

Grendel and Berserkergang

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Part I: Description of the *Berserkr*

The modern popular conception of the Viking warrior is one of a murderous savage, clad in animal skins, howling into battle. This conception probably owes more to literary tradition than to historical fact: it reflects not the ordinary Scandinavian warriors, but rather a special group of fighters known as *berserks* or *berserkers*.

The etymology of the term *berserkr* is disputed. It may mean "bare-sark," as in "bare of shirt" and refer to the berserker's habit of going unarmored into battle. *Ynglingasaga* ch. 6 records this tradition, saying of the warriors of Óðinn that "they went without coats of mail, and acted like mad dogs and wolves" (Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*. trans. Lee M. Hollander. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press. 1964. p.10) [... *hans menn fóru brynjulausir ok váru galnir sem hundar eða vargar...* (Snorri Sturluson. "Ynglinga saga". *Heimskringla*. eds. N. Linder and H. A. Haggson. WWW. Heimskringla. Accessed 11/01/2010. http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Ynglinga_saga)].

Others have contended that the term should be read "bear-sark," and describes the animal-skin garb of the berserker. *Grettirs Saga* calls King Harald's berserkers "Wolf-Skins," and in *King Harald's Saga* they are called *ulfhedinn* or "wolf-coats," a term which appears in *Vatnsdæla Saga* and *Hrafnsmál* (Hilda R. Ellis-Davidson, "Shape-Changing in the Old Norse Sagas," in *Animals in Folklore*. eds. J.R. Porter and W.M.S. Russell. Totowa NJ: Rowman and Littlefield. 1978. pp. 132-133), as well as in *Grettirs Saga* (Denton Fox and Hermann Palsson, trans. *Grettir's Saga*." Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press. 1961. p. 3).

The berserker is closely associated in many respects with the god Óðinn. Adam of Bremen in describing the Allfather says, "*Wodan — id est furor*" or "Wodan — that means fury." The name Óðinn derives from the Old Norse *odur* or *óðr*. This is related to the German *wut*, "rage, fury," and to the Gothic *wods*, "possessed" (Georges Dumézil. *The Destiny of the Warrior*. Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press. 1969. p. 36). This certainly brings to mind the madness associated with the berserker, and other Óðinnic qualities are seen to be possessed by the berserk. *Ynglingasaga* recounts that Óðinn could shape-shift into the form of a bird, fish, or wild animal (Snorri Sturluson, p. 10).

The berserker, too, was often said to change into bestial form, or at least to assume the ferocious qualities of the wolf or bear. *Kveldulfr* in *Egils Saga Skallagrimsonar* was spoken of as a shapechanger (Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards, trans. *Egil's Saga*. NY: Penguin. 1976. p. 21), and *Hrolf's Saga* tells of the hero Bjarki, who takes on the shape of a bear in battle:

Men saw that a great bear went before King Hrolf's men, keeping always near the king. He slew more men with his forepaws than any five of the king's champions. Blades and weapons glanced off him, and he brought down both men and horses in King Hjorvard's forces, and everything which came in his path he crushed to death with his teeth, so that panic and terror swept through King

Hjorvard's army..." (Gwyn Jones. *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*. NY: Oxford Univ. Press. 1961. p. 313).

[*Þat sjá þeir Hjörvarðr ok menn hans, at björn einn mikill ferr fyrir Hrólfs konungs mönnum ok jafnan þar næst, sem konungrinn var. Hann drepr fleiri menn með sínum hrammi en fimm aðrir kappar konungs. Hróta af honum högg ok skotvápn. en hann brýtr undir sik bæði menn ok hesta af liði Hjörvarðs konungs, ok allt þat, sem í nánd er, mylr hann með sínum tönnum, svá at illr kurr kemr í lið Hjörvarðs konungs. (Hrólf's saga kraka ok kappa hans. WWW. Netútgáfan. 1997. Accessed 11/01/2010. <http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/hrolf.htm>)]*

Dumézil refers to this phenomenon as the *hamingja* ("spirit" or "soul") or *fylgja* ("spirit form") of the berserker, which may appear in animal form in dreams or in visions, as well as in reality (Georges Dumézil. *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*. Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press. 1973. p. 142).

Another Óðinnic quality possessed by the berserk is a magical immunity to weapons. In *Havamál*, Óðinn speaks of spells used to induce this immunity:

A third song I know, if sore need should come
of a spell to stay my foes;
When I sing that song, which shall blunt their swords,
nor their weapons nor staves can wound

....

An eleventh I know, if haply I lead
my old comrades out to war,
I sing 'neath the shields, and they fare forth mightily;
safe into battle,
safe out of battle,
and safe return from the strife.

(Lee M. Hollander, trans. *Poetic Edda*. Austin. Univ. of Texas Press. 1962. pp. 44-45)

[*Þat kann ek it þriðja
ef mér verðr þörf mikil
haptis við mína heiptmögu
eggjar ek deysi
minna andskota
bítat þeim vápn né velir*

....

*Þat kann ek it ellipta
ef ek skal til orrostu
leiða langvini
undir randir ek gel
en þeir með ríki fara
heilir hildar til*

*heilir hildi frá
koma þeir heilir hvaðan*
(*Hávamál*. WWW: Anglo-Saxons.net. Accessed 11/01/2010.
<http://www.anglo-saxons.net/hwaet/?do=get&type=text&id=Hav>)]

The berserk was sometimes inherently possessed of this immunity, or performed spells to induce it, or even had special powers to blunt weapons by his gaze. Many tales say of their berserkers, "no weapon could bite them" or "iron could not bite into him." This immunity to weapons may also have been connected with the animal-skin garments worn by the berserk. As we saw above, while in animal form, "blades and weapons glanced off" Böðvarr Bjarki. Similarly, *Vatnsdæla Saga* says that "those berserks who were called *ulfhednar* had wolf shirts for mail-coats" (Ellis-Davidson, "Shape Changing," p. 133) [...*þeir berserkir, er Úlfhednar vǫru kallaðir; þeir höfðu vargstakka fyrir brynjur...* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Vatnsdœla saga*, Íslensk fornrit 8. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag. 1939. pp. 24-25.)]. This concept of immunity may have evolved from the berserker's rage, during which the berserk might receive wounds, but due to his state of frenzy take no note of them until the madness passed from him. A warrior who continued fighting while bearing mortal wounds would surely have been a terrifying opponent.

It is likely that the berserk was actually a member of the cult of Óðinn. The practices of such a cult would have been a secret of the group's initiates, although the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII refers in his *Book of Ceremonies* to a "Gothic Dance" performed by members of his Varangian guard, who took part wearing animal skins and masks: this may have been connected with berserker rites (Hilda R. Ellis-Davidson. *Pagan Scandinavia*. NY: Frederick A. Praeger. 1967. p. 100). This type of costumed dance is also seen in figures from Swedish helmet plates, scabbard ornaments, and bracteates which depict human figures with the heads of bears or wolves, dressed in animal skins but having human hands and feet. These figures often carry spears or swords, and are depicted as running or dancing. One plate from Torslunda, Sweden, may show the figure of Óðinn dancing with such a bear figure.



Warriors Dressed in Animal Skins and Masks
Left: Helmet Plate from Torslunda. Right: Bracteate Fragment from Gutenstein.

Other ritual practices attributed to berserks may represent the initiation of the young warrior into a band of berserkers. Such bands are mentioned in the sagas, oftentimes numbering twelve warriors. Another common feature of these bands is the name of the leader, which is often Björn or a variant, meaning "bear." The form of this initiation is a battle, either real or simulated, with a bear or other fearsome adversary. *Grettirs Saga* tells of a situation of this sort, when a man named Björn throws Grettir's cloak into the den of a bear. Grettir slays the bear, recovers his cloak, and returns with the bear's paw as a token of his victory (Fox and Palsson, pp. 62-67). Böðvarr Bjarki has a protégé, Hjalti, who undergoes a simulated encounter as his initiation in Hrólf's Saga. Böðvarr first slays a dragon-like beast, then sets its skin up on a frame. Hjalti then "attacks" the beast and symbolically kills it before witnesses, earning his place among the warriors (Jones, pp. 282-285). Bronze helmet plates from locations in Sweden and designs upon the Sutton Hoo purse lid seem to show examples of these initiatory encounters, where a human figure is seen grappling with one, or often two, bear-like animals (Margaret A. Arent. "The Heroic Pattern: Old German Helmets, *Beowulf* and *Grettissaga*." in *Old Norse Literature and Mythology*. ed. Edgar C. Polomé. Austin, Univ. of Texas Press. 1969. pp. 133-139).

Modern scholars believe that certain examples of berserker rage to have been induced voluntarily by the consumption of drugs such as the hallucinogenic mushroom *Amanita muscaria* (Howard D. Fabing. "On Going Berserk: A Neurochemical Inquiry." *Scientific Monthly*. 83 [Nov. 1956] p. 232), or massive quantities of alcohol (Robert Wernick. *The Vikings*. Alexandria VA: Time-Life Books. 1979. p. 285). While such practices would fit in with ritual usages, other explanations for the berserker's madness have been put forward, including self-induced hysteria, epilepsy, mental illness or genetic flaws (Peter G. Foote and David M. Wilson. *The Viking Achievement*. London: Sidgewick & Jackson. 1970. p. 285).

The physical appearance of the berserk was one calculated to present an image of terror. Dumézil draws parallels between the berserk and the tribe of Harii mentioned in Tacitus' Germania who used not only "natural ferocity" but also dyed their bodies to cause panic and terror in their enemies, just as the berserk combined his fearsome reputation with animal skin dress to suggest the terrifying metamorphosis of the shape changer (Dumézil, *Destiny of the Warrior*, p. 141). Indeed, berserkers had much in common with those thought to be werewolves. Ulfr, a retired berserker, is mentioned in this light in *Egils saga Skallagrímsonar*:

But every day, as it drew towards evening, he would grow so ill-tempered that no-one could speak to him, and it wasn't long before he would go to bed. There was talk about his being a shape-changer, and people called him Kveld-Ulfr ["Evening Wolf"] (Palsson and Edwards, *Egil's Saga*, p.21).

[*En dag hvern, er at kveldi kom. Þá gerðiz hann styggur, sva at fáir menn máttu ordum við hann koma; var hann kveldsvæfur. Þat var mál manna, at hann veri miök hamrammr. Hann var kalladr Kveldúlfr.* (Snorri Sturluson. *Egils Saga*. ed. Grímur Jónsson Thorkelín. Arnarnagæanske stiftelse. 1809. p. 3)]

In *Völsunga Saga*, Sigmundr and his son Sinfjolti steal the wolf-skins which belong to two "spell-bound skin-changers" to change into wolves themselves so that they might go berserking in the woods (R. G. Finch, trans. *The Saga of the Volsungs*. London: Thomas Nelson Ltd. 1965. pp. 10-11).

In the sagas, berserks are often described as being fantastically ugly, often being mistaken for trolls, as were Skallagrim and his kinsmen in *Egils saga Skallagrímsonar* (Palsson and Edwards, *Egil's Saga*, p. 66). Egill himself is described as being "black-haired and as ugly as his father" (*Ibid.*, p. 79) [...*at han mundi verda mjög líótr ok líkr fedr sínum, svartr á hárs lit.* (Snorri Sturluson. *Egils Saga*, p. 147)], and at a feast in the court of the English king Æthelstan, Egill is said to have made such terrible faces that Æthelstan was forced to give him a gold ring to make him stop:

His eyes were black and his eyebrows joined in the middle. He refused to touch a drink even though people were serving him, and did nothing but pull his eyebrows up and down, now this one, now the other. (Palsson and Edwards, *Egil's Saga*, pp. 128-129).

[*Egill var svarteygr ok skolbrúnn. Ecki villdi han drecka, þó at honum veri borit, en ymsum hleypti han brúnunum ofan eda upp.* (Snorri Sturluson. *Egils Saga*, p. 305.)]

In *Örvar-Odd's Saga*, the berserk Ögmundr Eyþjófsbani is similarly described as having a horrible appearance:

He had black hair, a thick tuft of it hanging down over his face where the forelock should have been, and nothing could be seen of his face except the teeth and eyes.... for size and ugliness they were more like monsters than like men (Paul Edwards and Hermann Palsson, trans. *Arrow-Odd: A Medieval Novel*. NY: New York Univ. Press. 1970. p 37).

[...*hann var svartr á hárslit, ok hekk flóki svartr mikill ofan fyrir andliti, þat er topprinn skyldi heita. Allr ver hann ok svartr í andliti nem augu ok tenn.... þeir vǫru líkari tröllum en mönnum fyrir vaxtar sakir ok allrar illzku.* (Richard C. Boer, ed. *Örvar-Odds Saga*. Leiden: E.J. Brill. 1888. p. 91)].

Part II: Going Berserk — a Description of the Berserker-gang

The actual fit or madness the berserk experienced was known as *berserker-gang*. This condition is described as follows:

This fury, which was called berserker-gang, occurred not only in the heat of battle, but also during laborious work. Men who were thus seized performed things which otherwise seemed impossible for human power. This condition is said to have begun with shivering, chattering of the teeth, and chill in the body, and then the face swelled and changed its color. With this was connected a great

hot-headedness, which at last gave over into a great rage, under which they howled as wild animals, bit the edge of their shields, and cut down everything they met without discriminating between friend or foe. When this condition ceased, a great dulling of the mind and feebleness followed, which could last for one or several days (Fabing, p. 234).

Hrólfr's Saga speaks similarly of King Hálfðan's berserks:

On these giants fell sometimes such a fury that they could not control themselves, but killed men or cattle, whatever came in their way and did not take care of itself. While this fury lasted they were afraid of nothing, but when it left them they were so powerless that they did not have half of their strength, and were as feeble as if they had just come out of bed from a sickness. This fury lasted about one day (*Ibid.*).

During the berserker gang, the berserk seemed to lose all human reason, a condition in which he could not distinguish between friend and enemy, and which was marked by animalistic screaming. In *Örvar-Odd's Saga*, Odd remarks upon hearing a group of berserkers, "Sometimes I seem to hear a bull bellowing or a dog howling, and sometimes it's like people screaming" (Edwards and Palsson, *Arrow-Odd*, p. 40) [*Mér þykkir stundum sem griðungar gelli eða hundar ýli, en stundum er, sem grenjat sé, eða veiztu nökkura menn...* (Boer, *Örvar-Odds Saga*, p. 97)].

This lack of awareness is clearly seen in *Egils saga Skallagrímsonar*, when the berserker gang came upon Egill's father, Skallagrím, as he played a ball game with his son and another young boy:

Skallagrím grew so powerful that he picked Thord up bodily and dashed him down so hard that every bone in his body was broken and he died on the spot. Then Skallagrím grabbed Egill. (Palsson and Edwards, *Egill's Saga*, pp. 94-95)

[*En um kveldit eptir sólarfall þá tók þeim Agli verr at gánga, gerdiz Grímr þá sva sterkr, at han greip upp Þórd ok keyrði nidr sva hart at han lamdiz allr, ok fékk hann þegar bana. Síðan greip han til Egils.* (Snorri Sturluson. *Egils Saga*, p. 192)]

Egill was saved by a servant woman, who was slain herself before Skallagrím came out of his fit, but had she not intervened, Skallagrím would certainly have killed his own son.

Another characteristic of berserker gang was the great strength showed by the berserk. This strength was sometimes expressed in the sagas by describing the berserker as a giant or as a troll. The berserker was thought not only to have assumed the ferocity of an animal, but also to have acquired the strength of the bear. In token of this, the berserk might assume a "bear name," that is, a name containing the element *björn* or *biörn*, such as Gerbjörn, Gunbjörn, Arinbjörn, Esbjörn or Þorbjörn (Saxo Grammaticus. *The History of the Danes*. trans. Peter Fisher. Totowa NJ: Rowman and Littlefield. 1979. Vol II, p. 95). Bjarki, whose name means "Little Bear," was said to actually take the shape of the bear in combat.

To gain this bear-like strength, the berserk might drink the blood of a bear or wolf (*Ibid.*, p. 45):

Straight away bring your throat to its steaming blood and devour the feast of its body with ravenous jaws. Then new force will enter your frame, an unlooked-for vigor will come to your muscles, accumulation of solid strength soak through every sinew" (Saxo, *The History of the Danes*, Vol. I, p. 25).

[*Protinus admissa vapidum cape fauce cruorem corporeamque dapem mordacibus attere malis. Tunc nova vis membris aderit, tunc robora nervis succedent inopina tuis solidique vigoris congeries penitus nervosos illinet artus.* (Saxo Grammaticus. *Gesta Danorum*. WWW: Det Kongelige Bibliotek. Accessed 11/01/2010. <http://www2.kb.dk/elib/lit//dan/saxo/lat/or.dsr/1/6/index.htm>)]

The aftermath of the berserkergang was characterized by complete physical disability. *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* says:

What people say about shape-changers or those who go into berserk fits is this: that as long as they're in the frenzy they're so strong that nothing is too much for them, but as soon as they're out of it they become much weaker than normal. That's how it was with Kveldulfr; as soon as the frenzy left him he felt so worn out by the battle he'd been fighting, and grew so weak as a result of it all that he had to take to his bed (Palsson and Edwards, *Egil's Saga*, p. 72).

[*Svá er sagt, at þeim mönnum veri farit er hamrammir voro, eda þeim er berserksgánger var á, at medan þat var framit, þá voro þeir sva sterkir, at ecki hellz vit þeim, enn fyrst er af var gengit þá voro þeir ómátkari en at vanda. Kveldúlfr var ok sva, at þá er af honum geck hamremmin. Þá kendi han mædi af sókn þeirri er han hafði veitt, ok var han þá af öllu saman ómáttigr, svo at han lagdiz í reckiu, en byrr bar þá í haf út.* (Snorri Sturluson. *Egils Saga*, p. 125).]

A common technique used by saga heroes to overcome berserks was to catch them after their madness had left them, as Hjalmar and Arrow-Odd do in *Herverar Saga*, and slay the berserkers while they lay in their enfeebled state after their fury (Christopher Tolkein, trans. *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*. NY: Thomas Nelson & Sons. 1960. pp. 5-7).

Part III: The Role of the Berserker in Viking Society

The berserker's place in society was limited by the terror and violence that was associated with berserkergang. As superb warriors, they were due admiration. However, their tendency to turn indiscriminately upon their friends while the madness was upon them went squarely against the heroic ethic, which demanded loyalty and fidelity to one's friends. The berserk skirted the classification of *niðingr*, one who was the lowest of men and the object of hate and scorn. An eleventh-century monument raised in Söderby in Uppland, Sweden in memory of a brother reads: "And Sassur killed him and did the deed of a *niðingr* — he betrayed his comrade" (Foote

and Wilson, p. 426) [U954†, Söderby, Uppland, *En Sassurr drap hann ok gerði niðingsverk, sveik féлага sinn.*]

The primary role of the berserk was as a warrior attached to a king's army. Both King Harald and King Hálfðan had berserker shock-troops. Aside from their military value, the berserker's ties to Óðinn would have been welcome in a royal army, since Óðinn also had a particular association with rulership, being venerated in Anglo-Saxon England as the ancestor of chieftains, and throughout the North as god of kings and protector of their royal power (Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, p. 26). Outside of this role, however, the berserker became the stock villain of the sagas, typified as murderous, stupid brutes, or as one modern critic has it, "a predatory group of brawlers and killers who disrupted the peace of the Viking community repeatedly" (Fabing, p. 232). Saxo Grammaticus speaks of such a band in his *Gesta Danorum*:

The young warriors would harry and pillage the neighborhood, and frequently spilt great quantities of blood. They considered it manly and proper to devastate homes, cut down cattle, rifle everything and take away vast hauls of booty, burn to the ground houses they had sacked, and butcher men and women indiscriminately" (Saxo, *The History of the Danes*, Vol. I, p. 163).

[*At iuvenes latrocinio viciniam incessere soliti magnas saepe strages edebant. Popolari penates, armenta sternere, diripere omnia, ingentem agere praedam, spoliatas rebus aedes exurere, mares passim cum feminis obruncare probitatis loco ductum est.* (Saxo Grammaticus. *Gesta Danorum*, <http://www2.kb.dk/elib/lit//dan/saxo/lat/or.dsr/6/2/index.htm>)]

In addition to their warlike activities within their communities, berserkers are characterized by their sexual excesses, carrying off wives, daughters and betrothed maids who then must be rescued by the heroes of the sagas. Saxo was particularly upset by this behavior:

So outrageous and unrestrained were their ways that they ravished other men's wives and daughters; they seemed to have outlawed chastity and driven it to the brothel. Nor did they stop at married women but also debauched the beds of virgins. No man's bridal-chamber was safe; scarcely any place in the land was free from the imprints of their lust (Saxo, *The History of the Danes*, Vol. I, p. 118).

[*Adeo enim insolenter se indomiteque gesserunt, ut, constupratis aliorum nuptis ac filiabus, proscrispisse pudicitiam atque in prostibulum relegasse viderentur. Corruptis quoque matronarum fulcris, ne toris quidem virginalibus abstinebant. Suus nullum thalamus securitate donabat, nec quisquam fere patriae locus luxuriae eorum vestigiis vacuus erat.* (Saxo Grammaticus. *Gesta Danorum*, <http://www2.kb.dk/elib/lit//dan/saxo/lat/or.dsr/5/1/index.htm>)]

It was no doubt due to these excesses of the berserker that resulted in their demise. In 1015 King Erik outlawed berserks, along with *hólmganga* or duels (Fabing, p. 235): it had become a common practice for a berserker to challenge men of property to *hólmgang*, and upon

slaying the unfortunate victim, to take possession of his goods, wealth, and women. This was a difficult tactic to counter, since a man so challenged had to appear, have a champion fight for him, or else be named *niðingr* and coward. *Egils saga Skallagrímsonar* records one such encounter:

There's a man called Ljot, a berserker and duel-fighter, hated by everyone. He came here and asked to marry my daughter, but we gave him a short answer and said no to his offer. After that Ljot challenged my son Fridgeir to single combat, so he has to go and fight the duel tomorrow on the isle of Valdero" (Pálsson and Edwards, *Egil's Saga*, p. 169).

[*Madr heitir Liótr hinn bleiki, han er berserkr ok hólmgöngumadr. Han er óþocka sæll. Han kom her ok bad dóttur minnar, en vér suörudum honum skiótt ok syniuðum honum rádsins. Síðan skoraði han til hólmgöngu á Fridgeir son minn, ok skal á morgin koma til hólmsins í ey þá, er Vörl heitir.* (Snorri Sturluson, *Egils saga*, p. 484).]

In 1123, the Icelandic Christian Law stated, "If someone goes berserk, he is punished with lesser outlawry and the men who are present are also banished if they do not bind him." Lesser outlawry (*fjorbaugsgarðr*) was a sentence of three years' banishment from the country. Berserker-gang was thus classed with other heathen and magical practices, all unacceptable in a Christian society (Foote and Wilson, p. 285). Certainly where berserkers were associated with the cult of Óðinn, and such spellcasting as was associated with their immunity to weapons or shape-changing, this activity would appropriately be classed as "heathen and magical." By the twelfth century, the berserker with his Óðinnic religion, animalistic appearance, his inhuman frenzy upon the battlefield, and terrorism within the Scandinavian community disappeared. The berserk, like his patron deity Óðinn, was forced to yield to the dissolution of pagan society and the advent of the White Christ.

Part IV: Grendel and Berserker-gang

(All Old English is from Frederick Klaeber's edition of *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 3rd ed. Lexington MA; D.C. Heath & Co., 1950. All translations to modern English and any mistakes therein are my own.)

A central assumption made about Beowulf is the monstrous nature of Grendel. This conception is so deeply rooted that modern translators often strain over words that in other contexts clearly describe men, glossing them to fit their understanding of Grendel. An example of this is given by O'Keefe:

The word *aglæca* is an instance of an unfortunate glossing which seriously affects the interpretation of the text. The word is used twenty times in Beowulf, chiefly, as Klaeber notes, for Grendel and the dragon. Yet *aglæca* is also used for Beowulf and Sigemund. Klaeber's solution to the problem of one word's describing two sets of characters is to gloss *aglæca* as "wretch, monster, demon, fiend" when it refers to Grendel and the dragon and as "warrior, hero" when it

refers to Beowulf and Sigemund. Building such a distinction into the glossing of the word completely ignores the possibility that the poet has deliberately chosen to use the same word to describe two sets of characters; as Dobbie notes in his edition of Beowulf, in the historical period of Old English the word need have been no more specific than "formidable [one]. (Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, "Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and the Limits of the Human," in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. 23 [1981]: pp. 484-485.)

O'Keefe goes on to deal with Grendel as a monster undergoing a transformation to a likeness of a man. However, the Beowulf poet who had such rich Scandinavian source materials available to him more than likely intended to depict a man undergoing a transformation to a monstrous likeness: such a motif was readily available in the *bersark*, the berserker encountered so frequently in the Old Norse sagas. Upon examining the character of Grendel, clear parallels to these fearsome warriors become evident.

As has been discussed above, the primary characteristics of the berserk are:

1. association with animals, including shape-shifting abilities;
2. terrifying appearance;
3. immunity to weapons via spells or the wearing of (magically) protective animal skins;
4. berserker rage, including turning purple in the face, loss of human reason, acquisition of enormous strength and animal behavior (killing and howling), followed by profound bodily weakness and disability;
5. rejection by the community due to excesses of violence.

It can be demonstrated that Grendel, rather than being an inhuman monster, exhibits the characteristics of the human berserk.

Grendel's approaches to Heorot occur at night, in a misty, dark landscape as suggestive of dreams as of night-time. In lines 702b-714, Grendel undergoes a transformation (O'Keefe, p. 487). Initially, he is described as *scriðan sceadu-genga*, a gliding shadow-walker: he seems almost to be an incorporeal spirit. As Grendel draws closer to the hall, and to the impending battle with Beowulf, he "solidifies," becoming a *manscaða*, an evil-doer (l. 712) who *gongan* (l. 711 and *wod* (l. 714), moving as a corporeal being. This progression brings to mind the *hamingja* or *fylgja*, the symbolic animal shape or spirit that the berserker possessed. Boðvarr Bjarki fought for King Hrólfr in bear-form, sending forth his spirit while his body remained motionless in camp. *Landnámabók* tells of two "shapestrong" men, Stórolfr and Dufþak, who have quarreled over grazing rights:

One evening about sunset a man with the gift of second sight saw a great bear go out from Hvál and a bull from Dufþak 's farm, and they met at Stórolfvellr and fought furiously, and the bear had the best of it. (Hilda R. Ellis-Davidson, "Shape Changing in the Old Norse Sagas" in *Animals in Folklore*. eds. J.R. Porter and W.M.S. Russell. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield. 1978).

[*Þat sá ófreskr maðr um kveld nær dagsetri, at björn mikill gekk frá Hváli, en griðungr frá Dufþaksholti, ok fundusk á Stórólfsvelli ok gengusk at reiðir, ok mátti björninn meira. (Ari Þorgilsson Froði. Íslendingabók, er skrifað hefir Ari Þorgilsson og Landnámabók. Reykjavík: Sigurður Kristjánsson. 1891. p. 205)]*

This was another instance when the spirit form is seen as a bear, and in this case, the other as a bull. That these apparitions partake of an incorporeal nature is clear, because it requires a man with "second sight" to perceive them. And yet, at some point they have taken on form and substance for:

In the morning a hollow could be seen in the place where they had met, as though the earth had been turned over, and this is now called Oldugrof. (Hilda R. Ellis-Davidson, "Shape Changing in the Old Norse Sagas")

[*Um morguninn var þat sét, at dalr var þar eftir, er þeir höfðu fundizt, sem um væri snúit jörðinni, ok heitr þar nú Öldugröf. (Ari Þorgilsson Froði, pp. 205-206)]*

The terror associated with Grendel is also due to his horrifying appearance. He is called *þyrse* (l. 426) and *eoten* (l. 761) for he is a giant in size. From his eyes comes a horrible light, like a flame (*him of eagamstod ligge gelicost leoht unfægr*, ll. 726b-727). Grendel's hand is like some animal's paw, having claws instead of finger-nails [*foran æghwylc wæs stiðra nægla gehwylc stýle gelicost, hæþenes handsporu hilderinces eglu unheoru*, ll. 984b-987a]. Although Grendel's visage is never described, when Beowulf returns from the mere with Grendel's severed head:

<i>Þa wæs be feaxe Grendles heafod, egeslic for eorlum wlite-seon wrætlic</i> (ll. 1647-1650)	<i>on flet boren þær guman druncon, ond þære idese mid, weras on sawon.</i>
--	---

(Then by the hair, Grendel's head; it was fearful for the earls a terrible sight	over the floor, was borne there men drank, and their queen with them, the men looked upon.)
---	--

Grendel's head is a terrible sight, and frightening to the people of Heorot even in death.

Another characteristic Grendel shares with the berserk is his immunity to weapons. When Beowulf's men try to come to their leader's aid as he grapples with Grendel, they find their swords to be useless:

<i>Hie þæt ne wiston heard-hicgende</i>	<i>þa hie gewin drugon hilde-mecgas</i>
---	---

*ond on healfa gehwone heawan þohton,
sawle secan: þone syn-scaðan
ænig ofer eorþan irenna cyst,
guð-billa nan gretan nolde,
ac he sige-wæpnum forsworen hædfde,
ecga gehwylcre. (ll. 798-805a)*

(They did not know when they entered the fight;
hard-minded men, battle-warriors
on every side, they meant to hew him,
to seek his soul: by none of the best iron
in the world, by no war sword
could the evil-doer be touched,
the victory weapons he made useless by a spell,
every sword-edge.")

Even when Beowulf has torn Grendel's arm from its socket, the arm retains Grendel's weapon immunity:

... *æghwylc gecwæð
þæt him heardra nan hrinan wolde
iren ær-god þæt ðæs ahlæcan
blodge beadu-folme onberan wolde
(ll. 987b-990)*

(... Each one said
that no hard thing would touch it,
no good iron of old times would harm
the bloody battle-hand of the enemy.)

Grendel, in his attacks, exhibits the characteristics of berserker-gang. He is swollen with rage [*ða he gebolgen wæs*, l. 723b], angry [*yrre-mod*, l. 726a], an angry spirit [*gæst yrre*, l. 2073b], like the berserk whose face swelled and changed in color, and was taken in hot-headedness and great rage. As he makes his final foray upon Heorot, Grendel is represented as a thinking being (O'Keefe, p. 487) [*mynte*, l. 712 and *gesohte*, l. 717], but as the rage comes upon him he seemingly loses his human reason to purely animal behavior. Like a ravening wolf or man-eating bear, Grendel feeds upon human flesh:

*Ne þæt se aglæca yldan þohte,
ac he gefeng hraðe forman siðe
slæpende rinc, slat unwearnum
bat banlocan, blod edrum dranc,
synsnædum swealh; sona hæfde
unlyfigendes eal gefeormod,*

fet ond folma. (ll. 739-745a)

(Nor did the combatant think to delay
but he quickly caught the first time
a sleeping man, greedily tore him,
bit the joint, drank the blood streams,
swallowed huge morsels; he immediately ate
the dead man all up
feet and hands.)

Once the fight with Beowulf has begun, Grendel continues his animal behavior, howling in berserk fashion:

... *Sweg up astag*
niwe geneahhe; Norð-Denum stod
atelic egesa, anra gehwylcum
þara þe of wealle wop gehyrdon,
gryre-leoð galan Godes andsacan
sige-leasne sang, sar wanigean
helle hæfton. (ll. 782b-788a)

(... The sound rose up
very strange; The North Danes endured
dreadful terror, each one
there on the wall heard the weeping,
the terrible song sung by God's adversary,
a victory-less song, bewailing the wounds
of hell's captive.)

During the battle, Grendel possesses great strength. While he is not yet so strong as Beowulf, who "has the strength of thirty men in his hand grip," Grendel is yet powerful enough to carry fifteen men away at once:

Þonne he Hroðgares heorð-geneatas
sloh on sweofote slæpende fræt
folces Denigea fyftyne men,
and oðer swylc ut offerede
laðlicu lac. (ll. 1580-1584a)

(Then Hrothgar's hearth companions
he slew in their beds, ate them sleeping,
of the Danish people fifteen men,
another fifteen likewise he carried off-
a hateful gift.)

Beowulf himself is aware of the enormous might of Grendel, which was nearly as great as his own:

<i>Ic hine ne mihte ganges getwæman, feorh-geiðlan: feond on feþe</i>	<i>þa Metod nolde, no ic him þæs georne ætfealh, wæs to fore-mihtig (ll. 967-970a)</i>
---	--

(I could not keep him, the Creator did not wish it,
from an early departure, not firmly enough
did I welcome him: too powerful was
the foe in his going.)

Grendel's strength is shown more dramatically as he enters Heorot. He merely seems to touch the hall door, which bursts under the strength of his hands:

<i>... fyrbendum fæst, onbræd þa bealohydig recedes muthan.</i>	<i>Duru sona onarn syþðan he hire folmum æthran; ða he gebolgen wæs, (ll. 721b-724a)</i>
---	--

(... The door immediately sprang open
tho fastened with forged bands when he touched it with his hands
driven by evil desire swollen with anger,
he tore open the hall's mouth.)

While it is supposedly physically impossible for Grendel to experience the berserker's typical post-frenzy physical weakness since he has received his mortal wound, the Beowulf poet ironically describes Grendel as "war-weary" [*guð-werigne*, l. 1586a] and "lying at rest" [*on ræste*, l. 1585b] as a berserk would normally do after a battle, even though Grendel is said to be dead of the wounds he received at Beowulf's hands. It is interesting to note in this context that Beowulf, having just dispatched Grendel's mother, does not take his war-trophy from her body: rather, it is Grendel's head that he severs. This is an odd action, for Hrothgar and the Danes have celebrated Beowulf's victory over Grendel already with feasting and gift-giving. There seems no call to bring back further proof of the Geat's victory over Grendel. Furthermore, when Beowulf cuts off Grendel's head, blood flows forth in great enough quantity to stain the waters of the lake:

<i>Sona þæt gesawon þa ðe mid Hroðgare þæt wæs yð-geblond brim blode fah</i>	<i>snottre ceorlas on holm wliton, eal gemenged, (ll. 1591-1594a)</i>
--	---

(Immediately it was seen by the wise earls
who were with Hrothgar that the waves
were all tainted and roiled:
blood stained the water.)

More than a full day has passed since he has fled from Heorot, yet Grendel's supposedly lifeless body pours forth blood when it is decapitated. One is forced to wonder if Grendel was in fact dead, or merely in a death-like slumber, experiencing the weakness that follows the berserker-gang.

Another discrepancy here harks back to Grendel's weapon immunity. While Grendel is fighting Beowulf, he is proof against steel (ll. 798-805), and even the next morning his severed hand retains this resistance (ll. 987-990), yet Beowulf is easily able to lop Grendel's head off as he lies *on raest*. This seems to suggest that Grendel's magical protection existed before he became *guð-werigne*, and extended even to his hand after it was severed from his body, but once he reached his lair and let his rage fall from him, so too ended the weapons immunity. Beowulf would have had a very good reason to cleave Grendel's head, if his enemy were yet alive and merely experiencing the normal infirmity that follows berserker-gang, and it would not be unreasonable to expect this to result in a copious flow of blood. Again, in the sagas, it is a standard practice to dispatch the berserk while he lies helpless after his fit, and this would seem to be Beowulf's course of action as well.

Grendel is also easily identified with the berserk as "a predatory brawler and killer who disrupts the peace of the community repeatedly," as a man separated from society by his excesses of violence. Certainly Grendel does not fulfill the role of a loyal retainer to Hrothgar, and is in fact actually at war with the king:

...	<i>þætte Grendel wan</i>
<i>hwile wið Hroþgar</i>	<i>hete-niðas wæg</i>
<i>fyrene ond fæhðe</i>	<i>fela missera</i>
<i>singale sæce</i>	(ll. 151b-154a)

(...	Grendel had fought
a long time with Hrothgar,	driven by hate,
crimes and feud	for many a season
he carried out.)	

The laws of Ine and Alfred suggest that Grendel's trespasses against Hrothgar were compounded by his murders in the hall. Not only does Grendel decimate Hrothgar's retainers, but violence in the hall seems to have been regarded as high treason, an offence against the king's peace, in Anglo-Saxon society:

If anyone fights in the king's house, he shall forfeit all his property, and it shall be for the king to decide whether he shall be put to death or not. (Law of Ine

6. F. L. Attenborough, trans. *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*. Cambridge: University Press. 1922).

If anyone fights or draws his weapon in the king's hall, it shall be for the king to decide whether he shall be put to death or permitted to live, in case the king is willing to forgive him (Law of Alfred 7, *Ibid.*).

The violent nature of Grendel's nighttime raids is vividly described by the poet (ll. 120b-125, 134b-137, 739-745a). Each time Grendel has found men in the hall, he has murdered them, up to thirty men at a time (ll. 122b-123a, 1580-1584a). It is not enough that Grendel slays his victims: he dismembers and devours them as well (ll. 739-745a), thus Grendel might well be described as a far worse butcher than the bersarks disparaged by Saxo Grammaticus. Like Saxo's berserks, Grendel pillages Heorot, but Grendel's booty is not in wealth or in goods, but rather is a commodity specifically forbidden by Hrothgar — the lives of men (ll. 71b-73).

Thus it may be seen that the Beowulf poet's depiction of Grendel coincides closely with the characteristics of the berserk: Grendel seems to possess a spirit form; he undergoes transformation during his attacks on Heorot; Grendel's appearance is horrifying; Grendel seems to have shapeshifting abilities, being described with words commonly used for men in one place, yet possessing an animal-like claw during his attacks; Grendel possesses the berserker's famed weapons immunity; during his attacks, Grendel shows the signs of the berserker rage, including swelling and rage; after battle, Grendel falls into an extreme exhaustion or war-weariness; and finally, Grendel is set apart from the society of the Danes by his violence against that society. Grendel is a complex character, one with many facets. Seeking to understand the Scandinavian motifs such as that of the berserker which inform some of these facets is a necessary and invaluable quest, for it sheds light on the character, and helps in deriving further meaning from the poem.

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