complex: Modern Berserkers and Combat Trauma

In my opinion, berserker scholarship at large stagnated for many years until the publication of *Achilles in Vietnam* by Dr. Jonathan Shay in 1994. Shay's academic

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[101] Nichols is particularly prone to this, and I would encourage any interested parties to read Kaplan's earlier, and far more selective, article on the subject before attempting to deal with Nichols.

[102] Nichols, "The Fly-Agaric," 101. Nichols, who is fairly consistent in his use of folk-evidence throughout, also writes: "The common name for the fly-agaric in Icelandic is *berserkjasveppur* ("berserk-mushroom"); this is not a true, or indigenous, folk-name, but almost certainly is derived from the debate that began with Samuel Ödman in late eighteenth century Sweden. Due to the limited number of birch enclaves (of little prominence and significance in terms of the overall flora of the island), it is understandable why a cultural significance for this mushroom would be absent in Iceland" (Nichols, "The Fly-Agaric," 104).

[103] Wasson, *Soma*, Ödman 343-247; Schübeler 348-351; Mörner, 351-353; Nordhagen, 353-355. It should be said that Ödman's theory was brilliant and wonderful in his time and I greatly respect his contribution, *at that time*. However, as described with Fabing, we now know he was wrong.

background, subject matter, intentions, and personal agenda in that publication are completely different from those of the literature discussed above. Shay makes only the most minimal references to the Norse idea of a berserker when discussing etymology and I have yet to discover an English language source, or hear rumor of a foreign-language source, from the Norse scholastic community which references Shay or his ideas, even on the rare occasion that post-traumatic stress disorder itself is mentioned. Shay is a psychiatrist who has worked heavily with American veterans of the Vietnam War (1955-1975) in Boston, Massachusetts and has no formal education as a historian, medievalist, Classicist, and least of all a Scandinavianist.[104]

Before getting into *Achilles in Vietnam*, allow me first to lay out some parameters and contrast points. Shay's work is the result of extensive therapy he personally conducted with a wide variety of Vietnam veterans and the significance of his first-hand exposure to their first-hand accounts versus the Norse situation, separated by hundreds of years and just as much cultural difference aside from the constant contest over source reliability, the significance of difference in source material cannot be overstated. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, Shay is a trained psychiatrist and I am not. (Nor, to my knowledge, are any of the scholars mentioned in this paper, with the exception of Fabing.) It is not my intention here to "diagnose" anyone with anything, as we could maybe say Shay "diagnosed" Achilles via metaphor. It is not my intention to set up a Greek vs. Norse equation with Shay's Vietnam veterans as the common denominator of "Reality," nor is it my intention to decide which culture had it worse than others, whose combat trauma was more traumatic, because that would be absurd. I freely admit that I wholeheartedly agree with Shay and consider his analysis to be the baseline explanation for the berserk phenomenon as a whole, and, when all is said and done, I will not be presenting a counter-point: I mean to introduce Shay into the Norse discussion, not evaluate his validity. In that vein, I do mean that I consider Shay's explanation a baseline for the phenomenon at large. Nothing with the complexity, longevity, and cultural breadth of the berserker is kept in play without

[104] After the publication of *Achilles in Vietnam*, Shay has become a recognized figure in Classical studies because of his highly original take on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Prior to publication, Shay released a couple of smaller articles covering the material which *Achilles in Vietnam* made famous.

multiple components coming and going over time, but I do believe that Shay's theory is the foundation for all the rest.

It is also unfortunately necessary to outline my concept of "proof." I do not believe there is such a thing as an exact recipe, in most human things and the berserker phenomenon in particular. Shay was trained in the hard sciences and is somewhat prone to lists and precise components, as are Norse scholars, particularly those trained in philology, which has an ideology similar to mathematics. I think there is room for variation without that variation collapsing an entire argument. In fact, even if we isolate our discussion to a particular society, a particular time period, even a particular military conflict, the idea of the berserker phenomenon deals with the complexities of human nature, human physiology and brain chemistry, and human experiences and relationships: there is no exact recipe for any of those things, let alone all of those things. Throughout his book, and particularly in his conclusions, Shay is open about his political opinions regarding war. *Achilles in Vietnam* and Shay's subsequent work on reducing combat trauma, if possible, is inherently anti-war and has inspired even more blatant anti-war academic arguments from scholars like Robert Meagher, who writes more specifically about the damage inherent in the ideology of "just war."[105] I have no intention of becoming entangled in a political discussion – this is not the proper arena – but it is hard to avoid anti-war undertones with any use of Shay's work, as it speaks so loudly for itself. Similarly, it is hard to avoid, nor do I think we should avoid, the reality of the twentieth century and its effect on all of us. Berserkers have often held a fascination but the resurgence of enthusiasm during the twentieth century is quite the coincidence and the steadfast avoidance of any theory like Shay's and the obsessive enthusiasm for safe and distant explanations with magic mushrooms and ancient rituals is almost equally interesting. It certainly gives a boost to Shay; it's hard not to like a theory which accurately and adequately explains both the subject and the scholars.

There is also the after-effects of the psychological *berserksgangr* and the exposure to intense combat trauma, what Shay calls a "betrayal of 'what's right,'" more

[105] Meagher, Robert E. *Killing from the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014.

than simply a psychological trauma this sort of experience results in a psychological wound, a wound to one's sense of humanity and morality, a "moral injury," and it is this wound which Shay was dealing with at the VA hospital in Boston. Needless to say, the majority of soldiers probably do not survive such a wound, even if they live through the war (reasonably unlikely for a berserk), they do not last long into civilian life, either through suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, incarceration, or homelessness and disease.

The berserk phenomenon is always going to be a difficult one to prove without the benefit of first-hand psychiatric analysis and at this scale, demonstrating the trend is more the issue. The main focus of this paper is contrasting the two theoretical approaches to the berserker phenomenon as it plays out in the Norse corpus: the traditional explanations and Shay's explanation, which, in all fairness, is quite new. I believe that Shay's explanation answers some of the most frustrating berserker questions, such as the bear/bare/wolf tangle and the ferocity and pervasiveness of the berserk figure, which has led to most drug and cultic explanations. Using Shay's theory, I think we can reevaluate and recalibrate the different theories on the Norse berserker to more specific questions and more productive lines of inquiry.

To fully integrate Shay's understanding of the berserker into Norse studies, the relevant information would be far more than just the moments of Norse *berserkrsgangr* or the animal identification, naming, and costuming. Shay's berserker is part of a process, and this includes the exposure to violence and the emotional, psychological, and literal living conditions of the soldiers prior to their *berserksgangr* and their behavior after a return to "civilian" life. We would also have to take into account worldview and religious differences, and the encroaching Christianity. A detailed look at Shay's work is, unfortunately, outside the scope of the current project. This will have to serve as a basic introduction of Shay's work to the corpus of Norse scholarship.

There is a great deal more to Shay's understanding of the berserk phenomenon than just the act of going berserk or identifying with animal imagery. Broadly speaking, this *berserksgangr* is one element of a larger process, the extreme result of a combination of factors, and these factors are as much a part of the experience and the

psychological climate as the *berserksgangr* itself. Shay's berserker is a very complicated figure and it is outside the scope of this project to go into every detail. It is also outside the current scope to offer a full background on the differences between Shay's Vietnam veterans, Homer's Achilles, and the Norse heroes, but most of the differences can be boiled down to either, a cultural difference, as discussed previously, or a difference in the saturation level of the examples in question.

The Vietnam War and the *Iliad* are so perfect for this, so perfect a match for each other (not the least of which for Homer's level of detail, observation, and general writing style), that it can be easy to forget that other cultures or source material might look much thinner next to these two. From a psychological point of view, the Vietnam War would have received a 10/10 for doing things badly. Regardless of intent, whatever could have been done to create the perfect storm for moral injury was done perfectly and repeatedly, a masterpiece of mistakes. We then have, in the *Iliad*, and extensive look at a few set individuals with a very high level of observation and writing skill, an unwavering emotional awareness, and some of the same cultural practices which affected the Americans in Vietnam, such as ethical standards for engaging the enemy and respecting enemy dead were also at play in the world of the *Iliad*. The Norse sources are just not as perfect. The anecdotes are smaller, emotional awareness and emotional display are less of a focus, hindered further by the saga style (although the skaldic poetry would be worth some emotional investigation on this point). It is rather difficult, therefore, to conduct a study of Shay's berserker in the Norse tradition which will look anything as full and rich with ruin as *Achilles in Vietnam*, particularly within the current scope.

Therefore, instead of going through each point one by one, I have chosen a handful of examples from Shay's work which should be easy to transpose into a Norse context, elements of Shay's observations which would have applied to that culture at that time. This is not exhaustive, just introductory. We also see, as Shay somewhat demonstrates regarding the *Iliad*, that we might need to expand our concept of the berserker's battlefields from the strictly physical (even the few which are magical) to a cosmic level. After these snippets, I shall include a few examples from the Norse sagas

to reinforce those links; again, this is demonstrative rather than exhaustive. First, though, for those who love lists, let us briefly contextualize the criteria: for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in this context, Shay lists some of the most common symptoms, noting that, "[t]he symptoms can range in severity from mild to devastating, and not everyone will have all of the symptoms at the same time."[106] These include:

- Loss of authority over mental function–particularly memory and trustworthy perception
- Persistent mobilization of the body and the mind for lethal danger, with the potential for explosive violence
- Persistence and activation of combat survival skills in civilian life
- Chronic health problems stemming from chronic mobilization of the body for danger
- Persistent expectation of betrayal and exploitation; destruction of the capacity for social trust
- Persistent preoccupation with both the enemy and the veteran's own military/ governmental authorities
- Alchohol and druge abuse
- Suicidality, despair, isolation, and meaninglessness.[107]

Characteristics of the berserk state:

- Beastlike
- Godlike
- Socially disconnected
- Crazy, mad, insane
- Enraged
- Cruel, without restraint or discrimination
- Insatiable
- Devoid of fear
- Inattentive to own safety
- Distractible
- Indiscriminate
- Reckless, intoxicated, frenzied
- Cold, indifferent
- Insensible to pain
- Suspicious of friends[108]

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[106] Shay, *Achilles*, xx.

[107] Shay, *Achilles*, xx.

[108] Shay, *Achilles*, 82.

We tend to think of alive and dead as fairly straightforward, but this is not always the case. Particularly after an extreme loss, in combat, the loss of a close friend is particularly and specially traumatic, many veterans report that they feel already dead. This can be the inverse of soldiers who experience a traumatically close brush with death, a chance which often results in the death of another. Not only does this immediately bring to mind the liminality of a battlefield existence with life on one side and the *einherjar* on the other, such thinking can lead to berserk behavior. Of being already dead, Shay writes:

> The sense of being already dead may contribute to the berserker's complete loss of fear, which we shall see below. It may also be the prototype of the loss of *all* emotion that defines for combat post-traumatic stress disorder the prolonged states of numbness – the inability to feel love or happiness or to believe that anything matters.[109]

When it comes to a near-death experience, we see definite traces of the berserker's power, not just their prowess, but one might almost say their warrior's charisma:

> When a soldier is trapped, surrounded, or overrun and facing certain death, the berserk state has apparent survival value, because he has nothing to lose and everything to gain from reckless frenzy. Paradoxically, however, deliverance from certain death is also a common trigger of the berserk state: (See Appendix 1.1)[110]
>
> The berserker also feels like a god. The veteran who had four berserk episodes told me he experienced the third one when he was trapped after his helicopter was shot down on a fire base that was then overrun. The men were demoralized and not firing their weapons. In a berserk frenzy he grabbed a weapon and jumped up on the berm, firing at the North Vietnamese: (See Appendix 1.2)[111]

We also see, somewhat surprisingly, that this behavior is magnetic, and this certainly puts the pre-literary trope berserkers, the rampaging "heroes," in an interesting, and perhaps less exaggerated, light.

> Now that [the berserk soldier] is obsessed with revenge, however, his own safety and that of his team no longer matter. All the diversity and multiplicity of social morality have been replaced by the single value of revenge. However, the berserker's sense of godlike invulnerability seems to make others feel safe.

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[109] Shay, *Achilles*, 53.

[110] Shay, *Achilles*, 79-80.

[111] Shay, *Achilles*, 84.

> They often volunteer to go on patrol with the berserker, despite his visible indifference to their safety."[112]

The biggest piece of the berserker, however, the most memorable and the most requiring explanation or justification in scholarship, is of course the violent berserker rage itself. In the *Iliad*, Achilles is repeatedly likened to a lion. He taunts and smiles as he kills a young enemy nobleman whom he had previously treated with professional respect, obeyed the rules of war, with capture and ransom back to Troy. When Hector, the warrior who killed Achilles' closest friend, Patroclus, asks Achilles to observe warrior courtesy and resect his soon-to-be-dead body, to return it to his family unsullied, Achilles replies that he would rather eat him. (Two accounts of the berserk rage, along with moments from *Egils saga* and *Örvar-Odds saga* are in the Appendix, 1.3 and 1.4 for the Vietnam accounts and 2.1 and 2.2 for the saga accounts.)

Despite the differences in personal detail, it is hard not to see traces of this behavior in the sagas. The extreme violent outbursts, often in the middle of battle or following the death of a loved one, which exert far more force of destruction than necessary to simply kill or defeat, are familiar, and too is the collateral damage. The last paragraph in particular is astonishingly reminiscent of Skalla-Grímr's attack on Egil, and the slave woman who stepped between them and said, "Hamask þú nú, Skalla-Grímr, at syni þínum."[113]

There are also less specific examples from Shay's observations, but elements which are nonetheless reminiscent of the cultural backdrop of the sagas.

> Homeric warriors saw equipment failure and other incidents of battlefield luck as the gods' meddling. Clearly, the poet can extent the finger of god wherever he pleases. Sometimes the *Iliad*'s combatants recognize divine intervention when Homer has shown it to us, and sometimes when Homer has all the gods resting in their dressing rooms the soldiers on stage attribute their bad luck to a god anyway.[114]

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[112] Shay, *Achilles*, 90-91.

[113] Sigurður Nordal, ed. *Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Vol. II. Íslenzk Fornrit. Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1979; 101. "That's your own son you're going for, Skallagrim," (Pálsson and Edwards, *Egil's Saga*, 95.

[114] Shay, *Achilles*, 143.

> Religious instruction of children usually offers a strongly positive view of such self-sacrifice, often explicitly guaranteeing that the person who dies in this fashion will spend eternity in paradise as his reward. However, a second guarantee is usually implicitly made at the same time: God will see to it that the act of self-sacrifice, or even a sincere willingness to die, will *spare* the life of the comrade. Battle is full of bizarre ironies that seem to have been scripted for black comedy, such as the man in a bunker who throws himself on a grenade to save his comrades. The grenade is a dud, but because he is on the ground he alone survives when the enemy bursts into the bunker and guns down all the others. What happens when the sacrifice, or the sincere willingness to sacrifice, does not "work"? This is a situation experienced by many combat veterans with PTSD.[115]

These elements may seem slight, but the Norse seem to have had a very well-developed sense of lucky, unlucky, etc. and it is impossible to overlook everything that has been said throughout the studies of Óðinn, the valkyries, and "choosing" men for Valhǫll in light of comments like this. Each of these elements has a history to complex to go into on their own, the the elements of betrayal, of irony, even the classic use of dry saga humor for gory topics can be seen in statements like these. The Norse gods are not the Greek gods, and they are not the Judeo-Christian god, but nonetheless the Norse clearly had a god, with company, who's authority overrode the soldiers' own actions, often accompanied by a sense of betrayal.

These were only a small sample of Shay's work and his veterans accounts, and only the beginning of ways in which we might be able to see his theories in a berserker context, even if some extrapolation is required. The mythology also provides an interesting tidbit, worthy of further study, events such as the murder of Baldr (death by friendly fire; death by upper-management "mistakes" or tactical casualties) and Freyr not having his sword at Ragnarǫk (failure of weaponry at key moments) for starters. If we choose to mix in a cultural customs such as ritualistic frameworks, and the importance of religious attitudes and expectations of gods in war, there are many interesting directions to pursue Shay into Norse territory.

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[115] Shay, *Achilles*, 74.

Conclusion

This has been a very abbreviated look at a very large subject. It is my hope that the previous scholarship on the Norse berserker now looks a little weaker and that the opening we have for scholars like Jonathan Shay look a little more inviting. Much has not made it into this survey, including staple Norse scholars like Hilda Ellis Davidson, Rudolf Simek, and John Lindow. The vast majority of Norse scholars discuss the berserker at some point in their career, and I have tried to select those which best exemplify trends and ways of thinking. Very few scholars, even in recent years, and even after the publication of *Achilles in Vietnam*, have made noticeable efforts to incorporate combat trauma, let alone well-developed efforts. The one exception is Neil Price, whose book *The Viking Way*, was too vast to make it into this survey in any meaningful way. To give a vast simplification, Price was attempting to study, among many other things, the intersection of spirituality, magic, and practice involving Oðinnic warfare, and was able to do so with a very impressive balance of humanism and hard scholarship. Towards the end of his book, Price begins to tie in military experiences from our own time frame, including World War I and the American Civil War, both sweeping and bloodthirsty campaigns, both with a lot of first-hand literary and poetic publications to their names. Price did not include Shay in his study, and the only explanation I can think of here was that Shay was unknown to him. This has been a very brief survey by a junior scholar from outside the field of Scandinavian studies and if it has done nothing else, I hope it introduces Shay to the Norse community so that scholars like Price can take him up.

APPENDIX 1:
First-hand accounts from Vietnam

Shay employs firsthand accounts throughout his book and was very professional in his treatment of these accounts: he has removed all possible identifying information – names, places, operations, etc. – and usually provides a bracketed explanation of any military terminology or slang that the original wording contains, as well as explanations of Greek words and concepts. I have kept these in for the same reasons, and, as NVA has been introduced to readers already by this point in the text, NVA stands for North Vietnamese Army, the "enemies" of the American forces and allies.

1.1 First account:

> Just as we're coming in I could see this NVA with his RPG [an infantry antitank weapon descended from the World War II bazooka] pointed straight at me. I said to my copilot, "You take it" [take control of the aircraft], and then at the last second the NVA shifted his aim to my [copilot] and fired. It hit the plastic and stuck halfway through but didn't go off. It just sat there vibrating. We landed and got the squad off. Then as we were taking off – I guess it was the vibration – it didn't explode, it burned. It sent a stream of flame right in my copilot's chest, and it literally melted him. The smell was beyond imagination.
>
> After that I knew I couldn't be killed.[1]

1.2 Second account:

> Everyone was so shocked, all the firing stopped except me, and then I stopped. It was silent. I felt like a god, this power flowing through me. Anybody could have picked me off there – but I was untouchable.[2]

1.3 Third account:

> It was about a week or two into Union II. I was walking point. I had seen this NVA soldier at a distance. We were approaching him and he spotted us. We spread out to look for him. I was coming around a stand of grass and heard noise. I couldn't tell who it was, us or him. I stuck my head in the bush and saw this NVA hiding there and told him to come out. He started to move back and I saw he had one of those commando weapons, y'know, with a pistol grip under his thigh, and he brought it up and I was looking straight down the bore. I pulled the trigger on my M-16 and nothing happened. He fired and I felt this burning on my cheek. I don't know what I did with the bolt of the 16, but I got it to fire, and I emptied everything I had into him. Then I saw blood dripping on

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[1] Shay, *Achilles*, 79-80

[2] Shay, *Achilles*, 84.

the back of my hand and I just went crazy. I pulled him out into the paddy and carved him up with my knife. When I was done with him, he looked like a rag doll that a dog had been playing with. Even then I wasn't satisfied. I was fighting with the [medical] corpsmen trying to take care of me I was trying to get at him for more….

I felt betrayed by trying to give the guy a chance and I got blasted. I lost all my mercy. I felt a drastic change after that. I just couldn't get enough, I built up such hate, I couldn't do enough damage….

Got worse as time went by. 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. Every time you lost a friend it seemed like a part of you was gone. Get one of them to compensate what they had done to me. I got very hard, cold, merciless. I lost all my mercy.[3]

1.4 Fourth account:

It was like two years, I was like that. I remember re-upping. I definitely remember. I wanted revenge. I didn't get it out of me. I wanted it, I wanted it…. It was unbelievable, the revenge never left me for a minute. It was there. It was there and it was powerful. And it consumed me. It consumed my mind. It consumed my body. It consumed every part of me. They took… my life. Somebody had to pay them back for that. And it was me, because it was my life. That's how I looked at it. I couldn't get enough. I could have had my hands around ten Gooks' throats a day and it wouldn't be enough.

I carried this home with me. I lost all my friends, beat up my sister, went after my father. I mean, I just went after anybody and everything. Every three days I would totally explode, lose it for no reason at all. I'd be sitting there calm as could be, and this monster would come out of me with a fury that most people didn't want to be around. So it wasn't just over there. I brought it back here with me.[4]

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[3] Shay, *Achilles*, 78-79.

[4] Shay, *Achilles*, 95.

APPENDIX 2:
Saga examples

Örvar-Odds saga

Þat var einn dag, at þeir Oddr ok Ásmundr váru tveir saman staddir á landi uppi. Oddr var svá búinn, at hann hafði örvamæli sinn á baki sér, en boga í hendi ok vildu leita manna nokkurra, ef þeir fyndi. Nú finnr Oddr eigi fyrr en strengr gellr við, ok flýgr ör af skógi ok nemr eigi fyrr staðar en hún kemr at Ásmundi, ok fell hann við ok dó skjótt. Þetta þótti Oddi svá mikil tíðendi ok ill, at hann þykkist aldri slíkan skaða beðit hafa á sinni ævi.

Hann gengr nú á land upp, en Ásmundr lá þar eftir, ok er Oddr svá í illum hug, at hann ætlar sér ekki annat en gera Írum allt þat illt, er honum kemr í hug. Hann kem nú at rjóðri einu ok sér þar fjölda mikinn, bæði konur ok karla. Hann bað mann standa upp í guðvefjarkyrtli, ok hafði boga í hendi, en örvarnar stóðu í vellinum hjá honum. Þat þykkir Oddi at vísu mega ganga, at hann muni þar eftir hefndum eiga at leita, þar sem sá maðr er. Því tekr hann ör eina af Gusisnatum ok leggr á streng ok skýtr at þessum manni. Kom sú á hann miðjan, ok fell han þegar dauðr niðr. Nú skýtr hann hverri at annarri, svá at hann drap þar þrjá menn aðra. Ok nú flýði liðit á skóga. Enn Oddr er svá í illum hug við Íra, at han ætlar at vinna þeim allt pat illt, er hann megi okra.[5]

One day it happened that Odd and Asmund were alone together some distance inland. Odd was carrying his arrow-bag on his back, and had his bow in his hand. They were looking to see if they could find anyone. Before Odd suspected anything, a bowstring suddenly twanged, and an arrow came flying out of the trees. It was a direct hit on Asmund. He fell down and died almost at once. To Odd this was the most terrible loss he had ever suffered in all his days on earth.

Odd left Asmund lying there and went deeper inland. So fierce was his rage, his only thought was to hurt the Irish in any way he could, no matter what entered his head. He came upon a clearing in the wood where he saw a large crowd of people gathered, men and women. He caught sight of a man there wearing a costly tunic, a bow in his hand, and beside him arrows stuck in the ground. Odd was sure that this was where he should direct his vengeance, against this man. So he pulled out one of Gusir's Gifts, drew the bowstring and took aim at him. The arrow caught the man in the the waist, and he dropped dead. Now Odd shot arrow after arrow, killing three more men, and then all the people ran off into the forest. Odd was in such a rage against the Irish, there was no limit to the damage he meant to do.[6]

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[5] Guðni Jónsson. "Örvar-Odds Saga." In *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda*, II: 199–363. Íslendingasagnaútgáfn, 1959; 237-238.

[6] Pálsson, Hermann, and Paul Edwards, trans. *Seven Viking Romances*. England: Penguin Books, 1985, 51.

Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar

Ok er þeir váru búnir til hólmgǫngu, þá hlaupask þeir at ok skutu fyrst spjótum, ok festi hvártki spjótit í skildi, námu bæði í jǫrðu staðar. Síðan taka þeir báðir til sverða sinna, gengusk þá at fast ok hjuggusk tilæ gekk Atli ekki á hæl; þeir hjuggu títt ok hart, ok ónýttusk skjótt skildirnir. Ok er skjǫldr Atla var mjǫk ónýttr, þá hjó sem tíðast. Egill hjó til hands á ǫxlina ok beit ekki sverðit; hann hjó annat ok it þriðja; var honum þá hœgt at leita hǫggstaðar á Atla, at hann hafði enga hlíf; Egill reiddi sverðit af ǫllu afli, en ekki beit, hvar sem hann hjó til. Sér þá Egill, at eigi mun hlýða svá búit, því at skjǫldr hands gerðisk þá ónýtr; þá lét Egill laust sverðit ok skjǫldinn ok hljóp at Atla ok greip hann hǫndum. Kenndi þá aflsmunar, ok fell Atli á bak aptr, en Egill greyfðisk at niðr ok beit í sundr í honum barkann; lét Atli þar líf sitt.[7]

They struck at each other hard and fast and soon their shields were useless. When Atli's was shattered he threw it away, took his sword in both hands and laid on furiously. Egil struck him on the shoulder but the sword didn't bite. He swung again, then a third time, and it was easier now for him to find a weak spot on Atli, who had nothing to protect himself with, but though Egil swung with all his might, no matter where he tried to hit Atli the sword didn't bite.

Egil saw that things couldn't go on like this. His own shield was useless by this time so he threw away both shield and sword, made a rush at Atli and and grappled with him. He was the stronger and Atli fell backwards. Then Egil leaned over and bit through through his throat, and that was how Atli died. Egil jumped quickly to his feet, walked over to the sacrificial bull, took it by the mouth with one hand and the horn with the other and kept twisting until the bull's feet were in the air and its neck broken.[8]

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[7] Sigurður Nordal, *Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 209-210.

[8] Pálsson and Edwards, *Egil's Saga*, 174-175.

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