

The Notion of *Berserkir* and the Relation between Óðinn and Animal Warriors

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The aim of this paper is to investigate the religious role of the *berserkir* and the relation between Óðinn and the so-called animal-warriors in the pre-Cristian religion of the North. I shall begin by briefly discussing the relation between Óðinn and his chosen heroes, which is clearly expressed in the ideas concerning the afterlife in Valhöll. I then go on to discuss the notion of the *berserkir* by analysing their role in some saga accounts, stating that such groups of animal warriors actually should be seen as confraternities in a religious context.

Snorri relates in *Gylf*. 38 that those who have died by weapons will go to Valhöll, as opposed to those who die a 'natural death', who will join Hel. This systematisation certainly does not constitute an exhaustive picture of the conceptions of the dead in Viking Scandinavia since, as we all know, other abodes too can be found in the sources.¹ Nevertheless, the dichotomy can and should be seen as part of a pre-Christian semantic universe in which different categories are seen as belonging to different and sometimes opposed realms. Thus, in this instance we notice that Hel and Óðinn are opposed as feminine to masculine, as the nether world to the upper world, and as passive to active in relation to the activities of the inhabitants in the two abodes. Therefore, there is no reason to dismiss the information by Snorri or to interpret the whole complex in historical terms (Hel as an older conception than Valhöll etc.).

The dead who go to Valhöll are called *einherjar*, a group that consisted of warriors as well as kings. In *Eiríksmál* we are told that when king Eiríkr arrives both Sigmundr (king) and Sinfjötli (not a king) are there. Now it could be argued that these kings have died in battle and therefore must be viewed as warriors. But apparently it was not even necessary to have died in battle, since Sinfjötli was poisoned during a banquet but was nevertheless taken home by Óðinn himself. The same holds true for Hadingus in *Gesta Danorum* I. This seems to demand an explanation, which we will return to below.

If warriors as well as kings went to Valhöll, and if warriors who did not fall in battle could go there too, it may be possible to find some common features for these different groups and maybe even features which are not in opposition to the structure related by Snorri. The key, I believe, is to be found in another work by Snorri, namely the *Ynglinge saga*. Here we have two statements that may have a huge explanatory value, namely chapter 6, in which we learn about the *berserkir*, and chapter 9, in which we are told about Óðinn's and Njörðr's death.

The *berserkir* have caused a lot of troubles within the history of religions. Who were they? Are our sources reliable as an expression of pagan ideas or are *berserkir* a pure literary fiction?

¹ Further it can be stated that the conceptions of the afterlife are very confusing in most, if not all religions. People simply have different ideas, and even the ideas of one single individual may change according to different circumstances.

In a paper read at the Saga Conference in Bonn in 2003, Anatoly Liberman attacked most of the ideas that have been prominent among scholars concerning *berserkir*. He starts out by telling us that even if there is a striking parallel in the stanza from Þórbjörn hornklofi's *Haraldskvæði* 8 between the mention of the *berserkir* and the *ulfheðnar*, they should not be understood along the same lines. Whereas he apparently accepts that the *ulfheðnar* in pagan times had some religious significance, this is not the case with the *berserkir*.² After having discussed some tendencies in the interpretations of the *berserkir* problem, he concludes:

If we dismiss idle speculations, we will come up with the following results. Some warriors were at one time called *berserkir*. They seem to have been elite troops renowned for their recklessness in battle; they may have fought without coats of mail. It is unclear whether folk etymology connected them with bears and whether Snorri or anyone heard an illusion to *ber*-‘bear’ in their name. They had nothing to do with religious cults. (Liberman 2003, 340).

Liberman then goes on to imagine the development from the end of the Viking epoch to the thirteenth century, where they were used as antagonists in the sagas. There is a lot to say about Liberman's paper but it is not possible to go into details here. What is of direct interest for the subject of this paper, however, is Liberman's statement about Óðinn's role in the *berserkir* complex, in which he denies a relation between the wild hunt, the *einherjar*, and the *berserkir*. He concludes: ‘It is safe to assume that myths of Óðinn's berserkers did not exist’ (p. 339).³ It is true that there is not much evidence of warrior bands which were ultimately linked by some religious bond to Óðinn, but does that really mean that it is ‘safe’ to deny such a relation? The source situation concerning Old Norse religion is of a kind that should warn us against exaggerated use of *argumenta ex silentio*; and I believe that there is as a matter of fact textual evidence to support the view that notions and ideas about a link between *berserkir* and Óðinn actually can be reconstructed. It should be admitted at once that ‘proofs’ cannot be given, but if ‘proof’ is to be understood in a narrow sense, it is hard to accept anything at all which has to do with historical reconstruction. As I have already stated, there is further evidence to be taken into account which is not referred to by Liberman. He actually does include some of the saga accounts in his considerations and finds, rightly, a certain pattern according to which *berserkir* are exclusively seen as antagonists in order to allow the brave Icclander to show what he is good for. However, Liberman also mentions *Hrólfs saga kraka* and the ‘Hrólfr kraki type of stories’. He says: ‘When berserkers are projected to a semi-legendary past, they appear as a king's retinue, as happens in *Hrólfs saga*’. So let us take a closer look at this saga.

² Liberman mentions the Sigmundur-Sinfjötli episode in *Völsunga saga*, and those interpretations that see initiation to some sort of group of *ulfheðnar* as an important element. He does not argue against that, but only that this episode can not be taken into account when we are discussing the *berserkir* (2003, 239).

³ Perhaps it should be mentioned here that Liberman does not accept the statement of Snorri in the *Ynglinga saga*. It is said that Snorri ‘described berserkers according to the ‘folklore’ of his time’ (p. 338).

The only element that is mentioned by Liberman is the one mentioned above, i.e. the *berserkir* sitting in the king's hall. We know that the saga is late, probably from the late fourteenth century or even later; and there is no doubt that, as Liberman also writes, the notion of *berserkir* at that time was very negative. Nevertheless, the author of the saga places them as Hrólftr's retinue, and thus they seem indeed to have been elite troops. The negative attitude, however, marks them as opposites to the true heroes of the saga, namely the *kappar*, the group to which Svipdagr, Böðvarr, and the other individualised heroes belong. Only one incident opposes this pattern, namely when Svipdagr and the leader of the *berserkir* are about to go into a fight and the king intervenes and says that they should be seen as equals and that they should both be his friends: *Ok eftir þat sættust þeir ok eru jafnan á einu ráði, liggja í hernaði ok hafa sigr, hvar sem þeir komu* (chapter 22). This suggests that the opposition is perhaps not as thorough as one would think, which is supported by the fact that in the hall, the *kappar* Böðvarr, Hjalti, Svipdagr, Hvítserkr and Beigaðr are sitting next to the king on both sides, and on the next seats the *berserkir* (chapter 37), although we should expect the rest of the *kappar* who are mentioned in chapter 49 to be placed there. Thus it seems as if the *berserkir* and the *kappar* 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, as we saw in his conclusion, accepted that it is likely that they were elite troops. What he did not accept was that they had any religious 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.

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. As regards the bear, it is mostly elaborated in connection to Böðvarr Bjarki, who is the leader of the *kappar* (who should eventually be identified with the *berserkir*): His father was named Biörn and was transformed into a bear by magic; and Böðvarr himself has the ability to transform himself into a bear. Further, we are told by Saxo that the monster which Hötrr has to kill in a clearly initiatory way was in fact a bear (II, vi, 11). 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. It is impossible to tell whether they actually fought in bear skins or if they were perhaps only 'transformed' into bears during initiation. However, this would not prevent them from roaring like bears when fighting the actual battles (which was probably rather frightening). Of course, the belief that these warriors were bears only has to do with the ritual or symbolic transformation: being a warrior of this special kind would demand that they were strong and savage like bears.⁴ From this we could

⁴ Thus there is no reason to imagine that these *berserkir* were ever thought of as bears in any essential way. Animals and other natural species are, as was maintained by Lévi-Strauss many years ago, 'good to think with', because they may illuminate how different groups of people are related to each other, namely in the same way as different groups of animals are related. Accepting that certain groups of warriors were thought of as bears does not necessarily mean anything else than accepting that players from a certain football club may be called lions or sharks or something similar. They are not thought of as lions or sharks, but when playing football they act like lions in a metaphorical way.

easily imagine how notions, perhaps expressed in myths or semi-myths along the lines of *Böðvars þátr*, could develop. Another element which in my opinion strongly indicates that there is a relation between bears and *berserkir*, at least in connection with initiations, is the way the *berserkir* arrive in the hall in *Hrólfs saga*: The first thing they do is to go to all the men in the hall and ask them if they think that they are as strong as they are themselves (cf. chapters 22 and 37). Kris Kershaw has suggested that this is also a pattern in the initiation (Kershaw 2000, 57 f.), and there is no doubt that the way these incidents are described in the saga have a ritual aura, which would indicate that in order to become a member of the band, one would have to fight a *berserkr*. Eventually, if the monster that Höttir 'kills' in the saga was actually a bear, this may be a variation or a supplement to fighting with a real *berserkr*: if you are able to kill a bear, you have ritually been transformed into a warrior who is not afraid of fighting *berserkir*, and who is strong as a bear.

All these bear incidents in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, which certainly form a pattern that is parallel to what we know from initiations of warriors in many different societies, are more or less impossible to explain unless we accept that the author of the saga had some more or less precise knowledge of old traditions about the men surrounding the king who were compared to bears and who, whether the etymology is accurate or not, were eventually labelled *berserkir*.

We shall now return to the other point which was rejected by Liberman, namely the role of Óðinn in relation to these warrior bands. According to Liberman, this relation is only present in *Ynglinga saga*. This may be true if we have to rely on direct evidence only. There is, however, a lot of indirect evidence that should be taken into consideration, and one source is certainly *Hrólfs saga kraka*. As already mentioned, this saga is very late and, of course, some interpretation is needed in order to go behind the medieval setting. One important feature is thus the picture of Hrólfir as a 'noble heathen'. He was not religiously committed to the pagan gods. Nevertheless, he does have a certain relation to Óðinn which can be seen in chapters 39 and 46, where the king and his *kappar* and many other men come to a farmer called Hrani, who turns out to be Óðinn. At their first visit, he gives them good advice by testing their endurance and telling the king to send home all the men except the *kappar* who, as we have seen, can hardly be separated from the *berserkir*. At the second visit, on their way home from Aðils, he offers them weapons, which, however, are refused by the king. This last incidence may be due to the Christian setting,⁵ but the first one is significant. Only the king and those who have shown endurance which is proper for a warrior are chosen by the advice of the god. And these are the king's *kappar/berserkir*. A relation between Óðinn and the *berserkir* therefore does not seem to be too far fetched. Further, it should be noticed that the one who recognises that Hrani is actually Óðinn is Böðvarr, who, as we have seen, is particularly 'bear-like'.

⁵ It may be significant, though, that as the men suspect that it might have been Óðinn, they know that they have done something stupid and try to find Hrani again, but he has disappeared, and they understand that they will not be victorious in the future. Thus even though Óðinn is said to be an evil spirit, they accept his power: that they have cut the bond to the god means that their war luck has disappeared.

In another *fornaldarsaga*, *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, the hero Ásmundr is about to be sacrificed by some *berserkir*⁶ (chapter 8), but escapes. However, the god to receive the sacrifice is Óðinn, and the reason for sacrificing Ásmundr to this god is to secure victory. Ásmundr himself, with the surname *berserkjabani*, is said to have been killed by Óðinn with a spear (chapter 18) in much the same way as other Odinic heroes, for instance Sigmundr. Now in the saga narrative Ásmundr is certainly not a friend of Óðinn, but by having killed *berserkir* and by being taken home by Óðinn, it seems likely that what is at stake here is a vague memory of some legendary hero who had a special relation to Óðinn during an initiation which made him an Odinic hero – an initiation which consisted in ‘killing’ one or more *berserkir* who would ‘sacrifice’ him, that is initiate him to the god by whom he is killed in the end.

Thus there are indications that *berserkir*, as groups of 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. So, the warriors who were initiated to Óðinn and had lived their lives as Odinic warriors were taken home by the god himself. But the sources tell us that there is yet another way through which one could secure a life in Valhöll, and that is narrated to us in *Ynglinga saga* chapter 9. Here it is said that Óðinn himself, when he was about to die, *lét hann marka sik geirsoddi ok eignaði sér alla vápndaða menn, sagði hann sik mundu fara í Goðheima ok fagna þar vinum sínum*. And later in the same chapter, we hear about Njörðr that *lét hann ok marka sik Óðni, áðr hann dó*. It is thus possible to go to Goðheimr, which we must no doubt see as a parallel to Valhöll, if one is marked with a spear. This is frequently, and no doubt correctly, seen as a parallel to the ritual of throwing out a spear in order to dedicate the enemy to Óðinn. This throwing is in accordance with Snorri’s statement that those who die in battle will go to Valhöll, although it is not said explicitly that a spear was thrown over them. Underlying the statement that *allir þeir menn er í orrosto hafa fallit frá upphafi heims eru nú komnir til Óðins í Valhöll* is then the knowledge that these men had been dedicated to the god. According to the sources, this could happen by either throwing a spear over the enemy or, if a person died in bed, by marking him with the spear. As is well known, the spear is an attribute of Óðinn, so this is all quite logical. Both the marking and the throwing are variants of dedications to Óðinn and so, of course, is the initiation that has no doubt preceded the acceptance into the *Männerbünde*, whether these are seen as *berserkir*, *ulfheðnar* or something else. There is no reason to believe that everybody in Valhöll was initiated to the god, since it seems as if the whole army of the enemy could be dedicated. But it is likely that the different symbolisms at stake all included the ‘killing’ with a spear, the ultimate sign that they belonged to Óðinn.

Although, then, there were different ways of being dedicated to Óðinn, exactly these initiated men, the *Männerbünde*, being professional warriors of course, are the proto examples of Odinic warriors, and this is no doubt the reason why they were in focus in legendary narratives from a much later period, in which much has been forgotten and only a vague memory is left. It is obvious that we cannot expect that the authors of these narratives from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were aware of

⁶ Later in the same chapter, after he has escaped, it is said that he killed twelve persons including the *berserkir*.

the sociological and socio-religious background for these incidents with animal symbolism, initiatory rituals and so forth. It is eventually up to us to try to reconstruct this background, and although we shall never be able to make these reconstructions as exact mirror images of the reality of the Viking Age and earlier, we have to try with the means that are at our disposal.

To return to Óðinn, I believe that these groups of warriors who surrounded the king or the chieftain together with their leader (this king or chieftain) were the basic stock in Valhöll. Whether every man who was killed by weapon was always supposed to go there, or whether this is a late element, can hardly ever be decided, but one of my purposes here has been to show that there was probably a relation between the notions of Valhöll and some rituals of initiation, including the element of marking oneself with a spearhead, or being dedicated to Óðinn by the enemy. However, the initiation proper was probably reserved for some elect warriors and their leaders.

There are a couple of traits that are important in connection with the symbolism at work here. It is definitely no coincidence that the recurring feature is a weapon. Firstly, the spear, as has already been mentioned, is an attribute of Óðinn's, and secondly, a weapon kills. Now it does not seem strange that somebody about to die is killed symbolically, but as an element in the initiation complex, we cannot avoid seeing it as an expression of the universal symbolism⁷ of initiation, namely the one comprising death and resurrection (cf. Eliade 1975). As is well known, Óðinn himself was struck with a spear when he was hanging on the world tree (*Háv* 138), and King Víkarr is sacrificed to him by being struck also (*Gautreks saga* ch. 7).⁸ This makes it likely that killing with a spear (and/or by strangling) is related on the symbolic level to the cult of Óðinn, whether we are talking about sacrifices or initiations.⁹ It can thus be argued that the very existence of the spear in these situations binds together the cult of Óðinn and the admittance to Valhöll.

To summarise: 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. It is in this connection that we must view the animal properties of the warriors. Of course they were not conceived as bears or wolves in general, but on the symbolic level they were compared to fierce animals, exactly as we use different kinds of animals in order to characterise different kinds of people. Things were no doubt institutionalised to another degree at that time, and when saga writers centuries later wrote about the past,

⁷ 'Universal', not in the sense that it can be depicted in all rituals of initiation, but that it is found in all parts of the world, and as such must be seen as a symbolism which is not specific to certain cultures.

⁸ In Saxo's version (*Gesta Danorum* VI,v,7) the weapon is a sword, but including the whole symbolism surrounding Óðinn, the saga seems to be the most reliable.

⁹ The relation between these two important ritual phenomena has been discussed by me earlier (1993). In short, we can state that in initiation there are always some characteristics which can also be found in most sacrifices, and I would not hesitate to maintain that symbolically and structurally the two phenomena are related (see also Schjødtt forthcoming).

they confused symbolic animals with real animals, ritual situations with reality, and therefore the warriors became bears or wolves who killed other animals. Imagining initiations of warriors, however, all the elements in these narratives come to make sense as parts of such rituals.

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