

THE BERSERKIR IN THE FORNALDARSÖGUR

The Swedish lexicographer Olaf Verelius in his posthumously printed work of 1691 gives the following under the head-word Berserkr:

Homines robore et animi ferocia aliis omnibus terribiles,
qui certo quodam furore et rabie armati, obvia quaque ob-
vertebant et prosternebant, evulsasque radicitus arbores,
in adversarios suos torquebant.¹

While there is no textual evidence, as far as I have been able to determine, to support the conclusion that the berserkir hurled uprooted trees at their adversaries, Verelius' definition does have the merit of summing up succinctly, at a time when the first saga texts were being printed, the attributes generally associated with this much dreaded figure in Old Norse literature.² One has only to compare Verelius' statement with the often swollen prose of Saxo in his Gesta to appreciate the difference. Jón Eiríksson in his De beserkis et furore berserkico of 1773 followed the lead of Verelius in describing the features of the berserkir, but added what for him was a significant aspect for consideration, namely, that their condition was a "vitium temperamentis sive morbus."³

Since Eiríksson's day, work on the berserkir has continued to be largely descriptive, focusing in general on the well-known attributes of these awesome embodiments of fitful rage, prodigious strength and invulnerability to metal. Various hypotheses, which have ranged from the supposed use of certain hallucinogenic agents, e.g., berserkjasveppur or Amanita muscaria, to the suggestion of epileptic seizures or even Malayan amok, have occasionally been constructed in an attempt to account for the behavioral syndrome

of Eiríksson's "morbus."⁴ More recently, the berserkir have been regarded as "Odinic warriors" within the Old Norse mythological frame, and related within the Indo-European mythological configuration ultimately to such manifestations as the Κένταυροι and the Indo-Iranian Gandharvas, virile, semi-human divinities who ruled over fertility.⁵ Whatever their origin, pathological or mythological or both, the berserkir, be they those in the ettarsögur or those in the fornaldarsögur, have in any case been lumped together, for their attributes, it would seem to be premised, are constant and so typical as to preclude differentiation. One cannot deny a certain "sameness" of course to a stock literary figure, but is, one may ask, the berserkir in the fornaldarsaga really the same as his predecessor in the classical saga? Or has he, after having been given a different literary function in the fornaldarsaga, been fitted with new attributes?

Although in the classical saga the berserkir shows an immense strength and fury, he is altogether a part of the human sphere. He is individuated often with respect to lineage and nationality, and often serves at the court of a ruler. The berserkir Berölu-Kári Vémundarsson, for example, is mentioned in Egils saga as a distinguished and valiant man of means in the service of King Haraldr inn hárfagri in Þrándheimr. Though an associate of Kveld-Úlfr who is hamrammr, no mention is in his case ever made of the behavior commonly associated with berserkir.⁶ In the Eyrbyggja and Heiðarvíga sagas complementary accounts are given of two berserkir, Halli and his younger brother Leiknir, who were given to jarl Hákon as gifts by the Swedish king at Uppsala, Eiríkr inn sigrsæli Bjarnarson. Later, it turns out, the two are presented to Vermundr inn mjóvi who takes them along to Iceland.⁷ In Hrólfs saga kraka, a fornaldarsaga with an early tradition, King Aðils of Sweden has a bodyguard of twelve berserkir--which becomes

almost a standard number--to defend his realm against hostile intruders.⁸ It is apparent from these examples that the berserkir were prized for their strength and fighting abilities and undoubtedly served as trusty landvarnarmenn in Norway or more often, as far as the sagas are concerned, in more magical Sweden.⁹

From Grettla we learn also that Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson instituted measures to outlaw "alla ránsmenn ok berserki" in the year 1012. Berserkir are mentioned here in the same breath as ránsmenn and, a few lines before, with úthlaupsmenn, and we are probably justified in regarding them as trouble-makers or unmitigated Raufbolde who abducted women and seized property to such an extent that jarl Eiríkr was left with little choice.¹⁰ The Grágás, as is known, specifically made berserksgangr and even those witnessing berserksgangr who did not seek to restrain it, liable to fjörsgangsgarðr or banishment for three years.¹¹

In the classical saga, the berserkr, however much he may at times rage and bluster, never leaves the human plane. And if he has fits, they are occasional ones, like those of Skallagrímur, explained away as being in the family line.¹² When Moldi, only a hálfberserkr, yet a berserkr just the same, is taunted by Þorsteinn in Svarfdæla saga as having the manners of a mare, he very soberly challenges his detractor to a hólmgang which is then set for the third day after Yule.¹³ The berserkr Leiknir in the aforementioned Heiðarvíga saga testifies that he is every inch a human when he sings a ditty to Ásdís extolling her beauty. And it is a humorous touch, very human indeed, when Styrr in this saga tells Leiknir and his brother that they are "afarmenn" who deserve to bathe by themselves, as it also is when the saga author, after the scalding hot water is poured into the bath-house window says in understatement: "Finna nú berserkirnir, at eigi er

allt heilð við þá."¹⁴ Whenever the stereotypical features of the berserkr, his gnawing at the shield edge, his bellowing, etc., are given in the classical saga, they are generally given matter-of-factly without elaboration as required by the terse art of the family saga with its dominantly realistic tone and texture.

In the late classical age, Kristni and Vatnsdæla sagas, as already Njála had done with the berserkr named Ótryggr, equated berserkerdom with a negative heathendom. Ecclesiastical magic was triumphant over the supernatural prowess of the fire-wading and iron-impervious possessed. In the non-literary, everyday world of document-writing at least, it was fashionable among some Norwegian clergy in the fourteenth century--prompted perhaps in some measure by a feeling of self-importance--to refer to certain lay people with the sobriquet "berserkr." Thus in a will dated April 19, 1389 a "korsbroder" or church friar of Oslo named Narve Matthiasson states that his remains are to have "lægherstað j sancti Haluarðz kirkiu neer mæistara Oghmunde bersærk [*italics mine*] frenða minom."¹⁵ It is indeed possible that immediately preceding the fornaldarsaga period the term berserkr, as it was used, was already somewhat archaic and, like an only partially recognizable coin, belonged to an older mythic currency. The reality behind the term was undoubtedly no longer keenly felt; what remained was a vague word with a given number of associations.

The fornaldarsaga authors, intent on reconstructing imaginatively and above all entertainingly a dimly seen heather past, snatch at the old coin--though, as will be seen, not as frequently as one might expect--and apply it to an "ancient" figure who is more or less incidental to the action. There appear berserker types who receive the appellation, but also non-berserkers to whom it is seemingly misapplied; in other cases, figures appear

who, to judge from the full context in which they are found, are clear-cut berserkir, but who in the fornaldarsaga narrative are designated otherwise. From the standpoint of consistency the pattern certainly seems confusing.

When Helgá Reuschel states that the term berserkr is used synonymously in the fornaldarsögur for víkingr, she is correct, although it would perhaps be more precise to say that the two words are near-synonyms.¹⁶ In Hrólfs saga kraka the word berserkr occurs forty-five times, in most instances referring to those who are "í hernaði." Thus even within one sentence the words are used almost interchangeably: "svá fór leikr með þeim, at berserkir falla þar allir fyrir þeim bræðrum; snýr nú skjótt mannfall í lið víkinga, . . ." ¹⁷ While at court and not off marauding, seated as dependable bodyguards in the hall of King Hrólfr or beside the huge golden throne of King Aðils, the favorite almost ritualized pastime of these unnamed and often noisy berserkir is to challenge all in the hall to a show of strength. Since so many of those challenged invariably fail, as is expected, out of fear to accept, a startlingly new note of dauntlessness is struck when a Svipdagr (ch. 22) or a Böðvarr bjarki (ch. 37) steps forward against one of these bullies to reverse what has become a habitual pattern of cowardice. These "berserkir" have in common an overbearing contentiousness, and their function is of course to throw into bold relief the heroic opponent. But nowhere in this saga do we find that Saxonian brand of berserkr who like Harthbenus (Harðbeinn) from Helsingjaland puts live coals into his mouth and passes them into the lowest parts of his intestines.¹⁸

Even including the occasional instances, mainly in genealogical openers, in which the term berserkr is used in the fornaldarsögur almost like an honorific, e.g., "Grímr var hinn mesti berserkr," "Skati (Eiríksson, Myndilssonar, Meitálfssonar) hafði verit berserkr," etc., the total incidence

of the term in the fornaldarsaga is not as high as might be extrapolated from the previously given numerical total for Hrólf's saga kraka, and as might be expected from the nature of the genre itself.¹⁹ While actual berserkers are designated as such, their overall representation in the fornaldarsögur is, it must be admitted, sparse, though deceptively so. A good many berserkir, who possess many of the earmarks given for them in Saxo's account, and some additional ones as well, do however appear in the fornaldarsögur without their being explicitly referred to as berserkir. To give some examples: While Jökull járnhryggr alone in Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar is mentioned as being a "blár berserkr,"²⁰ such readily identifiable kindred oddities as Björn blátönn, Hárekr járnhauss, who is completely "sköllóttir" at the age of seven, the invulnerable Ingjaldr trana, and Kolr enn krappi are all essentially berserkr types. Ötunfaxi, against whom Þorsteinn is advised by Sindri to use a stout kylfa, is a typical brutish "challenger from without." In Sturlaugs saga starfsama Kolr krappur burst onto the scene on horseback, his spear in thrusting position, and in typical berserkr fashion asks for the hand of Ása--or else. Eventually a large wooden club, by means of which berserkir can be subdued, is successfully brought to bear also against him. In the later versions of Sturlaugs saga, Kolr, now called Kolr hinn Ramma, is enlarged into an even more frightening berserkr figure, although again the term berserkr is not once used for him. The one instance of the term occurs in the earlier version, and there it is used for the gigantic blámaðr who accompanies Kolr's half-brother Framarr.²¹

What happens in the fornaldarsaga is often a total enlargement, often to the point of a spectacular grotesqueness, of the berserkr figure. No longer is it enough for the berserkr to be taunted with a common reference

to behaving like a mare (cf. Ölkofra Þátr, ch. 3), for the fornaldar-
saga author must now please an audience that has become inured to an older
literary diet and restlessly craves after fresher and more varied fare--
as far as this is possible within the saga form--of a sensationalistic
kind. For one thing, the berserkr is now taunted as being, plainly and
simply, an animal. In Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar the title hero accuses
at considerable length the twelve berserkir--the two of which who are
named have, interestingly enough, names compounded with hross- --of being
of mixed parentage, having been begotten of Hrosskell and a mare which,
among other presents, was given to the former by King Gautrek.²² Not only
is therefore Hrossþjófi Hrosskelsson, despite his patronymic, a merarson,
Hrólfur charges, but so are all the other so begotten berserkir to boot,
and they have, he continues, no reason to be arrogant. To this the ber-
serkir react instantaneously, jumping up and shouting. The action there-
after is not, as in the classical saga, retarded by the passage of time
and by a hólmgang with its set of elaborate rules; instead, the action--
which is primarily what the fornaldarsaga audience wants--is brisk as
Hrólfur with his Risanautr dispatches the dozen berserkir in quick suc-
cession.

In the fornaldarsaga the berserkr is described more and more hideously
almost as if the notion of ugliness and concomitant horror must be con-
stantly reinforced for the interest of the audience to be sustained. In
the family saga, on the other hand, the convention of matching a negative
name (e.g., Ljótr in Egils saga) or cognomen (e.g., Brenneyjarfaxi in
Þórðar saga hreðu and járnhaus in Flóamanna saga [ch. 15] and Víga-Gríms
saga [ch. 5]) with the berserkr was generally deemed sufficient. Frequently
a piling up of description is found in the fornaldarsaga, with words

normally reserved for the more obstreperous members of the animal world used to describe the wild appearance and antics of the berserkir. Thus when in Herverar saga ok Heiðreks konungs the berserkir see their comrade Hjörvarðr tumble to the ground, having been slain by Oddr, it is said of them that "afmynduðust þeir ákafliga, ok gnöguðu í skjaldar rendrnar, en froða gaus úr kjapti þeim."²³ When subsequently Hervarðr is also hewed down, they exhibit even more heightened animal characteristics: "eyskraði sút í berserkjunum, réttu út tungurnar, ok urguðu saman tönnunum, öskrandi sem blótneyti, svá buldi í hömrnunum." Repeatedly underscored is the related notion that the berserkir are more monster- or troll-like than they are human, and one often finds that they indeed do assume the bizarre features of such beings in the fornaldarsögur. In Hálfðanar saga Brönufostra, Sóti, one of a pair of berserkir, is described by jarl Þórir as follows:

Sóti er bölvæðr berserkr; hann er háflitr, er hann öðrumegin blár, enn öðrumegin rauðr; hann hefir ekki klæði á búknum, hann er sköllóttr um allt höfuðit, nema eitt hár stendr upp úr miðjum hausum hans.²⁴

Similarly, Ögmundur in Örvar-Odds saga is described in equally freakish terms:

hann var svartr á hárslit, ok hékk flóki ofan fyrir andlitit, þar sem topprinn skyldi vera, en alls ekki var at sjá til andlitsins, nema tennr ok augu . . .²⁵

In Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar, as Þorsteinn at one point struggles with Ötunfaxi, the hero is certain, it is said, that the latter intends to bite his windpipe to pieces.²⁶ In another scene, Ötunfaxi swims very much like a whale.²⁷ Another interesting description of a berserkr is that provided

of Kolr in the later version of Sturlaugs saga starfsama:

Einn tíma sem Hringr jarl sat við drykkju ok allir menn voru glaðir, geck maðr í hallardyr mjök stór ásyndar. Hann hafði krókaspjót harðla stórt ok sverð við síðu ok skjöld ok blés mjök þungliga. Hann hafði skegg sitt ok svart á bringu niðr en eckert hár á höfði. Bryr hans hengu á nef niðr en augun [voru] gul sem í ketti, tenr sem kalt járn. Öllum þótti hann hræðiligr ok mjök illr ásyndar. Þessi ganaði at hinum óceðra bekk ok geck at smti ok settiz niðr ofan á þria menn ok fengu allir bana. Síðan tók hann til matar ok át meir enn hófi þótti gegna þar til hann hafði tæmt allt borð at mat ok öli á stuttum tíma.²⁸

The counterpart to the berserkr of the family saga is thus invested in the fornaldarsaga with super- or preterhuman properties: the figure has golden eyes like those of a cat; his appetite, not merely confined to the edge of his shield is as voracious as that of some monster, and his demands, usually for the hand of a contrastingly beautiful damsel, are impetuous to the extreme and startlingly free of the more normal considerations. In effect, the berserkr in the fornaldarsaga, and to a greater extent in the later ýkjusögur, becomes a zoomorph, sometimes equine, sometimes monstrous, but more than often ferocious and hideous.

From such grotesque distortion it is only a short step further to the ýkjusaga. If the "bersercur" Kalldanus in [H]ectors saga can have "hrossa fętur ath hniam nedan,"²⁹ then also there can be shape-changing "blaer berserker" like Falr and Sóti in Victors saga ok Blávus who assume the form of venom-spewing dragons.³⁰ In Sigurðar saga Þögla a motley illþýðisfólk is found, composed not only of "blamenn og berserkj," but also of a number of headless creatures and other anatomical marvels.³¹

Given the hideous and chilling detail so unsparingly bestowed in the fornaldarsaga and then in the ýkjusaga upon the berserkir, and elsewhere

upon haugbúar, it is not surprising, for example, that the aggressive and roving draugr figure, corporeal and actual, should persist as long as it has in Icelandic folklore. Yet no matter how repellant many of these Schreckgestalten from another realm may be, whose bowels on occasion, like those of Ötunfaxi, float on the surface of the sea, these figures, it should not be forgotten, are essentially the literary representations of those dark forces of a wretched reality against which the Icelanders have forever contended.

¹ Olai Verelii, Index lingvæ veteris Scytho-Scandiæ ex vetusti ævi monumentis, maximam partem manuscriptis, collectus atqve opera Olai Rudbecki editus (Upsalæ, 1691), p. 33.

² Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs (Fornaldar Sögur Nordrlanda [hereafter cited FAS], ed. C.C. Rafn [Kaupmannahöfn, 1829], I, 416) does say of berserkir that "[Peir] brutust við stóra steina eðr skóga," but that is hardly the same. Verelius' definition appears to have been inspired by Saxo's account (Gesta Danorum, VII) of Haldanus (Hálfdan) according to which he, walking by chance through a forest enclosure, tore up by the roots from the ground an oak which was stuck in his path ("hærentem obiter quercum humo radicitus eruit") and, by stripping away its branches, converted it into a sturdy cudgel for use against Syvaldus (Sigvaldi) and his seven berserker sons. For the full text see Gesta Danorum, ed. Alfred Holder (Strassburg, 1886), p. 222.

³ Jón Eiríksson, "De berserkis et furore berserkico," in appendix ("Annotationes uberiores") to Hannes Finnsson's edition of Kristni-saga sive Historia Religionis Christianæ in Islandiam introductæ (Hafniæ, 1773), p. 155.

⁴ The Amanita muscaria hypothesis was evidently first advanced by the Swedish botanist and physician, Frederik Christian Schuebeler (1815-92) in his Viridarium norvegicum. Norges væxtrige (Christiania, 1885), I, 224. See also: Hermann Güntert, Über altisländische Berserker-Geschichten (Heidelberg, 1912), pp. 24-25; Fredrik Grøn, Berserksgangens vesen og årsaksforhold, en medisinsk-historisk studie (Det kgl. norske videnskabers selskabs skrifter nr 4, Trondhjem, 1929). Lately, anthropologists such as R. Gordon Wasson (Soma, divine mushroom of immortality [New York, 1971] and Reid W. Kaplan ("The sacred mushroom in Scandinavia," in MAN, The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, New Series, X [1975], 72-79) have, on the strength of petroglyphs found mainly around the southern Swedish coast which contain the mushroom motif, maintained that a mushroom cult in Scandinavia in the Bronze Age utilized the plentiful Amanita muscaria as a psychotropic agent in its rites. There is, however, no shred of evidence in saga literature to indicate that berserksgangr was so induced.

⁵ So George Dumézil, "Le problème des Centaures: étude de mythologie comparée indo-européenne," Annales du Musée Guimet 41 (1929).

⁶ Íslenzk Fornrit [hereafter ÍF] 2 (1933), p. 3ff.

⁷ Ibid., 4 (1935), p. 65ff.; 3 (1938), p. 217ff.

⁸ FAS I, 32.

⁹ On the matter of warriors in early Germanic times see Hans Kuhn, "Kappar og Berserkir," in Skírnir (123), 98-113.

¹⁰ ÍF 7 (1936), p. 61.

¹¹ Grágás (Staðarhólsbók, 13th century), ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (Kjöbenhavn, 1883), p. 28: "Ef maðr gengr berserksgang oc varðar þat FiðrBavgsGarð oc varðar sva karlmönnum þeim er hia ero nema þeir hepti hann at. Þa varðar

engum þeirra ef þeir vinna stoðvat. Ef optar kómur at oc varðar þat FiörBavgs-Garð." A parallel Latin version in Kristinrettr hinn gamli edr Þorlaks oc Ketils Biscupa, ed. Johannis Thorkelin (Havniæ et Lipsiæ, 1776), p. 79, reads: "Furore actus berserkico relegetur, præsentisque viri, nisi rabidum compescant, eadem poena afficiantur; si eum compescere possint, poenæ obnoxii non sunt. Sæpius rabiens relegetur."

¹²ÍF 2 (1933), p. 5: "Grimr var . . . líkr feðr sínum, bæði yfirlits ok at skaplyndi."

¹³Svarfdælasaga, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík, 1966), p. 15.

¹⁴ÍF 3 (1938), p. 223f.

¹⁵Diplomatarium Norvegicum, ed. C.C. Lange & C.R. Unger, IV (Christiania, 1858, p. 422. See the mention made in 1354 of "Thoror berserker" (ibid., II [1852], p. 267), and in 1396 of "Oghmunder berserk" in Biskop Eysteins Jordebog (den Röde Bog), ed. H.J. Huitfeldt (Christiania, 1879), p. 240.

¹⁶Helga Reuschel, Untersuchungen über Stoff und Stil der Fornaldarsaga (Bühl-Baden, 1933), p. 68. On "near-synonyms" and "absolute synonyms" see Ladislav Zgusta, Manual of Lexicography (Prague, 1971), p. 89ff.

¹⁷FAS I, 41.

¹⁸Gesta Danorum VII, ed. A. Holder, p. 223: "igneos ventri carbones mandare non destitit, raptas ore prunas in uiscerum ima transfudit, . . ."

¹⁹FAS II, 383; II, 431. In the latter passage, another vellum from the same century, AM. 556b, 4to, has sækonungr. Cf. also in this connection: "Rodgeir hiet jarl eirn. hann var hinn mesti Berserker." (AM. 524, 4to, 105^b [Konráðs saga keisarasonar], where all the primary MSS have soekingr. Rafn's "hlutaregistr" (FAS III, 741) yields a total of seventy occurrences for the word berserkr.

²⁰FAS II, 391.

²¹The Two Versions of Sturlaugs Saga Starfsama, ed. Otto J. Zitzelsberger (Düsseldorf, 1969), p. 15.

²²Zwei Fornaldarsögur, ed. Ferdinand Detter (Halle a. S., 1891), p. 40f.

²³FAS I, 425.

²⁴Ibid., III, 561.

²⁵Ibid., II, 207.

²⁶Ibid., II, 452.

²⁷Ibid., II, 451.

²⁸Zitzelsberger, p. 361. The text here is given in normalized form.

²⁹Late Medieval Icelandic Romances, ed. Agnete Loth (Copenhagen, 1962),
I, 99.

³⁰Ibid., p. 27.

³¹Ibid., II, 177.

³²FAS II, 453.

