

## Wearing the wolf skin: psychiatry and the phenomenon of the berserker in medieval Scandinavia

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*Wearing the wolf-skin: Psychiatry and the phenomenon of the Berserker in medieval Scandinavia*

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## ***Abstract***

This paper examines the Berserker, a frenzied warrior attested to in both the written and material sources of medieval Scandinavia, and elucidates the characteristics that define him. It critiques explanations for the phenomenon offered in the existing historiography and whether this can be explained as a psychiatric diagnosis. It concludes that the Berserker cannot be simply defined as a culturally-bound or other psychiatric syndrome nor accounted for by psychogenic drugs alone. Instead, it proposes that berserk frenzy constituted a transitory dissociative state shared among a small warband steeped in religious/spiritual ideology. In entering this state the psyche of the Berserker was reconstituted in an almost archetypal pattern. Further research is required into this phenomenon in other contexts, including modern conflicts.

**Keywords:** Berserker, Frenzy, Scandinavia, Dissociative, Archetypal

## *Introducing the Berserker*

*'They were as mad as dogs or wolves, bit into their shields, and were as strong as bears or bulls. They killed men, and neither fire nor iron could touch them. That is called berserkergang.'*<sup>1,2</sup> Sturluson, S (1225) in Lang, S (1844)

The concept of 'going berserk' (ON. *berserkergangr*, 'berserk fury') was seemingly well understood amongst the cultures of medieval Scandinavia but, to the modern reader, few figures in Old Norse literature are as enigmatic as the *berserkr*. The name persists in our daily speech, hinting at unspoken furies lurking at the limits of our equanimity (so that we might 'go berserk' if our delayed train does not arrive soon), but we rarely realize the etymology of the word. The *berserkr* (ON, pl. *berserkir*, 'berserker(s)') was a frenzied warrior, fearsome and fearless in equal measure. The origin of the word is perhaps ambiguous, deriving either from the tendency of fighting without armour (ON. *berr*, 'bare' and *-serkr*, 'shirt') or else from the custom of wearing bear-skins into battle (ON. *berr*, *beri*, 'bear').<sup>3</sup> As a group or caste, it seems probable that they were cognate with the Old Germanic *Wolfhetan*, at least in their earlier incarnation, and the Old Norse term *úlfhéðnar* (ON. 'wolf-coat') appears at times to be used interchangeably (Tuczay, 2015). The skaldic poet Þorbjorn Hornklofi, recounting the role of the *berserkir* during the ninth century battle of Hafrsfjord (in present day Norway), describes King Harald Fairhair's elite 'wolf-skinned' warriors wading out into battle, spears and shields reddened with blood.<sup>4</sup>

Repeated references to such warriors can be found in both written sources and the material culture of a period extending from Antiquity through to the setting down of the Icelandic sagas in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But what were the characteristics that defined the *berserkr*, physically, culturally and, most importantly to this work, psychologically? It should first be noted that, whilst not a restlessly fluid figure, the *berserkr* could not claim to be a conceptually static one either.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly a shift in prestige can be seen to occur, if not paradigmatically then in nuance, over the centuries

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<sup>1</sup> *A Note on Sources.* We have utilized both edited primary written sources and secondary sources in this study. The written sources will be defined as both documentary ('historical', such as law codes or chronicles, compiled in either the vernacular or the Latin) and literary (the 'sagas', legendary and historical prose narratives written mostly between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries in Old Norse/Old Icelandic). 'Material culture' refers to archaeological finds and, in some instances, architectural survivals (such as Trajan's column). For the purposes of this paper and as a convenience, longer written passages are presented in translation but for my own research I have often utilized the primary sources in their original language (the saga literature, for example, which constitutes a significant portion of the primary material, was accessed in the edited Old Icelandic as part of the *Islensk Fornrit* series.

<sup>2</sup> *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 6

<sup>3</sup> Snorri Sturluson, the celebrated C13 Icelandic saga author, ascribes their name to the former origin but modern scholars have perhaps leaned in favour of the latter.

<sup>4</sup> Hornklofi, *Haraldskvaethi or Hrafnsmól* ('The Lay of Harold')

<sup>5</sup> We will leave aside here the question as to whether the *berserkr* really existed, which we believe is a given. Certainly, by the time of the writing of the later sagas he may have become a more literary figure, but there is sufficient evidence in the earlier chronicles (cf. Saxo Grammaticus, Byzantine sources such as *De Ceremonis*, and the earlier Latin authors) as well as the material survivals to conclude that berserk fighters in various forms pervaded the Teutonic cultures of early medieval Europe.

during which evidence for the *berserkir* can be found. The *berserkir* of the skaldic poems<sup>6</sup>, associated with powers of physical and psychological transformation through the animal skins they wore, become in the later sagas cyphers for unruly bullies, fodder for the heroes of the tales.<sup>7</sup> Given the fluctuations in martial exigency over a thousand year period it is possible that this judgmental shift (from valued champions to discomfiting outlaws) owed mostly to the shift away from reckless, frenzied skirmishing towards the more cautious and stylized form of duelling that characterized combat in medieval Iceland.<sup>8</sup> But it is perhaps no coincidence that the *berserkir* were once considered sacred to the Norse god Óðinn and that a nascent Christian society would have been at pains to distance itself from such religious associations. Certainly by the time of the codification of the Icelandic law code *Grágás* the practice of *berserkrangr* was sufficiently disruptive to societal harmony to warrant outlawry and in 1015 Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson similarly declared it illegal in Norway.<sup>9</sup>

### *Defining the Berserker*

Despite these changing perceptions of the *berserkir*, certain defining attributes recur in both the earlier and later incarnations. Most obviously, berserks were considered indomitable warriors, the paragons of the battlefield. *Haraldr Hárfaðgi* utilised them as a vanguard, shock troops cast foremost into battle to splinter the morale of their opponents.<sup>10</sup> This martial prowess is not explained simply in terms of skill at arms but is derived rather from their raw strength and resilience to pain and injury. (The invulnerability to iron and/or fire is a repeated trope)<sup>11</sup> Tactically they fought with abandon, consumed by a bloodlust that could blur the distinction between friend and foe.<sup>12</sup> Irrespective of the actual etymological derivation of their name, their bestial quality is emphasized and, certainly in the earlier sources, this extended to the symbolism of their physical accoutrements (such as the animal-skins worn into battle).<sup>13</sup> Coupled with this latter element we may also

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<sup>6</sup> Essentially a form of court poetry composed for Scandinavian rulers.

<sup>7</sup> The characteristic ‘unwelcome suitor’ motif of the later Berserks recurs in the ‘family’ sagas. In this trope the berserks are found bullying a hapless farmer whilst very often aggressively courting his beautiful daughter; the hero of the saga appears in time to save the day and dispatch the villains. See Blaney, ‘The Berserk Suitor’.

<sup>8</sup> We are grateful to Dr. Elizabeth Ashman Rowe for noting the caveat that the Icelanders would have been classified primarily as farmers and not part of a professional military retinue at court. An interesting parallel can perhaps also be found in the shifting status of the *Rōnin* in feudal Japan.

<sup>9</sup> The later sagas make it clear that a moral stigma was attached to the practice of *berserkrangr*. For example, *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp.83: ‘Now and then *berserkrangr* came over Thorir. That seemed a great injury to such a man, for he received no distinction from that.’ Thorir’s brother Thorstein prays to ‘him who has created the sun’ (i.e. the suggestion is Christian) and the berserk fury no longer afflicts him.

<sup>10</sup> Hornklofi: ‘The prince in his wisdom puts trust in such men/Who hack through enemy shields’; *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*: ‘They were called wolf-skins, and no iron bit on them, and where they rushed to the attack, there was no holding against them’.

<sup>11</sup> See *Grettis saga*, *Ynglinga saga* above; *Hrólfs saga kraka* (the king’s champions refuse to flee from ‘fire or iron’).

<sup>12</sup> Elton, *The Nine Books of Saxo Grammaticus*. Hardbeen ‘turned his sword with raging hand against the hearts of six of his champions’.

<sup>13</sup> Aside from the written sources, warriors clad in animal pelts are to be found depicted on Trajan’s column in Rome (the relief shows Roman auxiliaries from the Northern tribes) and the Torslunda helmet from

perceive a cultic quality, sometimes stated explicitly (the berserks were ‘Odin’s men’ according to Snorri)<sup>14</sup> and other times inferred through behavioural patterns (Hornklofi says of them that ‘they form a closed group’, whilst it is stated in *Svarfdæla saga* that a *berserkr* deferred his duel until three days after Yule, the festival sacred to Óðinn<sup>15</sup>). In number also we may discern the trace of the sacred, for whether as outlaws in the later sagas or bodyguards in the earlier, the *berserkir* often occur in groups of twelve.<sup>16</sup>

Other characteristics are mentioned, though not all consistently. Some sources refer to the exhaustion that consumed the berserks after their battle rage had passed. It was said that after their fury had abated, the *berserkir* were as weak as infants.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, there is also some suggestion that an altered mental state may have preceded the berserk rage. The character of Egil Skallagrímsson, protagonist of perhaps the best known of the Icelandic family sagas, comprises one such example. Though Egil is never described explicitly as a *berserkr*, so many parallels present themselves in his portrayal that it is impossible not to read the saga and imagine that to a contemporary audience this possibility was not tacitly understood (and Egil’s paternal lineage is clearly suggestive of this association).<sup>18</sup> Throughout his saga, Egil is prone to both melancholia and deep, brooding anger.<sup>19</sup> Sitting at court before King Athelstan (king of the English 927-939) he simmers and glowers, inflamed by both the death of his brother Thorolf in battle and a perceived sense of injustice at the king’s lack of generosity. But his moods appear to dip and soar, a state of mind perhaps physically manifest in the workings of his countenance: ‘[Egill] wrinkled one eyebrow right down onto his cheek and raised the other up to the roots of his hair...[h]e refused to drink even when served, but just raised and lowered his eyebrows in turn’.<sup>20</sup>

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Denmark (where wolf-skinned and boar-helmeted warriors can be seen alongside a one-eyed dancer, either representing Óðinn himself or a devotee).

<sup>14</sup> Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Svarfdæla saga*.

<sup>16</sup> Though this is not always the case; where they are not a dozen they commonly manifest in pairs, especially in the later tales (where they are typically represented as brothers).

<sup>17</sup> *Egils saga Skalla-Grímsonnar*: ‘It is said of those men who are shape-strong or who go berserk, that while their rage lasts, they are so strong that nothing can withstand them, but when it is passed they are very much weaker than before. So it was with Kveldulf so, that when his rage had passed, he felt such weariness from their battle, and he was so exhausted from all that fighting that he took to his bed’. *Eyrbyggja saga*: ‘They both went into berserk fits and once they had worked themselves up into a frenzy they were not like human beings. They went mad like dogs and had no fear of either fire or iron. [...] The berserks went home that evening and were very tired, as is the nature of men who go berserk, that all their strength leaves them once their rage ebbs’.

<sup>18</sup> The saga tells how Egil’s own grandfather Kveld-Úlfr was *hamrammr* (‘shape-strong’, that is, capable of transforming into another form). It is recounted how his temper would deteriorate in the evening and his name, which means ‘Evening-Wolf’, seems to follow in sense those powers attributed to his own father Bialfi (whose name means literally an ‘animal skin’). No actual incidence of shape-shifting is displayed by Kveld-Úlfr during the saga, although the capacity is attributed to him. Certainly there are suggestions throughout the literature that *berserkrangr* is an inherited condition or quality, possibly one that changes in quality across generations (Christa Tuczay observes that the shapeshifting power of Egill’s family ‘becomes diluted’ over time; Tuczay, ‘Into the Wild, p.66).

<sup>19</sup> Though this is often precipitated by ‘legitimate’ events, such as bereavement, the intensity of affect is what characterizes Egill.

<sup>20</sup> *Egils saga*, ch.55; Egil also sits sheathing and unsheathing his sword, perhaps a metaphor for his capricious temperament, violence apparent then hidden by turns. An interesting parallel of this distorted portrait can be seen in the *riastradh* (‘battle fury’) of the Ulster hero Cú Chulainn: ‘He sucked one of his eyes into his head

When eventually the king addresses Egil and rewards him with a public display of honour (and plunder, to boot), Egil's mood turns upwards, inspiring him to recite some verses. Indeed, throughout the saga, Egil's fluctuant affect is woven within his poetic temperament.<sup>21</sup>

Shield-biting and howling are repeatedly cited as activities that preceded and even precipitated *berserkr*; such habits support the theory that the rage was a trance-like state induced by particular ritual behaviours, perhaps those that emulated perceived animal characteristics.<sup>22</sup> At other points the physical appearance of the berserks is accentuated. In the later sagas they are usually portrayed as hulking giants, almost troll-like in their countenance. In Egil's saga the companions of Egil's father Skallagrim are described as: '*The hardest of men, with a touch of the uncanny about a number of them...they [were] built and shaped more like trolls than human beings*'<sup>23</sup> Egil himself is painted as a vivid and distorted specimen ('*great of face, broad of forehead, with great eye-brows: the nose not long, but marvelously thick...thick-necked and great-shouldered beyond the measure of other men: hard-looking and grim-like whensoever he was wroth [angry]. He was of goodly growth and taller than any man else: his hair wolf-grey and close of growth, and became early bald*')<sup>24</sup> Attempts have been made to explain Egil's physical qualities as a disease of the bone<sup>25</sup> but perhaps more than any other, we would argue that physical portrayal is a characteristic that lends itself to literary embellishment, an attempt to tarnish the berserk henchmen of the later sagas with the stain of villainy and misanthropy. It is certainly easy for these characters to be pulled narratively within the occult undercurrents of the tales, associated as they are with pagan survivals and superstition.<sup>26</sup>

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so that a wild crane could hardly have reached it to pluck it out...[t]he other eye sprang out onto his cheek'. In this state *Ó Chulainn's* vision (his reason) is either loose or disappeared. O'Rahilly (trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

<sup>21</sup> Affronts to Egil's pride plunge him into grim moods (often precipitating violent outbursts or acts) but these appear to be ameliorated by his acts of lyrical creativity; Egil's depressive states (such as those engendered by the bereavement of his sons) are less correlated with aggression but are similarly alleviated by poetic composition. An interesting modern parallel is perhaps to be found in the reckless and suicidal bravery of Siegfried 'Mad Jack' Sassoon in the trenches of the Western Front; Sassoon is recounted advancing on enemy trenches and scattering sixty German soldiers single-handedly with hand-grenades before sitting down to read from a book of poetry. (Egremont, *Siegfried Sassoon*)

<sup>22</sup> *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* '[The berserk] now began to howl and bit into the rim of his shield and placed the shield up in his mouth and gaped over the top of it and raged furiously.'; *Vatnsdæla saga*: 'Shortly after that came another ship, and on it were two berserks, both of whom were called Hauk...they howled like dogs and bit into their shield rims and waded through burning fires with their bare feet.' Egil himself is not described chewing his shield but his opponent Ljótr is. Note also the famous Lewis chessmen, where the Rooks are depicted chewing their shields.

<sup>23</sup> Ármann Jakobsson has written extensively on the meaning of trolls in Old Norse literature and even equates the word *troll* with *berserkr*. See Jakobsson, 'Beast and Man'.

<sup>24</sup> Note also *Göngu Hrólf's saga*: 'Scarcely any weapon could bite the coat he was wearing. When he grew angry, Rondolf would burst into a frenzy and howled like a troll'

<sup>25</sup> Jesse Byock has suggested that Egil suffered from Paget's disease (Byock, 'Egil's Bones').

<sup>26</sup> Egil's saga in particular is notable for its occult motifs. Generally the *Íslendinga sögur*, occupied as they are with chronologically later events, share fewer fantastical elements with the *fornaldarsögur* (which treat of pre-Christian legendary themes). But occult elements (such as prophetic dreams and *seiðr*, sorcery) work their way into the tales in an almost sublimated manner. See Friðriksdóttir, 'Women's Weapons'; Jakobsson, 'Beast and Man'; Heath, 'Totemism'.

The animal quality of the berserk is worth exploring in greater detail. The association between the *berserkir* and particular animals is repeatedly elucidated, but interpreting the precise relationship between the elements of man and beast is complex. The shamanistic characteristics of Old Norse religion have been proposed as a way of understanding this<sup>27</sup>, particularly as they pertain to the cultures of battle<sup>28</sup>, but we would argue that, whilst the concept is seductive, the evidence is not sufficiently robust to support the theory. A totemistic relationship would seem to better fit the details, given its more subtle criteria of inclusion.<sup>29</sup> There is again a chronological dimension to the manner in which human beings were seen to interface with animal beings in medieval Scandinavian cultures. The phenomenon of shape-changing is a case in point as it pertains to the *berserkir*.<sup>30</sup> In the earlier *fornaldarsögur* or ‘legendary sagas’, transformation is more suggestive of an actual bodily process<sup>31</sup> but by the time of the later sagas shapeshifting seems to be understood as more of a symbolic or psychological transmutation.<sup>32</sup> The berserkers of the *Íslendinga sögur* are certainly characterized by lupine qualities (the howling and biting behaviours which in several instances even descend into biting out the throats of opponents) but there is little suggestion that they have taken on the bodily form of wolves.<sup>33</sup>

### *An Altered Mental State?*

What, as modern interpreters are we to make of these accounts of berserk behaviour? Academic explanations for the phenomenon have run a gamut. Scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, viewing the sources from what we may describe as an anthropological or literary perspective, were clear in identifying the ‘religious’ elements of the berserk. Hilda Ellis Davidson, noting the ritual dance of the Varangian Guard attested to by the Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII, drew attention to the cultic qualities of the *berserkir* as ‘animal warriors’.<sup>34</sup> Inevitably, the use of intoxicants or psychogenic substances was mooted. The proposal that the hallucinogenic mushroom *Amanita muscaria* (the so-called ‘fly agaric’) was implicated in engendering a trancelike homicidal state has a venerable pedigree. It was first committed to print in 1784 by the

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<sup>27</sup> Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*; Schnurbein, ‘Shamanism in the Old Norse Tradition’.

<sup>28</sup> Price, *The Viking Way; Archaeology of Shamanism*.

<sup>29</sup> Shamanism demands quite precise relations with the spirit world, and fixed procedures for accessing it; totemism allows for a less defined relationship with a symbolic or spiritual avatar. See Heath, ‘Totemism’.

<sup>30</sup> Shape-changing is used to describe the alteration of form from one to another, here human into animal; whilst very often taken to be a literal physical transmutation it can also be understood as a psychological, symbolic or metaphoric transfiguration.

<sup>31</sup> The character of Böðvarr Bjarki in *Hrólfs saga kraka* transforms into a frenzied bear during the saga’s final battle; Böðvarr’s father Björn was transformed into a cave-bear after rejecting the sexual advances of the sorceress Queen Hvit and his children all encompassed something animal (one possessing an elk’s legs, another dog’s feet and the third, Böðvarr, though appearing human, the ability to change form).

<sup>32</sup> Though the distinction is not precise, a difficulty accentuated by the ambiguity of the associated linguistic terminology. The phrases *einhamr* and *hamramr* are often used synonymously or interchangeably.

<sup>33</sup> Tuczay, ‘Into the Wild’; Heath, ‘Totemism’.

<sup>34</sup> Reiske, *Constantini Porphyrogeniti*. The Varangians were a bodyguard to the Byzantine Emperors composed traditionally of Norse warriors (and more latterly those of Teutonic origin, including Anglo-Saxons). The account describes how the warriors wore animal skins and masks during the dance.



Uppsala theologian Samuel Ödman and has proven itself to be a persistent theory; as late as 1956 Howard Fabing, conducting an experiment on inmates at the Ohio State Penitentiary, concluded that bufotenine (a compound isolated from the mushroom and identified by him as the active hallucinogenic ingredient in certain *Amanita*) was responsible for the lack of fatigue and altered awareness displayed by the *berserkir*.<sup>35</sup> As epistemological inquiry shifted its focus to more biological mechanisms, explanations presented themselves that were more consonant with psychological or psychiatric paradigms. Psychopathy (or sociopathy) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have both been advanced as underlying causes of berserk behavior, as has transient psychosis.<sup>36</sup> Curiously (given the animal characteristics of the berserk), ‘lycanthropy’ (as a lived experience and putative psychiatric diagnosis) has not been explored as an explanation.<sup>37</sup> But it is important to remember that, if not a commonplace modern diagnosis, within the hermeneutical context of the medieval medical mind lychanthropy existed as a legitimate diagnosis of disordered humours.<sup>38</sup>

Do the explanations offered above suffice to explain how a man might enter such a murderous rage that he felt no pain and became, in physical strength as in self-identity, as an animal? It may well have been the case that drugs were used to help precipitate the berserk state. Alcohol pervaded the culture of medieval Northern Europe and its use amongst military units, both modern and historical, is well attested.<sup>39</sup> Recent evidence from contemporary conflicts also seems clear in implicating particular drugs (such as Khat in

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<sup>35</sup> Fabing, ‘On Going Berserk’. Note a recent essay by Peter Frankopan in which the berserk state is attributed to the mushroom. Frankopan notes the psychoactive effects as ‘delirium, exhilaration and hallucination’ and suggests that Kievan Vikings (the *Rus*) would have observed the use of the drug in the ritual ceremonies of local shamen. He credits ‘superhuman strength and focus’ as amongst the effects of *Amanita*. (Frankopan, ‘War, on Drugs’) Importantly *Amanita* is not indigenous to Iceland, where much of the berserk activity is recorded, and even in more temperate climates exists only as part of a sensitive ecosystem. It would thus not necessarily have been readily available in much of Scandinavian Europe.

<sup>36</sup> See Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*.

<sup>37</sup> Lycanthropy is described by the O.E.D. as ‘the mythical transformation of a man into a wolf’, or (clinical) Lycanthropy as the ‘a form of madness in which a person believes himself or herself to be an animal (esp. a wolf) and behaves accordingly’. The name derives from Gk. *Lukos* (‘wolf’) plus *anthrōpos* (‘man’); ‘Werewolf’ from OE *wer* (‘man’, from L. *vir*) and *wulf*. As it was understood by medieval medicine, Lycanthropy was a humoral disorder of the black bile, characterized more by melancholia than violence (though the more popular cultural understanding of the word in lay belief did suggest more supernatural wolf-like rampages). See Metzger. ‘Battling Demons’. The condition of ‘Insania Zooanthropica’ was chronicled in the Eighteenth Century (Davis, W.M. Wellwuff, H.G., Garew, L. & Kydd, O.U. (1992). Psychopharmacology of lycanthropy. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 146, 1191-1197. Recent reviews of the clinical literature situate the presentations of the condition as psychosis-like with marked delusional behaviours; far from the ferocious were-wolf of European folklore or superhuman beast of celluloid and tabloid fiction, clinical lycanthropy appears to have been a largely incapacitating diagnosis. (Garlipp, P., Gödecke-Koch, T., Dietrich, D.E. & Haltenhof, H (2004). Lycanthropy: Psychopathological and psychodynamic aspects. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 109, 19-22.)

<sup>38</sup> By the early modern period there is evidence that this humoral interpretation of lycanthropy as a pathology of black bile alone was failing, or at the very least retreating into nuance. In the *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) Robert Burton lists several contemporary but anecdotal examples of lycanthropes, describing the condition as a ‘disease’. It is notable however that he opts to diverge from the understanding of the authorities of classical and late antiquity, suggesting that his opinion is not unusual: ‘Aetius and Paulus call it a kind of melancholy; but I should rather refer it to madness, as most do.’ (1.1.1.)

<sup>39</sup> Kamienski, *Shooting Up*.

Somalia and Captagon in Syria) as an (at least partial) explanation as to how young men might normalize violence against others and make comprehensible the prospect of their own demise.<sup>40</sup> But is violence, moreover highly focused and structured violence (from a military perspective) compatible with high levels of intoxication? We should not ignore the fact that the berserks were considered highly effective warriors and conducted warfare without the benefit of modern mechanized weaponry (firearms are great levelers in modern conflicts); they therefore had to be able to repeatedly and consistently maintain their proficiency in combat, whether in groups on the battlefield or individually as duelists.<sup>41</sup> Thus whilst the possibility that the berserk frenzy was in fact some sort of trance-like state engendered by hallucinogens is seductive, it seems highly improbable that *Amanita muscaria* could be the sole agent responsible.<sup>42</sup> Certainly *A. muscaria* is implicated in altering consciousness, and it may be a likely candidate for inducing the delusory states allegedly undergone by medieval witches.<sup>43</sup> But ingestion of the fungus does not generally lead to focused aggression (though stimulation is reported as a paradoxical effect) rather (like the *psilocybins*) a state of incapacitating psychedelia, as Fabing himself acknowledged.<sup>44</sup> *Amanita* might explain a sufficiently altered state of mind but it falls short of efficiently accounting for the superhuman efforts of the *berserker*.<sup>45</sup>

Psychiatric causes are also a possible explanation but it is not instructive to reduce the berserk rage to the level of homicidal psychopathy, at least as this is understood in psychiatric terms. The sense of abandon that accompanied *berserkrangr* is not really consonant with either Machiavellian or narcissistic personality traits and moreover, berserk rage is often described as if it ‘comes over’ the *berserkr*, not so much as a continuously unwinding psychological state.<sup>46</sup> More pertinent psychiatric diagnoses, for example

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<sup>40</sup> For the discussion around the role of Khat amongst Somali combatants cf. Odenwald et al., ‘Use of khat and posttraumatic stress disorder’; *ibid.* ‘The consumption of khat’.

<sup>41</sup> Though it is worth remarking again on possible changing dynamics within military strategy as piecemeal skirmishing gave way to more organized or stylized fighting. Like all medieval warriors, it would have been essential that *berserker* conveyed a sense of awe and supremacy to prospective challengers, for reputation could often demoralise an opponent before combat even began.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Hutton, *The Witch*. In Austria fly agarics are known colloquially as *hexenpils* (‘witches’ mushrooms’).

<sup>44</sup> It should be noted that the Bufotenin(e) isolated and administered by Fabing is not the only psychoactive toxin present in *Amanita* species and is in fact not even the most prevalent (muscimol and ibotenic acid are generally present in greater quantities). But, as with any naturally occurring drug, precise constituents vary from species to species and between individual plants (fly agarics are infamous for the unpredictability of their effects). Thus, it is entirely possible that not only the pharmacodynamics but the pharmacokinetics of consumption could alter the effects in particular instances. However, if it were the case that a particular species produced a specific effect more consonant with ‘berserk’ behaviour, the question pertains: ‘how would this have been replicable across chronology and geography?’ Moreover, even allowing for outlying reactions, the spectrum of non-hallucinogenic symptoms described in the scientific literature varies from ‘a pleasant Martini-like’ relaxation, through numbness, to cholinergic-type crises such as sweating and hypotension, seizures and ataxia. Nausea and vomiting are also common reactions.

<sup>45</sup> Although mood swings and sensory disturbances could explain the desire to attack like a wolf, few if any of the symptoms described above would be compatible with the action of actually executing it with any effectiveness. The practical result would be less wolf, more discombobulated dog that has drunk his master’s Guinness. Note crucially that nowhere in the sources is there any evidence for the use of psychogenic substances.

<sup>46</sup> The ‘anti-social’ quality of psychopathic individuals, as defined by the DSM-5 is more evident in the berserk personality (particularly in their guise as the outlaws of the later sagas) But there is no explicit

Intermittent Explosive Disorder or Bouffée Délirante, might take into account this paroxysmal nature of the rage.<sup>47</sup> Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has also been proposed by the clinical psychiatrist Jonathan Shay as fulfilling the criteria of berserk behaviour, with the author citing his personal experience with Vietnam veterans in support of this.<sup>48</sup> Shay's theory centres upon the element of hyperarousal in PTSD but there are other characteristic elements of the disorder that sit less comfortably. Flashbacks are key symptoms in the diagnosis of PTSD and there is no suggestion in the saga literature, which can be surprisingly sensitive in its depiction of the interior worlds of its protagonists, that these were acknowledged. Emotional numbing is similarly absent and some characters, for example Egil, appear on the contrary to be emotionally quite engaged. It is also a critical aspect of PTSD that sufferers seek to avoid situations that may trigger recollections of the traumatic event; this definitely does not describe the outlook of the berserkers (who voluntarily returned to battle and indeed proudly exalted in it). And, more profoundly, we may ask: What could have been the traumatic precipitating stressor, especially given that berserkrangr is described as a hereditary condition? (We may posit the hypothesis that some form of initiation rite may have led to the condition but it seems unlikely that this could be replicated consistently and once again there is no mention in the sources of such a ritual).<sup>49</sup>

### *A Culture-Bound Syndrome or Dissociative Religious Warband?*

What is missing from these differing theories, which all contribute some peripheral insight whilst seemingly missing the heart of the matter? The written evidence suggests that some form of transient dissociative state drives the berserker, and this accords with repeated descriptions of them as being 'not human' whilst overcome by frenzy.<sup>50</sup> The key to understanding the phenomenon of *berserkrangr* lies in the fact that the explanation needs to allow for a man to be sufficiently able to function expertly on the battlefield and yet be dissociated enough that he could supersede reason with some form of transcendent or 'meta' consciousness (which, in effect, allowed him to overcome great physical hardship

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suggestion in the contemporary literature that *berserkrangr* represented a pathological tendency, except insofar that it could be argued that a practice at odds with social mores was inherently sociopathic. As attitudes towards pagan residua shifted, notably with the conversion to Christianity and the imposition of a more legally and morally regulated society, it is likely that attitudes toward the berserker would have changed hue. What can be seen as acceptable, celebrated even, within the earlier period sat less comfortably later. Michel Foucault has made a similar point with respect to mental illness in early modern Europe, with the 'idle' mad becoming increasingly pathologised as they antagonized the mores of an evolving bourgeois society. (Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*)

<sup>47</sup> DSM-5

<sup>48</sup> Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*: 'If a soldier survives the berserk state, it imparts emotional deadness and vulnerability to explosive rage to his psychology and permanent hyperarousal to his physiology — hallmarks of post-traumatic stress disorder in combat veterans. My clinical experience with Vietnam combat veterans prompts me to place the berserk state at the heart of their most severe psychological and psychophysiological injuries.' It is worth noting that a more 'acute' presentation of PTSD may differ in quality from that witnessed by physicians in primary care.

<sup>49</sup> The concept that *berserkrangr* was hereditary is an interesting one for it suggests either some occult knowledge passed from generation to generation or else some biological trait. If the latter then the question presents itself, given the propensity of the *berserker* for early deaths, how was this trait heritable?

<sup>50</sup> There is even the hint that they are some form of atavistic cast-back. See *Egils saga*.

and any qualms of conscience). The cultic, almost liminal quality of the *berserker* is an important clue to this aspect. We would like to propose that one of the earliest explanations as to what inspired berserk frenzy, that is its dissociative religious quality, can offer a cardinal intuition into what may have been its defining essence.

It is important to acknowledge that the berserk tendency was not considered a disease by contemporary culture and that therefore no remedy was offered (or sought) at that time. In seeking to explain the phenomenon we therefore run a risk of pathologising by retrospect but there are several candidates within the lexicon of dissociative pathologies that hint at diagnosis (and yet, we would argue, do not properly explain the berserker). Intermittent Explosive Disorder (IED), an impulse-control disorder, is associated with dissociative states, though not to the degree reported in the so-called ‘culture-bound syndrome’ (CBS) of (running) amok. The latter state describes a sudden episode of mass assault against animate or inanimate objects characteristically preceded by an intense period of brooding; observed initially in Malay and Indonesian cultures and considered as a CBS confined to them, it is now classified as psychopathological by the American Classification of Mental Disorders, the DSM-5.<sup>51</sup> Significantly, the DSM notes that ‘unlike Intermittent Explosive Disorder, amok typically occurs as a single episode rather than as a pattern of aggressive behavior [*sic*] and is often associated with prominent dissociative features’.<sup>52</sup> IED is, nevertheless, commonly diagnosed with psychiatric co-morbidities (including dissociation disorders) and, in terms of symptoms, accords quite well with certain characteristics of berserk rage outlined above. The defining feature of IED is a tendency to extreme outbursts of anger or violence, disproportionate to any instigating stressor, often accentuated to the point of rage. This is certainly consonant with *berserkrangr*. It is also associated in some cases with affective alterations preceding the event, such as mood or energy swings, and in some cases symptoms of sympathetic nervous agitation (for example, sweating and palpitations). This we may also see reflected in the berserk state. In many cases a sense of relief and even elation accompanies the outburst in IED, very often followed by a sense of remorse and low mood; again this is suggestive of the berserk personality described in the literature. *Contra* this argument, IED outbursts cannot be, at least as defined by the DSM, premeditated or serve any premeditated purpose.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Totemism as a Form of Multiple Personality Disorder?***

Recent archaeological studies of bronze age communities on the Russian steppes have identified cultures of ritualized canid sacrifice and consumption, which the study authors have hypothesized were precipitants of individuation into manhood and initiation into

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted from the DSM-IV in Paniagua, ‘Culture-Bound Syndromes’.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Coons also notes that, in the cases of IED diagnosed by him, all outbursts were accompanied by partial or full amnesia. (Coons, ‘Dissociative Disorder’).

warbands.<sup>54</sup> A similar trope is attested to by Cicero, who wrote of a ‘wolf festival’ that was the most ancient of Roman rituals, wherein dogs were sacrificed as part of a coming of age rite for adolescent boys. Undoubtedly, this intimate connection between canids and violence pervaded the psyche well into the Renaissance in Italy, albeit perhaps in an attenuated form. Edward Muir (referencing Le Roy Ladurie), in his study into the vicious and factionalised culture of vendetta in Renaissance Italy, refers to the ‘spontaneously nominalist’ mental habits of the period, that is the prevalence of a mentality that was ‘better adapted to handling objects...than dealing with abstract concepts’.<sup>55</sup> In practice, concepts often became enriched with a quality of substantive understanding that took them somewhere beyond the metaphorical whilst perhaps stopping short of arriving at the literal. As this applied to dogs, canine traits were often so conflated with the human that a certain apotropaic personification took place, and dogs were often incorporated within the household for the purposes of legal protection accorded during feuds.<sup>56</sup> For Muir, this nominalist analogizing served the purpose of making sense of poorly understood or chaotic events. By a simple syllogism, the consuming need for revenge could be understood as a ‘form of wildness’, a trait in men paralleled by the periodic unpredictability of the dog consumed by rabies.<sup>57</sup> Just as the ancient Greeks distinguished between the calculated anger of Odysseus’ revenge and the wolfish *lyssa* of Hector on the battlefield, so the Renaissance Friulians that make up Muir’s study understood the need for both types of anger in pursuing vendetta; ‘in effect’, writes Muir, ‘the dog provided an explanation – to wit, the killers were like rabid dogs, besides themselves in anger, and did not know what they were doing’.<sup>58</sup>

The archaeologist Neil Price, in examining warrior practices of the Vikings, sorcery (*seiðr*) and shamanism, has argued for what he describes as ‘the supernatural empowerment of aggression’.<sup>59</sup> We do not believe that Viking culture subscribed to shamanistic practices, except insofar as it encountered Sami (‘Lapp’) peoples on its margins. However, we do believe that totemistic beliefs pervaded the ‘cognitive architecture’ of medieval Scandinavia and that Price has offered an important insight into the manner in which identification with the ‘supernatural’ can enable transformative mental (and indeed, physical) states. The berserker may have been religious in the specific sense of devotion of Odin, or in a more abstract totemic sense. (And, we would propose, these would not have

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<sup>54</sup> ‘In initiations for fraternities and sororities, people do things that they don’t do at any other time, and the initiations are highly gendered. This is a rite of passage, where they seek to transform into what they eat. They are initiated into warriorhood as wolves, then expelled and told to go somewhere else, which is probably not a bad idea for 14-year-olds.’ David W. Anthony, Dorcas R. Brown, ‘The dogs of war: A Bronze Age initiation ritual in the Russian steppes’, *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, volume 48, Dec 2017, Pages 134-148

<sup>55</sup> Muir, p.222. This worldview is echoed in Carlo Ginsburg’s famous study of the Friulian miller Menocchio, *The Worms and the Cheese*.

<sup>56</sup> Muir notes that a similar blurring of the distinction between animal and human informed the hunting practices of the day, a fact not lost on Christian commentators of the time. (Muir, p. 236)

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p.237

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p.227. For a more contemporary account of the formaton of feral self-identity during brutal conflict see van de Port, M., *Gypsies, Wars and Other Instances of the Wild: Civilisation and its Discontents in a Serbian Town* (Amsterdam, 2014). We are grateful to Mr. Jo Middleton of Brighton and Sussex Medical School for this insight, and for his observations on the Sioux Ghost Dance.

<sup>59</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*

been mutually exclusive categories) Totemism is a somewhat protean concept but at some fundamental level it is involved experientially with the identification of the human with the non-human<sup>60</sup>, even in some instances to the point that the animal spirit supplants or possesses the human mind. Modern psychiatry has yielded the diagnostic classification of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID, formerly ‘Multiple Personality Disorder’, MPD) which is defined by the intermittent subversion of the primary egotistical mind by an ‘alter’ ego. The DSM-5 states that the condition is characterized by the presence of two or more distinct and persistent personality states<sup>61</sup>; importantly, these ‘alters’ are often reported as episodes of supernatural ‘possession’ and can even include the phenomenon of ‘animal alters’.<sup>62</sup> Associated with this ‘fragmented’ identity the individual experiences a disruption in sense of self, agency, behaviour, cognition, consciousness and even motor function.<sup>63</sup> Frequent absences in memory are symptomatic of the disorder. The psychiatrist Ellert Nijenhuis has furthermore proposed a distinction between the aspect or fragment of personality responsible for everyday functioning and that which is dominant during traumatic events. He concludes that traumatic experiences ‘especially when they occur early in life and involve severe threat to the body, may activate psychobiological action systems [involved in the flight or fight response] that have been developed by evolution.’<sup>64</sup> There are certainly interesting parallels between what is described during the dissociative episodes of DID/MPD and the cognitive transformations of the Berserker. But crucially, even allowing for Nijenhuis’ observations, the diagnosis is broadly described in the medical literature as incapacitating and thus does not map squarely onto whatever psychic state was undergone during *berserkrangr*.

### ***A Pagan Death Cult?***

A final point worth considering draws upon another facet of the religious experience as portrayed by the berserks, that is to say their cultic dimension. A crucial aspect of the *berserkir* must be their identification with Odin in his many aspects; not only are they explicitly portrayed as warriors sacred to him but the influence of the god manifests in other more subtle fashions in the sources relating to the berserkers (it is Odin who is said to gift Egil his poetic inspiration, for example). Odin himself, as a god, is a shape-changer and it has been argued that he also occupies the role of god of death in Old Norse

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<sup>60</sup> Most often this non-human presence is animal, but on occasion it takes the form of other living organisms such as trees.

<sup>61</sup> DSM-5. The natural history or pathophysiology of D.I.D. usually involves trauma; the advent of parvenu personalities classically ensues from an act of severe injury to the psyche, with the suggestion that these identities offer a protective refuge or retreat from the stressor. A recent case from Australia described the several hundred or even thousand personalities that evolved in a young victim during years of sexual assault by her abusive father. (BBC Sept 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-australia-49589160>)

<sup>62</sup> Hendrickson, ‘Animal Alters’.

<sup>63</sup> DSM-5

<sup>64</sup> These action systems activate as part of a dissociative state. Interestingly, he notes that they may be responsible for ‘analgesic’ responses to physical or psychic trauma. Nijenhuis, *Dissociation in Trauma*. These observations may enable a link with the PTSD patterns studied by Shay.

mythology.<sup>65</sup> This latter association, whilst more nebulous in attribution, is important for (if correct) would constitute the *berserkir* as members of a death cult. The psychology of death cults is a slightly fraught area of inquiry but we believe it would be fair, in the sense in which their members are admitted into some form of transcendent (or delusional, according to perspective) mental state to categorise them as an example of ecstatic religious belief.<sup>66</sup> The reported and observed phenomenon of religious ecstasy has been investigated by both psychologists and anthropologists and can be broadly described as an altered state of consciousness or awareness engendered by a culturally specific, intense ritualized focus or technique (such as physical exertion, dancing, music, fasting or psychogenic drugs). This transcendent state is often accompanied by visionary perception and a sense of euphoria and has been heavily identified with the process undertaken as part of the shamanic spirit journey.<sup>67</sup> Recalling the shield-biting and howling behaviours of the *berserkir* we might observe certain parallels, especially when we consider the physical component of the berserk frenzy.<sup>68</sup>

### **Conclusion: Man into Animal, Animal into man**

We believe that the *berserkir* were a war-band whose psyches were forged in a collective dissociative religious state probably triggered by ritual behaviour and some degree of drug or alcohol usage. Recent research into the psychological aspects of religious experience have concluded that spiritual or religious beliefs may be associated with altered brain states and chemistry, though it is not clear how the relationship plays out in terms of sufficient, necessary and contributory causes. The theory of 'schizotypy' has proposed that all personality states or experiential characteristics occupy a continuum, and that psychosis and the pathology defined as schizophrenia fall at one end of this (rather than presenting as discrete conditions which are either present or absent).<sup>69</sup> According to this theory the 'religious mind', replete with visions and imaginative dissociations, is one that may undergo interludes common to psychosis (but not to the point of interruption of function, as in schizophrenia). The forensic psychiatrist Gwen Adshead has spoken of 'ecologies of violence' in which violence can be understood not simply as an inevitable event in certain individuals but as a propensity proceeding from sufficient organic and cultural and

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<sup>65</sup> Grundy, *The Cult of Óðinn*. Animal 'familiar' (specifically the raven and the wolf) occupy both a symbolic and literal role in the mythology of Odin, a significance that has led to claims of the god's quasi-shamanic status. It could be argued that in fact this relationship is more accurately a totemistic survival embedded within a neologic accretion of attributes more properly belonging to sky divinities (of which the Eddaic Norse pantheon could be said to be composed, cf. the writings of Joseph Campbell).

<sup>66</sup> The common basic characteristics of death cults have been identified thus: a charismatic leader (Odin? Perhaps an avatar of the deity?); a common set of beliefs; a partially collective isolation from society (the cultic warrior band); the concept of a hostile society (life is war); the concept of Armageddon (Ragnarok?); striving for a better life (physical reward in Midgard, a warrior's heaven in Valhalla); death. (Wegner, 'Death Cults'). Note also Buckley, 'Mystical Experience'.

<sup>67</sup> Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*

<sup>68</sup> In certain tales *berserkrangr* manifests not in the context of battle but whilst undertaking some stupendous feat of strength or endurance. See, for example, *Vatnsdæla saga*.

<sup>69</sup> Clarke, *Spirituality*

substrates.<sup>70</sup> While undefined in biochemical terms, her concept of psychic substrates remains a valid one. It is against such a conceptual backdrop that we believe we must interpret the *berserker*; these were not merely psychotic individuals but high functioning warriors possessed of a transcendent tenacity. We believe that religion supplied for the berserker an ingrained psychic substratum that predisposed them towards altered states of dissociated consciousness but that episodes of *berserkergangr* would have been induced by a precipitant of some type, be that psychogenic substances (including alcohol), ritualized behaviours or some combination thereof. The fact that these warriors maintained such a high level of battlefield proficiency suggests that any chemical inducement must have been moderated and may only have provided a symbolic value in uniting the warband or catalyzing the rage state.<sup>71</sup> These episodic furies would have been transient but utterly encompassing, carrying the berserker far beyond the parameters of their normal capabilities and consciousness.

We may never know with certainty what occurred on the battlefields of history but similar manifestations of ‘belief-’ or ‘faith-bound martial states’, that share characteristics of behaviour and aetiology but span broad spectra of time and place, suggest that a shared process runs throughout (Albeit perhaps one nuanced by, but not bound to, the specificities of culture) The berserker, the Fianna of Celtic mythology and the Maenads of Dionysus (not to mention suicide bombers and extremist fighters of recent times) cannot be explained simply by means of drugs that alter minds.<sup>72</sup> Certainly drugs may have accentuated or helped achieve a shift in consciousness, disinhibit fear or altered physiological function on the battlefield. But some form of prior conviction seems to have led these warriors to the battlefield in the first instance and, in the case of the groups above, that conviction is best understood as the product of a spiritual or religious formation.<sup>73</sup> A key feature here appears to have been the warband’s hereditary or group nature. Collective dissociative states are reported (for example, as an aspect of death cults) and in this it may also be that, given the group nature of this formation, some role for culture is inevitable. The *berserker* rarely operated alone whereas most of the impulse control diagnoses considered above (IED, Bouffée Délirante and Amok) pertain to individuals. The ontological beliefs of the Vikings

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<sup>70</sup> Gwen Adshead; ‘Things of Darkness: The Nature of Human Violence’ (<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/series/things-of-darkness/>). Adshead’s erudite and thoughtful analysis raises interesting questions regarding determinism and agency and the nature of trigger mechanisms.

<sup>71</sup> And may indeed not have actually formed a great part of the preamble to battle but rather have found their role in identity shaping and group cohesion rituals performed outside of the arena of immediate conflict.

<sup>72</sup> Bennett Simon, in his work ‘Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece’, discusses the ‘ecstatic possession’ of the Maenads as it corresponds to patients experiencing seizure, noting that both phenomena are well represented by the term ‘dissociation’, noting that both states progress by way of an escalation in tension to the point where control is surrendered (whether to seizure or possession by a god such as Dionysius). Simon, p.252.

<sup>73</sup> The savage recent attacks by men claiming allegiance to ISIL perhaps hint at a contemporary parallel. The quest into the attacks and post-mortem investigation determined that the attackers in both the London Bridge and Houses of Parliament massacres of 2017 had taken significant doses (outside of the physiological range) of dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), a steroid hormone known to alter mental states, in the hours or days before the attacks. The religious motivation behind the attacks must remain speculative and yet the question as to what combination of factors could drive young men to such a brutal and collective act of homicidal frenzy echoes our research enquiry.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/feb/09/london-bridge-attack-trio-had-taken-large-quantities-of-steroids-inquest>



provided for them a means of conceptualizing and experiencing the very fabric of their religious world and, in the case of the berserks, provided a psychic substrate transformed into lived reality (with terrifying consequences).

Whilst these states may be said to be ‘culture-bound’ in the sense that they manifest with some cultural specificity, we believe that they essentially share sufficient characteristics to justify their consideration as a collective phenomenon arising from precursors common to multiple societies. What recurs in the sources is the suggestion of a dislocation or transmogrification of the psyche, essentially transcendent and possibly disinhibited by drugs or alcohol. Thus loosened and fluid, the mind appears trammled into atavistic behavioural archetypes or ‘lycanthropic’ (xenomorphic) patterns of identity. It is as if whatever psychic substrate that forms identity, made molten in the crucible of ritual intoxication, is temporarily reformed in another mould, a mould preformed archetypally (whether we consider this archetype to be broadly psychological, spiritual or metaphysical). The metaphysical sequence of analogy described in these processes of animal identification can form conduits not only of understanding but cyphers of behaviour. The totem sits somewhere along this semiological-behavioural axis of exchange. In the case of the *berserkir* we would suggest that the archetypal shaping of identity was totemic in origin and as such these cultic warriors should be differentiated from other combatants who exhibited less immersive spiritual beliefs.<sup>74</sup> For the totemic worshipper association could be so powerful that it might manifest not simply as *association* but as *becoming*. This need not simply be interpreted as cognitive degeneration but may indeed be perceived as an almost transformative psychic exercise. In his book ‘Becoming a Beast’ the anthropologist Charles Foster describes the therianthropic imperative of ancient religions, the ‘ancient and earnest need to unite the human and animal worlds’<sup>75</sup>. For Foster, ‘[s]hamanic transformation is the natural corollary of highly developed Theory of Mind’.<sup>76</sup> We might argue that the pre-modern mind, and its greater symbiosis with the natural world, gave rise to an enhanced porosity between the psychic boundaries demarcating beast and man. And it may be that the use of symbolic ritual and mind-altering chemicals allowed for a further sensitization of this more permeable membrane. In a very different context, it has been observed that religion ‘is the opiate of the masses’. In the context of the *berserker*, religion should be considered the opiate of the warband.

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<sup>74</sup> A recurring characteristic of totemic behaviours involves the use of suitable accoutrements; the Berserkers’ use of animal pelts in ritual and in establishing their identity may be an important detail in this respect. A more modern parallel (highlighted by Mr. Jo Middleton) can be found in the Ghost Dance rituals of Oglala Sioux braves; warriors initiated into this nineteenth century millenarian cult came to believe in the invincibility incurred by the use of ritual shirts (see Mooney, J. *The Ghost Dance Religion and Wounded Knee* (Emmaus, 1973)).

<sup>75</sup> Foster, *Being a Beast*, p.3-4

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p.12

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