HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
Hugvísindasvið

The Dreams of a Bear

Animal Traditions in the Old Norse-Icelandic Context

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í 2014

Eduardo Ramos

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Medieval Icelandic Studies

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Table of Contents

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Abstract

Medieval Icelandic literature is rich with animal references. We often read of characters appearing in dreams as animals, taking the shape of animals, or even simply fighting like ferocious beasts. Particularly prominent are the traditions of animal warriors, such as *berserkir*, and animal doubles embodied by *fylgjur* and those who are said to be *hamrammr*. Traces of these animal traditions can be found across the Old Norse sphere, but they are most persistent in the literature of Iceland. Despite the changes in perspective to pre-Christian material that took place over the centuries, the versatility of these animal traditions allowed them to remain current and relevant in Iceland. By conducting a study of the character Bǫðvarr bjarki, with particular focus on his shape changing episode in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, this thesis demonstrates the resilience and versatility that allowed these rich animal traditions to endure for centuries within the Old Norse-Icelandic context.

Ágrip

Gjarnan er vísað til dýra í íslenskum miðaldabókmenntum. Oft koma sögupersónur fram í draumum sem dýr, taka á sig ásýnd dýra eða einfaldlega berjast eins og þau væru dýr. Einkar eftirtektarverðar eru frásagnir af hermönnum sem hafa dýrsleg einkenni, t.d. *berserkir*, en einnig fylgjur í gervi dýra auk þeirra persóna sem sagðar eru *hamrammar*. Menjar um þessa sagnahefð má finna víða í fornnorrænni menningu en eru mest áberandi í bókmenntum Íslands. Þó að afstaðan til hins forkristna efnis hafi breyst í gegnum tíðina, gerði sveigjanleiki sagnaminna um hamskipti af þessu tagi þeim kleift að halda gildi sínu í íslenskum bókmenntum eftir því sem sögu þeirra vatt fram. Með því að rannsaka sérstaklega sögupersónuna Bǫðvar bjarka og hamskiptum hennar í *Hrólfs sögu kraka*, er reynt í ritgerðinni að sýna fram á sveigjanleika en einnig varðveislu þessarar hefðar um aldaraðir í samhengi norrænna og íslenskra miðaldabókmennta.

Introduction

Medieval Iceland appears to have inherited strong traditions relating to animals from its pre-Christian beliefs. Images equating people, particularly warriors, to animals are abundant in the poetry. Given names containing animal elements such as Bjǫrn, Úlfr, and Qrn are common in writings from the Middle Ages. These inherited animal traditions really take on their own form in the sagas. Particularly prominent in the literature are the traditions of animal-like warriors, such as *berserkir*, and animal doubles often appearing in dreams.

Animal motifs are present from the earliest writings in Icelandic. *Landnámabók* makes several references to people with supernatural links to certain animals. These motifs were still evident in the literature that came centuries later. Themes and settings changed widely over the centuries in Iceland, but these resilient motifs endured all the same, speaking to their versatility. What was fit for the warrior band of a Viking ruler might not be adequate for a courtly chivalric setting. Nevertheless, the ingenious Icelandic authors found ways to adopt foreign material, themes, and settings without having to abandon, and often incorporating anew, their native animal traditions. Bǫðvarr bjarki is a character that makes many appearances in the medieval writings of Iceland and Scandinavia. Although traditionally linked to the *berserkr* tradition, Bǫðvarr's incarnation in *Hrólfs saga kraka* is reshaped to make him conform to the new standards of a hero. However Bǫðvarr's historical connection to bears remains intact through the centuries into this late setting.

According to medieval legends, Hrólfr kraki was the greatest king of Denmark during the Heroic Age. In his court at Hleiðargarðr he was surrounded by loyal servants and the greatest of champions; chief among them was Bǫðvarr bjarki. Despite his leading status among the champions of King Hrólfr, according to the most expansive accounts of the final battle at Hleiðargarðr, where King Hrólfr and all of his champions would eventually fall, Bǫðvarr bjarki was conspicuously absent from the initial stages of the battle. It was not until Bǫðvarr's friend and fellow champion of King Hrólfr, Hjalti, summoned him that Bjarki joined the battle, and according to *Hrólfs saga kraka*, it was not until this moment that their defeat was sealed. *Hrólfs saga* tells of a large bear defending the king while Bǫðvarr was absent from the battle, and heavily alludes to this bear being linked to the absent Bǫðvarr. The bear in this scene shows influence from both the *berserkr*

tradition of animal-warriors, to which Bǫðvarr bjarki has historically been associated, and the tradition of fetches and other animal-doubles.

The story of Bǫðvarr bjarki survives in several medieval sources spanning centuries. It can be found in narratives from Denmark, Iceland, and if *Heimskringla* can be trusted, Norway. Given the title of the *Bjarkamál*, a poem detailing the final battle of King Hrólfr kraki and his champions, there is good reason for believing that the character's original name was Bjarki and that *bǫðvar* was a nickname that he was given, as is the case in the *Gesta Danorum*. However, since the primary source that this thesis focuses on is *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and in that text Bǫðvarr is the given name of the character with bjarki serving as the nickname, that is how I will refer to him from here on out.

Hrólfs saga kraka is a troublesome saga. It is preserved in forty-four known manuscripts.[1] Despite the numerous manuscripts that we currently have, all but one are paper copies, and none dates to before the seventeenth century.[2] Desmond Slay, who did extensive work on the manuscripts of *Hrólfs saga*, believed that all of the surviving manuscripts can be traced back to a lost common original which may have been no earlier than the sixteenth century itself.[3] Despite lacking any manuscripts that actually date to the medieval period, scholars do believe that *Hrólfs saga* in the form that we have it today is a medieval text. Records from 1461 indicate that *Hrólfs saga kraka* was among the books kept at the cloister in Möðruvellir.[4] It is likely that the saga reached the form in which we have it today by the late fourteenth to early fifteenth century. As the various other versions of King Hrólfr's story attest, the material that the saga draws from was very much current in the medieval Nordic sphere.

The episode of Bǫðvarr bjarki fighting in bear form during King Hrólfr's last stand at Hleiðargarðr is unique to *Hrólfs saga*. While the scene of the final battle itself does survive in other sources, we do not see Bǫðvarr take bear form anywhere else. The fact that this episode is not present in any of the earlier versions of Hrólfr kraki's story would naturally suggest that it is a late addition to the tradition likely introduced by the author of *Hrólfs saga*. While *Hrólfs saga*

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[1] Carl Phelpstead, "The Sexual Ideology of *Hrólfs saga kraka*," *Scandinavian Studies* 75 (Spring 2003), 1.
[2] Desmond Slay, *The Manuscripts of Hrólfs saga kraka*, Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana 24. (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1960), 4.
[3] Desmond Slay, "More Manuscripts of *Hrólfs saga kraka*," in *Specvlvm Norroenvm: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, edited by UrsulaDronke, et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), 432.
[4] Ármann Jakobsson, "Le Roi Chevalier: The Royal Ideology and Genre of Hrólfs saga kraka," *Scandinavian Studies* 71 (1999), 140.

kraka has traditionally received very much attention from scholars, this particular episode has not yet been fully addressed.

Bǫðvarr bjarki is generally viewed as a *berserkr* today. As I will show in the following chapter, a study of the primary sources in which Bǫðvarr is present very much supports that view. However, while *berserkir* are definitely a class of animal-warriors, actual shape changing and fighting in animal form is not among the abilities traditionally attributed to them. By having Bǫðvarr fight in the form of a bear during the final battle, the author of *Hrólfs saga* is drawing on a separate animal tradition in which animals serve as doubles for people. This tradition of animal-doubles is best encapsulated by *fylgjur*, which can act as guardian spirits attached to a particular person or family, or as doubles for people in dreams. The concept of *fylgjur* is closely associated with that of *hamr*.[5] In medieval Icelandic literature, certain people are described as being able to take on the *hamr* of an animal when they sleep, not unlike Bǫðvarr bjarki does in the final battle of *Hrólfs saga kraka*.

That the character Bǫðvarr bjarki is changed from a strict animal-warrior, *berserkr*, speaks to some of the changing aesthetics from the dawn of his story to the writing of *Hrólfs saga kraka* as we have it today. However, the addition of Bǫðvarr fighting in the form of a bear illustrates the resilience of the animal traditions since his ties to bears is still present, perhaps more clearly than ever before. In the following chapters, by analyzing the various incarnations of the character Bǫðvarr bjarki in light of Icelandic animal-warrior and animal-double traditions as preserved in other texts, I will demonstrate how saga authors adapted these animal traditions in different settings allowing them to remain current in the literature for centuries.

[5] See Lecouteux, *Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies: Shapeshifters and Astral Doubles in the Middle Ages*, Turville-Petre, "Dreams in Icelandic Tradition," and chapter three below.

Chapter I *Bǫðvarr Bjarki in the Primary Sources*

Because he was the most prominent champion of the most famous legendary Danish king, numerous medieval sources make reference to Bǫðvarr bjarki and various parts of his tale. Like that of the Skjǫldung king whom he served, Bǫðvarr's story was constrained by the legends that the medieval authors had inherited. Nevertheless, by comparing the primary sources dealing with his story, it becomes quite clear that his tradition was not one fixed in stone. While the main story arc remained the same across the sources, the individual authors took liberties with the details of Bǫðvarr's life. The younger versions of his story show the most liberties being taken, and it is only in these younger versions that any direct references are made to Bǫðvarr bjarki shape-shifting.

The earliest source to unambiguously mention Bǫðvarr bjarki is the *Bjarkamál.*[6] The opening stanzas of the *Bjarkamál* are spoken by Hjalti, one of Hrólfr kraki's champions, as he attempts to wake all of Hrólfr's other champions after realizing that they are being ambushed in their own stronghold. According to *Heimskringla* Óláfr Haraldsson had this poem recited to his men before the Battle of Stiklarstaðir in 1030.[7] If we accept this, then the poem is at the latest an early 11th century work. Unfortunately *Heimskringla* does not preserve anything beyond the opening stanzas. For anything more, we are forced to rely on Saxo Grammaticus' loose adaptation in Latin.

Chronologically the next work to mention Bǫðvarr bjarki is *Skjǫldunga saga*. We know that Snorri Sturluson (if we accept that *Heimskringla* should be attributed to him) used *Skjǫldunga saga* as a source for *Ynglinga saga,* the opening saga in *Heimskringla,*[8] dating it to no later than the early 13th century. Unfortunately, like the *Bjarkamál*, this work is mostly lost. *Skjǫldunga saga* survives only in a Latin translation by Arngrímur Jónsson dated to 1596.[9] Arngrímur's version

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[6] Many similarities have been pointed out by various scholars between Bǫðvarr bjarki and the hero Beowulf from the Old English epic bearing his name. The debate on whether or not the two characters share a common origin has dominated much of the English scholarship on Bǫðvarr bjarki. Because the final battle at Hleiðargarðr has no parallel in the Old English epic, I will not explore those similarities. See Jesse Byock, trans., *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (London: Penguin, 1998), introduction.

[7] Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway,* trans. by Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 932.

[8] Paul Acker, "Part I. 'Fragments of Danish History' (*Skjöldunga saga*)," *American Notes and Queries* 20, no. 3 (Spring 2007), 8.

[9] Arngrímur Jónsson, "Fragments of Danish History," trans. By Clarence H. Miller, *American Notes and Queries* 20, no. 3 (Spring 2007), 9.

gives the impression of being a summary more than a translation proper. Despite that, it is still a major source for at least one version of what Bǫðvarr bjarki's story must have been like in Iceland around the year 1200.

As preserved by Arngrímur Jónsson, *Skjǫldunga saga* tells us that Bǫðvarr bjarki was a Norwegian. It refers to him by the name Bodvarus and describes him as the bravest of Rolfo's (Hrólfr) men, singling him out among Hrólfr's twelve champions. Bǫðvarr was the only one of Hrólfr's men bold enough to take on Agnarus (Old Icelandic Agnarr), described here as a raider kinsman to Hrólfr and a son of Ingjaldus (Old Icelandic Ingjaldr). Bǫðvarr is said to have killed Agnarr. Bǫðvarr married Hrólfr's daughter Skura (Old Icelandic Skúr) making him a kinsman of King Hrólfr by marriage. King Adillus (Old Icelandic Aðils) of Sweden, the stepfather of Hrólfr kraki, asked his stepson for support in a battle offering rich rewards. *Skjǫldunga saga* says the following, "Rolpho domi ipse reses pugiles suos duodecim Adillo in subsidium mittit,"[10] (Rolfo himself stayed home but sent his twelve warriors to help Adillus);[11] the twelve warriors referenced here being the champions of which Bǫðvarr was foremost. Despite their service, Aðils refused to give Hrólfr his reward, and so Hrólfr's champions rejected their own and instead marched with their king to Aðils' hall. In this hall they were met by traps, including a large scorching fire because Hrólfr used to boast that he, "nec ferro cedens nec igni,"[12] (would flee from neither fire nor sword).[13] Hrólfr and his champions overcome this trap by jumping over the fire (and thus not fleeing from it). On their way home from the successful expedition to Sweden, Hrólfr and his champions stayed a night with a peasant. The peasant offered the king war gear, which he refused. Shortly after their departure, the peasant's hut vanished; "Cognovit igitur certo Rolpho hunc fuisse Odinum bellantium Deum: et sibi ob spreta oblata arma victoriam in posterum denegatam ac proinde extremum fatum instare,"[14] (Thus Rolfo knew for sure that the peasant was Odinus, the god of war, and that, because he had scorned the arms offered to him, victory would be denied him in the future and that thereafter, his death hung over his head).[15] Sometime later, Hrólfr's brother in-law Hiørvardus (Old Icelandic Hjǫrvarðr), the husband of Hrólfr's sister Sculda (Old Icelandic

[10] Arngrímur Jónsson, "Rerum Danicarum Fragmenta," in *Arngrimi Jonae Opera Latine Conscripta*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Copenhagen: Den Arnamagnæanske Kommission, 1950), 346.
[11] Arngrímur Jónsson, "Fragments of Danish History," 18.
[12] Arngrímur Jónsson, "Rerum Danicarum Fragmenta," 347.
[13] Arngrímur Jónsson, "Fragments of Danish History," 19.
[14] Arngrímur Jónsson, "Rerum Danicarum Fragmenta," 348.
[15] Arngrímur Jónsson, "Fragments of Danish History," 20.

Skuld), treacherously attacked him. Pretending to bring tribute, Hjǫrvarðr ambushed Hrólfr kraki and his champions in Hleiðargarðr during the evening. Arngrímur's rendition of *Skjǫldunga saga* makes no mention of Bǫðvarr's role in the final battle, but it does say that Óðinn was seen in the ranks of Hrólfr's enemies, and that dead bodies were coming back to life again. Hrólfr perished in this battle with most of his men.

The earliest extant text to mention Bǫðvarr bjarki is Saxo Grammaticus' Latin *Gesta Danorum*. Saxo's work is dated to roughly 1220[16]. While the incident of Hrólfr in Aðils' (here called Athislus) hall and his being tested by flames is included in the *Gesta Danorum*, there is no mention of Hrólfr's champions at that point. In Saxo's work, Bǫðvarr bjarki (here called Biarco), is first introduced during the wedding feast of Agner (Agnarr) and Roluo's (Hrólfr) sister Ruta. Upset by Bǫðvarr's retaliation at being hit by a bone thrown by one of Hrólfr's champions at Hialto (Hjalti), Agnarr challenges Bǫðvarr to a duel and is slain. Saxo also tells of how Bǫðvarr slays a gigantic bear and has Hjalti drink its blood in order to give him the strength of a great champion. Because of these deeds, Bǫðvarr was given Hrólfr's sister Ruta in marriage (not Hrólfr's daughter Skúr like in *Skjǫldunga saga*). Bǫðvarr eventually goes on to answer provocations from Aðils destroying him in combat and placing Sweden under the control of Hiarvarth (Hjǫrvarðr) who, like in *Skjǫldunga saga*, is Hrólfr's kinsman by his marriage to Skulde (Skuld). Here again, Hjǫrvarðr and Skuld, under the pretense of bringing tribute, ambush king Hrólfr in his stronghold. For his account of the battle, Saxo provides a stylized rendition of the *Bjarkamál* in Latin, which he adds was still recited from memory in Danish by those well versed in ancient deeds.[17] Just like the text preserved in *Heimskringla*, Saxo's retelling begins with Hjalti attempting to awaken Hrólfr's champions. After the end of Hjalti's first speech, the text says, "Ad hanc uocem expergefactus Biarco,"[18] (Biarco was woken by his words).[19] Despite Bǫðvarr issuing a reply, the poem states that Hjalti made further efforts to waken Bǫðvarr who was still absent from the battle. On his third attempt he said, "Ut quid abes, Biarco? num te sopor occupat altus?"[20] (Why aren't

[16] Hilda E. Davidson, *The History of the Danes: Books I-IX*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 1.
[17] Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes: Books I-IX*, trans. by Peter Fisher, ed. by Hilda E. Davidson, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 63.
[18] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: Danmarkshistotorien*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen and Peter Zeeberg, (Copenhagen: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab & Gads Forlag, 2005), 172.
[19] Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, 57.
[20] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 176.

you out, Biarco? You aren't still deep asleep?)[21] The *Gesta Danorum* provides no explanation for Bǫðvarr bjarki's absence, which is problematic. Nevertheless we must not hastily jump to the conclusion that Bǫðvarr bjarki's bear-shape episode was originally part of the tradition. As Hilda Ellis Davidson points out, "Saxo shows no knowledge of it."[22] After being taunted by Hjalti, Bǫðvarr bjarki begins to recount his many exploits, including how he obtained the nickname "*belligeri*" roughly the Latin equivalent of the Old Icelandic *bǫðvar*, meaning "battle" (both forms are in the genitive). After listing off his exploits, Bǫðvarr joins the battle and is said to seek out Óðinn, to whom the poem alludes as being present. Ultimately, King Hrólfr and his champions fall in the battle.

Bǫðvarr bjarki is briefly mentioned in the Hauksbók version of *Landnámabók*. It tells that Miðfjarðar-Skeggi, an Icelander, broke into the burial mound of King Hrólfr kraki, "ok tók hann þar ór Skǫfnung, sverð Hrólfs, ok øxi Hjalta ok mikit fé annat, en hann náði eigi Laufa, því at Bǫðvarr vildi at honum, en Hrólfr konungr varði"[23] (and he took out of there Hrófr's sword Skǫfnungr, and Hjalti's axe, and many other possessions, but he did not obtain Laufi because Bǫðvarr wanted [to get] at him, but Hrólfr defended[him]).[24] Laufi is Bǫðvarr's sword. Although this scene has no bearing on the final battle at Hleiðargarðr, I include it here because it shows how prominent Hrólfr and Bǫðvarr were in the minds of medieval Icelanders.

The next surviving text to mention Bǫðvarr bjarki is *Snorra Edda*, which had to have been written not later than 1241 since Snorri was killed that year. Although it does not concern itself with the full story of King Hrólfr kraki and his champions, *Snorra Edda* does make reference to them in *Skáldskaparmál* in order to explain a kenning. Here the story of King Aðils asking his stepson for aid in a conflict while offering lavish gifts is recounted. *Snorra Edda* says, "Hrólfr konungr mátti eigi fara fyrir ófriði þeim er hann átti við Saxa, en þó sendi hann Aðilsi berserki sína tólf. Þar var einn Bǫðvarr bjarki ok Hjalti hugprúði… Svipdagr ok Beiguðr,"[25] (King Hrólfr could not go because of the conflict he had with the Saxons, but still he sent to Aðils his twelve *berserkir*. There was one Bǫðvarr bjarki, and Hjalti the stout-hearted… Svipdagr and Beiguðr.)

[21] Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, 59.
[22] Hilda E. Davidson, *The History of the Danes*, 48.
[23] Jakob Benediktsson ed. *Íslendingabók Landnámabók*, (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzk Fornritafélag, 1968), 213.
[24] All translations from Old Icelandic are my own.
[25] Snorri Sturluson. *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. By Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research), 58.

Despite their service, in the *Edda* King Aðils refuses to pay both King Hrólfr and his *berserkir* (where as in Arngrímur Jónsson's rendition of *Skjǫldunga saga* it was only Hrólfr whom he refused to pay). Hrólfr and his twelve *berserkir* make their way to Aðils' hall where they are faced by a great fire. As they heaped logs on the fire, Aðils' men asked, "Er þat satt at Hrólfr kraki ok berserkir hans flýja hvárki eld né járn?"[26] (Is it true that Hrólfr kraki and his *berserkir* flee neither fire nor iron?). Again, after enduring for some time, Hrólfr kraki and his *berserkir* jump over the fire to face their enemies.

Although very brief, Snorri's account of Hrólfr kraki and his champions is very telling. Of particular interest is the fact that Hrólfr's champions are explicitly called *berserkir* by Snorri. As Snorri described in *Heimskringla*, *berserkir* were invulnerable to fire and iron. Given their consistent reputation across the various sources for never fleeing fire or sword (specifically fire and iron in the *Edda*), and their ferocity in battle, it is not strange that Hrólfr's champions are called *berserkir*. Just like a king's typical retinue of *berserkir*, Hrólfr's champions are twelve in number. It is likely that Snorri's statement is simply the earliest surviving source to explicitly mention what was surely an established fact within the tradition. As Jens Peter Schjødt notes of Hrólfr's champions and *berserkir* in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, "there are features that indicate that the two groups, both of which consist of twelve persons, may be considered identical."[27]

Another long narrative dealing with Bǫðvarr bjarki are the *Bjarkarímur*. In the *rímur* it is said that Bǫðvarr slays a wolf and has Hjalti drink its blood in order to gain great strength and courage. Hjalti later slays a bear to prove himself. The ending of this collection of poems is lost, and the scene of the final battle at Hleiðargarðr with it. Nevertheless, the eighth *ríma* in the collection contains the only reference to Bǫðvarr bjarki fighting by means of a bear other than *Hrólfs saga kraka.* When Bǫðvarr bjarki and Agnarr wage battle against each other, a white bear is seen between the troops:

> 7. Hǫldar líta hvítabjǫrn
> hlaupa þeira á milli,
> verður hǫnd á venju gjǫrn
> vǫskum fleina spilli.

[26] Snorri Sturluson. *Edda: Skáldskaparmál,* 59.
[27] Jens P. Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion*, trans. Victor Hansen (The University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008), 313.

8. Sverðið harða setr hann þá
sjálfr í hǫfuð á bessa,
stǫkk í sundur hjǫltum hjá,
hann mun iðrast þessa.

9. Laufi raufar lífið mjóst,
lék hann þetta Bjarki,
naktan rak hann í niflungs brjóst,
nú kom á hann að marki.[28]

(Men see a white bear/ leap in between them,/ become the hands eager/ of the valiant pike destroyer./ The hard sword he then sets/ himself in the head of the bear,/ jumped asunder by the hilt,/ he will regret this./ Laufi pierces the slender torso,/ Bjarki did this,/ naked thrust he into the niflung's breast,/ now came on him significantly.)[29]

Although the *ríma* does not state that Bǫðvarr bjarki is the bear himself, and he certainly is not sleeping in this scene, the bear's presence does appear to be linked to Bǫðvarr since it aids him specifically in defeating Agnarr. The *Bjarkarímur* likely postdate *Hrólfs saga kraka*, so the presence of a bear aiding Bǫðvarr in battle could be influence from the saga.

Hrólfs saga kraka presents us with the most detailed account of Bǫðvarr bjarki's life. The saga goes as far back as the story of his parents. Bǫðvarr's father, Bjǫrn, was a king's son who was put under a curse by his stepmother that saw him transform into a bear; "hann sé dyr um daga enn maðr um nætr,"[30] (he was an animal during day, but a man during night).[31] Bera, a freeman's daughter who was in love with Bjǫrn, followed the bear into his cave and saw him take human shape. Bera remained there with him for a time. Bjǫrn was eventually hunted down, and Bera later gave birth to Bǫðvarr and his two brothers, Elgfróði and Þorir hundsfœtr. Because Bera had been made to eat some of the bear meat after Bjǫrn had been hunted down, her children were born with certain deformities. Elgfróði was an elk from the waist down, and Þorir hundsfœtr had dog feet.

[28] Finnur Jónsson, ed. *Hrólfs Saga Kraka og Bjarkarímur*, (Copenhagen: S.I., Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1904), 161.
[29] The translations of the *Bjarkarímur* are my own. I am in the debt of Haraldur Bernharðsson who translated the Danish entries of the Rímur dictionary for me.
[30] Desmond Slay, ed., *Hrólfs saga kraka* (Copenhagen: Den Arnamagnæanske Kommission, 1960), 57.
[31] All translations of *Hrólfs saga kraka* are my own. I have normalized the orthography of Slay's diplomatic edition.

Bǫðvarr alone was born without deformities, though in the *Bjarkarímur* he is said to have been born with a bear claw.[32] The Bear's Son motif is clearly apparent in this episode. Through the introduction of this motif, which is not found in any of the surviving sources from the 13th century or earlier, we see Bǫðvarr bjarki's connection to bears strengthened. Bjarki (little bear) is the son of Bjǫrn (bear) and Bera (she-bear), and his father could literally take the form of a bear. While familial ties to a particular animal do not play a role in the animal-warrior tradition, they can play a role in the animal spirit-double tradition.

After growing up Bǫðvarr makes his way to King Hrólfr kraki's hall to become one of his champions. When he arrives at Hleiðargarðr, bones are being thrown at a man named Hǫttr. Bǫðvarr defends Hǫttr and kills one of the assailants by throwing a bone back at him. Unlike in the *Gesta Danorum*, the bone throwing episode does not take place during a wedding feast, and Agnarr is altogether absent here. During yule time, a winged monster attacks Hrólfr's hall. Bǫðvarr slays the beast in secret and has Hǫttr drink its blood as well as eat some of its heart giving him great strength; just as in the *Gesta Danorum* Bǫðvarr has Hjalti drink the blood of the large bear and in the *Bjarkarímur* the blood of a wolf. In the morning, the beast is propped up and Hǫttr pretends to slay it with everyone watching. Despite seeing through their ploy, King Hrólfr recognizes that Hǫttr has changed into a true champion and decides that he shall hence forth be called Hjalti. The naming aspect of this scene has no parallel in the *Gesta Danorum*.

One striking detail about *Hrólfs saga kraka* is that within this work Bǫðvarr bjarki and his comrades are not referred to as *berserkir*. Just like in *Snorra Edda*, King Hrólfr is said to have twelve *berserkir* in his service, but these men are no longer identified with the twelve champions which Snorri named. Rather than being called *berserkir* themselves, Bǫðvarr and his fellow champions are often placed in opposition to *berserkir* and must prove their worth by overcoming them. When Hrólfr's *berserkir* first return to Hleiðargarðr after Bǫðvarr joins the king, they aggressively confront him. Bǫðvarr and Hjalti both handle the *berserkir* with ease until King Hrólfr intercedes and asks them to make peace, adding that he now has such great champions that he no longer needs to depend on the *berserkir*.[33] In *Hrólfs saga*, *berserkir* are seen as unreliable trouble

[32] Jesse Byock, trans., *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (London: Penguin, 1998), 136.
[33] Slay, ed., *Hrólfs saga kraka* 85.

makers. It is obvious that a negative connotation has been attached to the word *berserkr*, and it is no longer fit to describe the mighty champions of the legendary King Hrólfr kraki.

In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, like in *Skjǫldunga saga*, Bǫðvarr is said to marry Hrólfr's daughter, but here the daughter that he marries is called Drífa, though a daughter named Skúr is mentioned in the saga. Hrólfr has no sons, and the names of both daughters evoke precipitation. Rather than going to Sweden to collect withheld payment for a service rendered in battle, Hrólfr and his champions here go to collect an inheritance. *Hrólfs saga kraka* attributes Helgi's death (Hrólfr's father) to King Aðils of Sweden, and states that Bǫðvarr egged King Hrólfr to go collect the property which Aðils had taken after killing Helgi. On their way to Aðils they stop at the house of a farmer named Hrani three separate times. On the first night, it was too cold for most of Hrólfr's men, on the second night most men were too thirsty, and on the third night the fire in the hall was too strong for all but the king and his twelve champions. Each time, Hrani, who is actually Óðinn in disguise, asked the king to send men home because they would be no aid to him if they could not withstand these trials. It is interesting to note that the only one of Hrani's trials which is actually employed by King Aðils is the large fire. *Berserkir* are said to be Óðinn's warriors in *Heimskringla*, and even though they are not *berserkir* in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, it makes sense that Hrólfr's champions, who traditionally possess *berserkir* attributes, would be the only ones to successfully pass Óðinn's trials. When faced by Aðils' fire, the champions attempt to shield Hrólfr from the fire until the moment when they jump over it like in the other sources mentioned above. On their way back from Sweden, Hrólfr and his champions meet Hrani again. Like in *Skjǫldunga saga*, the king is offered weapons which he refuses to accept. After they leave the farmer's house Bǫðvarr realizes that scorning his weapons may have been a fatal mistake, but when Hrólfr and his champions attempt to return, having realized that Hrani was Óðinn, his farm was already gone.

Like in the other traditions mentioned above, Hjǫrvarðr, at Skuld's urging, attempts to ambush Hrólfr at Hleiðargarðr under the pretense of bringing tribute. They begin their attack at night, and like in Saxo's retelling, Hjalti calls out in an attempt to waken all of Hrólfr's champions so that they may defend the king. After listing Hrólfr's champions off, the saga says, "Bǫðvarr bjarki stóð nú strax upp,"[34] (Bǫðvarr bjarki now stood immediately up). This shows that Bǫðvarr was aware of the attack prior to being found sleeping by Hjalti while the bear was defending the

[34] Slay, ed., *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 115.

king. Nevertheless the next that we hear is that all of the champions followed King Hrólfr out to battle, except Bǫðvarr bjarki. When the battle commenced, Hjǫrvarðr's troops saw a large bear beside King Hrólfr; "Hann drepr fleyri menn með sínum hrammi enn fimm aðrir kappar konungs. Hrjóta af honum hǫgg ok skotvápn,"[35] (He kills more men with his paws than five other of the king's champions. Strikes and projectile-weapons fall off him.) The bear shows it is more ferocious than King Hrólfr's greatest warriors and, when struck by his enemies, shows immunity to their attacks, much like how *berserkir* are invulnerable to iron.

Hjalti sets out to waken Bǫðvarr when he notices that he is not fighting, despite Hrólfr's warning that Bǫðvarr would be where he could best help them. Hjalti finds Bǫðvarr sitting still in the hall and stirs him into battle, but Bǫðvarr says that he will no longer be able to serve the king as well as before. When Bǫðvarr bjarki joins the battle, the bear that fought beside the king is gone. Once the bear is gone, the corpses of the enemy become animated. Reference is made to Óðinn being present at the battle, although Bǫðvarr is unable to see him. Ultimately, King Hrólfr and his champions fall.

Comparing all of the primary sources, it becomes quite clear that although there was an established tradition, the details of the story were free to change with each retelling. By all accounts Bǫðvarr bjarki is a kinsman by marriage of Hrólfr, yet all the accounts also vary on who it was that he married. All the versions of the story agree that King Hrólfr journeyed to Sweden where King Aðils tested him with a large fire but why exactly king Hrólfr was there can vary from source to source. Óðinn is mentioned across all of the accounts of the final battle, but what role he plays can be unclear. The sources agree that King Hrólfr had twelve mighty warriors that fled neither sword nor fire, but these warriors are not always explicitly called *berserkir*. The bones of this tale with its ever changing incarnations is what the author of *Hrólfs saga kraka* inherited and fleshed out into the saga as we have it today. As can be seen throughout the saga, the author was fond of expanding the tale, often relying on folklore motifs. While the status of *berserkr* was no longer adequate for Bǫðvarr, the final battle at Hleiðargarðr may have presented the saga author with the opportunity to elevate Hrólfr's mightiest champion by allowing him to defend the king in the form of a bear, and thereby preserving one form of animal tradition where another had once existed.

[35] Slay, ed., *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 117.

Chapter II *Berserkir and Animal Warriors*

As was pointed out in the previous chapter, Bǫðvarr bjarki and King Hrólfr's champions were traditionally perceived as *berserkir*. They are part of the continuum of an ancient tradition. *Heimskringla* contains one of the most iconic descriptions of berserkir. It describes them as Óðinn's warriors and says they "fóru brynjulausir ok váru galnir sem hundar eða vargar, bitu í skjǫldu sína, váru sterkir sem birnir eða griðungar. Þeir drápu mannfolkit, en hvártki eldr né járn orti á þá. Þat er kallaðr berserksgangr."[36] (… went without mail and were mad as dogs or wolves, bit their shields, were strong as bears or bulls. They killed the men, but neither fire nor iron affected them. That is called going berserk.) The etymology for *berserkr* that is most accepted is that it comes from "bear-shirt" or "bear coat,"[37] implying that these warriors wore the pelts of bears. Indeed, medieval Icelandic literature draws from a long tradition of equating warriors to fierce animals. Images of anthropomorphic animals and zoomorphic beings can be traced back deep into Scandinavian prehistory.

Terry Gunnell, in *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, identifies Stone Age petroglyphs from Finnmark and Nordland in northern Norway as the earliest evidence for people wearing animal disguises in Scandinavia.[38] These images depict people wearing either bird masks or animal horns. Gunnell points out that these very early images were not common. Nevertheless, they serve as evidence of at least the early stages of a tradition establishing a link between certain people and certain animals. Petroglyphs of this nature are not confined to Stone Age Norway. In southern Sweden we can find petroglyphs depicting ships being pulled by men or animals. These petroglyphs also contain images of horned men and figures clad in animal skins. While we have no texts to help interpret the significance of these very ancient petroglyphs, they clearly seem to represent some sort of religious activities: "There can be little doubt that these horned figures depict men who, on cult occasions, originally dressed in animal skins, and wore animal

[36] Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzk Fornritafélag, 2002), 17.
[37] See Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, "The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology July* (2007): 280, and Hilda E. Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas," in *A Lycanthropy Reader*, ed. Charlotte Otten, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 149.
[38] Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995), 37.

headdresses (if not masks) like the Stone Age skin-clad 'sorcerer' of Trois Frères.'[39] Certain animals appear to have played a special role in early Nordic religion from a very early point.

Further evidence of people in animal costumes during what is presumably religious activity can be found on the images of the Kivik stones. The Kivik stones are grave tablets found in south-east Skåne from the Swedish Bronze Age, circa 1200 B.C.E.[40] These tablets contain images of female figures with pointed bird heads. We can assume that these figures indeed represent birds because of several other figures found in southern Sweden depicting humans who are winged or are wearing bird masks. Figures in bird disguises do not appear to have been rare in this region. Gunnell adds, "the idea of female bird figures playing a role in funeral processions raises logical associations with the image of the *valkyrjur* who in later times were said to collect spirits of dead warriors and wear swan-skins ('álptarhamir') which could be removed at will."[41] While there is a considerable temporal gap between these images and the earliest written attestation of *valkyrjur*, it is nevertheless plausible that these are two points of the same continuum of female animal figures playing a role in funeral rites.

More than a thousand years after the Kivik stones (but still possibly a thousand years apart from *Hrólfs saga kraka*) we find anthropomorphic animal images on the Gallehus horns. These two horns found in Schleswig are dated to circa 400 C.E.[42] The horns contain images of what appear to be sacrificial activity. They depict horned men bearing weapons, one of them leading a goat. The horns on the goat, Gunnell points out, are similar to those of the horned men establishing a possible link between the men and the goat itself. The Gallehus horns also contain images of several costumed figures including, "two opposed armed figures with human bodies and what would appear to be animal masks, one resembling a wolf head, the other that of a bird."[43] The presence of these figures support the argument for a pagan ritual ceremony involving costumed ritual combat. This will be of particular interest when discussing initiation scenes involving animal warriors in medieval Icelandic literature.

[39]Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, 43.
[40]Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, 47.
[41] Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia,* 47.
[42]Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, 49.
[43]Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia,* 51.

Next we will examine the Oseberg tapestry that was buried circa 835-850 C.E.[44], placing us within the Viking Age. The tapestry contains many images, including what appears to be a religious procession. Of particular interest is the following:

> Among other things, one notes again the element of female figures in animal and bird disguise, the wearing of horns by priest figures, and the suggestion of disguised combat involving figures in animal costume. The two last features occurred on the Gallehus horns four hundred years prior to the time of the Oseberg burial… Once again, these features point to the continuation of an almost homogenous religious tradition with very ancient roots.[45]

While many of the images on the Oseberg tapestry are difficult to make out, or simply enigmatic, there is still plenty that is quite useful when observed within the context of the other images described above. The tapestry contains the image of an armed man dressed in the skin of an animal approaching a larger figure possibly wearing a bull-horned helmet.[46] What exactly the relationship between the skin-clad warrior and the horned figure may be is uncertain, but in light of the images of the Gallehus horns, ritual combat seems a likely explanation.

Several helmet plates and matrices dating to the sixth and seventh centuries displaying images of what appear to be human figures in animal pelts or horns have been found across Scandinavia. These animal like figures are often bearing arms. Gunnell suggests that these images are based on the idea of "a recognized ritual combat between a man and a mock monster,"[47] again pertaining to some aspect of the pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia. One of the most famous images associated with animal warriors in Scandinavia comes from the Torslunda helmet-plate matrix. It contains the image of a man in a horned helmet carrying what appear to be spears leading a man wearing what is clearly a wolf pelt who is also armed with a spear. While there is no writing describing this figure as a *berserkr,* the image seems to fit what one would expect from an *úlfheðinn*, which Geir T. Zoëga defines as, "a berserk wearing a wolf-skin."[48] Several scholars find good reason for believing that the figure depicted here is a type of *úlfheðinn* or *berserkr*.[49] Whatever the context of their usage, the finding of two tenth century animal masks at Hedeby

[44] Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia,* 60.
[45] Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia,* 60.
[46]Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, 61.
[47]Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, 66.
[48] Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc.: 2004), 458.
[49]Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, 70.

seems to confirm as late as the Viking Age there was some function in Scandinavia that saw people dress as animals.

Of the fact that a tradition existed in Scandinavia involving warriors dressed as animals (even if only within the context of rituals), there can be no doubt. The archaeological evidence seems to suggest that animal costumes played a role in the ritual activity of Scandinavia prior to the conversion to Christianity.[50] It is from this tradition that the *berserkir* so common in medieval Icelandic literature stem. While it is important to establish the long and rich history of this animal warrior tradition, it is to their literary presence that we must pay the most attention when inspecting their influence on Bǫðvarr bjarki.

Disguises play a very prominent role in medieval Icelandic literature. The majority of these disguises are related to animals, and that is likely due to the ritualistic use of animal costumes during the then not so distant pagan past.[51] However, at times it seems as though the exact purpose of these animal disguises was lost by the time the stories reached the form in which we have them today. Consider Gunnell's analysis of an episode from *Kormáks saga*, where Steinarr Qnundarson appears:

> dressed in a 'bear-skin coat with a mask (gríma) in front of his face'. Steinarr intends to challenge Hólmganga-Bersi to combat. Nonetheless, the purpose of the disguise is totally unclear, since while Steinarr may have been classed as a 'trouble-maker' ('óeirumaðr'), there is nothing in either *Kormáks saga* or *Egils saga* to suggest that he was ever regarded as a berserkr or needed to hide his identity… As with many of the other accounts of animal costumes, it would seem that only part of the story is being told.[52]

Despite never being stated in the sagas, given the etymology of *berserkr*, it seems plausible that Steinarr may have been remembered as one at some point before the saga reached the form in which we currently have it. As we saw with Bǫðvarr bjarki himself in the previous chapter, he was clearly a *berserkr* when the *Edda* was written, but was no longer referred to as one by the time *Hrólfs saga* was written despite still showing *berserkr* traits.

The poem *Haraldskvæði*, attributed to Þorbjǫrn hornklofi who lived roughly around the year 900, could potentially be our earliest attestation of the words *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar*.[53] It is

[50] Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia,* 92.
[51] Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia,* 80.
[52] Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia,* 81.
[53] Aðalheiður, "The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature," 280.

the fact that *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar* are named here together that adds weight to the etymology of *berserkr* given above.[54] What the poem makes clear is that these are warriors in service of King Haraldr. We have no detailed description explaining that these warriors wore animal pelts, but their names contain animal elements that fit well with many of the images detailed above. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir interprets stanzas twenty and twenty one of *Haraldskvæði* as explaining that *úlfheðnar* are *berserkir* that have distinguished themselves in battle, making the former a subcategory of the latter.[55] In any event, it is clear that these are members of an elite warrior group. This being an exclusive group, and one having close ties with the God Óðinn[56], it seems logical that there would be some sort of ritual associated with initiation into their ranks. While we may lack a literary source detailing as much, there are traces of initiation patterns in the surviving literature dealing with Odinic warriors.

Vǫlsunga saga details how Sigmundr, a king descended from Óðinn himself, tests and trains his son Sinfjǫtli in order to prepare him to avenge his (Sigmundr's) father. During their training Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli don wolf skins that see them transformed into wolves. While this tale does contain certain folktale elements, there are structures that suggest that the memory of a tradition involving the training of young warriors in association with wolves is also being evoked.[57] Despite the inclusion of this tale and these structural elements, it is most likely that the author of the saga as we have it today did not understand the meaning of many of the elements preserved within the story.[58] As will be discussed in chapter four of this thesis, the scene in question also shows evidence of continental influence. I will demonstrate how the incorporation of foreign material further illustrates the versatility and resilience of Old Norse animal traditions in medieval Icelandic literature.

In the scene in question Sigmundr, who has already been singled out as an Odinic character earlier in the saga by pulling free a sword that Óðinn had stabbed into a tree, acts as the initiator for his son (and nephew) Sinfjǫtli. The most important motif of this initiation for our purpose is

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[54] The alternative etymology is that "ber" is the equivalent of the English word "bare", implying that berserkr fought shirtless. See Hilda E. Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas," in *A Lycanthropy Reader*, ed. Charlotte Otten, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 149.

[55] Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, "The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* July (2007), 281.

[56] Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, 17.

[57] Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas," 152.

[58] Jens P. Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion*, trans. Victor Hansen (The University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008), 305.

the transformation into wolves. As Schjødt explains, this "evokes association with the concept of *úlfheðnar* 'men clad in wolf skins', probably a designation for certain warrior bands in the pre-Christian North"[59]. Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli only don the wolf skins that make them transform after Sinfjǫtli passes tests of courage from both his mother and his father, something none of his siblings did successfully. Sigmundr still considered Sinfjǫtli too young and untried after passing the initial tests before donning the wolf skins. When they are transformed into wolves, they go their separate ways in the forest, but Sigmundr commands that they call for aid if faced with more than seven opponents, something that Sinfjǫtli does not hold to. Sinfjǫtli's disobedience leads to Sigmundr attacking him in rage and injuring him in the throat. Sinfjǫtli is eventually healed by a leaf that Sigmundr acquires from a raven. Schjødt interprets this as a symbolic death for Sinfjǫtli, and sees his life as being restored by the raven, "Óðinn's bird *par excellence*, and in his new existence he can then be characterized as an Óðinn-warrior connected in some mystical way to wolves."[60] After his time spent as a wolf, Sinfjǫtli is irreversibly changed. When Sinfjǫtli is poisoned later in the saga and dies, Óðinn himself comes for him and takes him away in a boat. This position as an Odinic warrior follows him after death as is verifiable in *Eiríksmál* where Sinfjǫtli is named among the warriors residing in Valhǫll.[61]

Let us now examine an example from *Hrólfs saga kraka* itself. When Bǫðvarr bjarki leaves home for Denmark, he first visits his brothers. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, both these brothers had certain animal characteristics on their bodies. Bǫðvarr first visits Elgfróði, who is an elk from the waist down. Because Bǫðvarr kept his face hidden, Elgfróði did not recognize the intruder and they got into a fight. Elgfróði proves to be stronger than Bǫðvarr, but before Bǫðvarr continues on his way, Elgfróði has him drink blood from his calf greatly increasing his strength. By the time that Bǫðvarr reaches Hrólfr's hall, he is ready to prove that he is a mighty warrior by testing himself against King Hrólfr's *berserkir*.[62] Elgfróði, whose animal affiliation is

[59] Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds*, 308.
[60] Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds*, 309.
[61] Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds*, 310.
[62] We must remember that while in *Hrólfs saga kraka* the *berserkir* and the champions appear as two separate groups, traditionally they were one in the same. Schjødt says, "The relationship between Hrólfr's warriors (*kappar*) and his berserkir is problematic. The two groups are placed in opposition to one another to a great degree throughout the saga. This contrast is, however, more of a literary feature, creating a stage for the heroes' courage and strength, than a description of two actual groups. The *berserkir* appear exclusively as opponents of the *kappar*, but there are features that indicate that the two groups, both of which consist of twelve persons, may be considered identical." See Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds*, 313.

at that time greater than Bǫðvarr's, provides Bǫðvarr bjarki with the ability to enter the retinue of a king with a special affinity to Óðinn as his foremost warrior.[63]

More telling still is Bǫðvarr's own initiation of Hǫttr/Hjalti which we will now revisit. Because of a monster that attacks during Yule, a liminal period,[64] Hrólfr forbids his warriors from leaving the hall at night. Bǫðvarr nevertheless leaves the hall to face the beast, and brings Hǫttr with him. Bǫðvarr slays the beast himself and then has Hǫttr consume its blood and heart, and it is this that gives Hǫttr the strength and courage to become one of Hrólfr's champions. Despite having acquired the attributes of a great champion, Hǫttr still has to demonstrate his new abilities before he can be accepted into this elite group. He does this by pretending to kill the monster's corpse, which Bǫðvarr has propped up, in sight of the king in the morning, and he is rewarded with the new name Hjalti, marking the completion of his initiation.[65]

The staged killing of the beast can come off as a bit ridiculous outside of the context of initiation, after all King Hrólfr sees right through Bǫðvarr and Hjalti's ploy. Despite knowing that it was Bǫðvarr that killed the beast, King Hrólfr still rewards and praises Hjalti. It seems that by carrying out the staged killing, Hjalti is going through the motions of a sort of mock combat ritual such as those that Gunnell associates with the images described above, and what is important is not whether or not there was danger involved, but rather that the prop or human actor symbolically represents a dangerous animal[66]. We must recall that in Saxo's version of the story, the beast that was killed was a bear. If Saxo's use of a bear for this scene is due to an old tradition, then this episode seems very much linked to the *berserkr* tradition, particularly since Hjalti is being welcomed into the retinue of a king known for his elite *berserkir* guard.[67]

Bears, being large and powerful animals, surely made an impression early on to those living in the Scandinavian north. Traces of bear claws have been found in graves from Norway and Sweden from the period preceding the Viking Age, suggesting that bearskins played a role at some point in pre-Christian Scandinavian burials.[68] These could potentially be graves associated with the initiated. It is also worth noting that in the literature, the leader of *berserkr* bands often has a

[63] Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds*, 320.
[64] Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds*, 322.
[65] Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds*, 323.
[66] Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds*, 325.
[67] Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds*, 324.
[68] Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas," 146.

bearlike name such as Bjǫrn.[69] Regardless of whether or not they accurately represent some pre-Christian ritual, the literary motif of initiation is clearly present in these episodes linking animals and warriors in *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka.*

Berserkir had a special affinity with Óðinn, and even after the label of *berserkir* has been lifted from them, Hrólfr's champions still share this affinity. The other prominent affinity *berserkir* share is to bears, and as the episode of Hjalti above shows, this was particular prominent during their initiation.[70] These attributes make Bǫðvarr bjarki the ideal *berserkr,* since he is the most bear-like of all of Hrólfr's champions. As was mentioned last chapter, under the disguise of the farmer Hrani, Óðinn tests the troops that King Hrólfr leads into Sweden. The trails are ultimately only withstood by Hrólfr's champions, which Schjødt states, "can hardly be separated from the *berserkir*."[71] After Hrólfr turns down the weapons offered to him by Hrani, it is Bǫðvarr bjarki, the champion who most embodies the essence of a *berserkr*, who realizes that Hrani is really Óðinn.

Bǫðvarr bjarki is undoubtedly a *berserkr's berserkr* (to use an anachronistic colloquialism), but that in and of itself is not enough to account for his ability to fight in the form of a bear that is evident in the late *Hrólfs saga kraka*; after all, *berserkir* "were not conceived as bears and wolves in general, but on the symbolic level they were compared to fierce animal".[72] There are numerous examples of shape-shifting in medieval Icelandic literature, but these appear to be quite apart from the *berserksgangr* fit that *berserkir* are known for. While the men who undergo *berserksgangr* often behave like animals, howling and biting their shields, there is nothing to indicate their ever losing human form. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdottir contrasts these two occurrences by saying that the condition of *berserkr* is psychological while those of concrete shape-shifting episodes are physical.[73]

It is not uncommon to encounter a character able to put on the *hamr* of an animal in medieval Icelandic literature. The word *hamr* can refer to the skin and pelt of an animal, the wings

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[69] We must remember that in all likelihood Bjarki was the original name of the Hrólfr's foremost champion and Bǫðvarr an acquired nickname. See also Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas," 146.
[70] Jens P. Schjødt, "The Notion of Berserkir and the relation between Óðinn and Animal Warriors," in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles*, ed. John McKinnell et al. (Durham: The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), 890.
[71] Schjødt, "The Notion of Berserkir and the relation between Óðinn and Animal Warriors," 889.
[72] Schjødt, "The Notion of Berserkir and the relation between Óðinn and Animal Warriors," 891.
[73] Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, "The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature," 282.

and feathers of a bird, or the shape of the animal itself.[74] This motif can be found in both the prose and the poetry of medieval Iceland. The word *hamrammr* is used to describe characters with the ability to change their shape. Despite the physical aspect associated with *hamr*, the reflexive verb *hamask* could mean both to take on the shape of an animal or to rage like one, not unlike *berserksgangr*.[75]

Snorra Edda tells of a falcon or hawk *hamr* that Freyja possesses allowing her to take the form of a bird. This *hamr* is borrowed by Loki who is also able to use it to change his shape.[76] Scholars believe that there existed a native tradition of shape-shifting in Iceland, much like that attributed to Freyja's *hamr*. However shape-changing because of a curse, such as is the case with Bǫðvarr's father Bjǫrn, is a later phenomenon.[77] The native tradition of shape-shifting seems closely tied to the tradition of animal guardians and spirit doubles best encapsulated by the *fylgjur*.

[74] See Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, "The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature," 279, and Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas," 142.
[75] Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 183.
[76] Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 2.
[77] Aðalheiður, "The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature," 283.

Chapter III *Fylgjur, Hamr, and Animal Doubles*

Medieval Icelandic literature has a rich tradition of animal doubles beyond warriors. These doubles are usually associated with sleep. Animals appear frequently as dream-symbols, and when they do, these are most often the *fylgjur* of certain characters.[78] The word *fylgja* comes from the verb "to follow", and as a noun it traditionally refers to a sort of guardian spirit that follows its possessor.[79] It is worth noting that *fylgjur* do not appear exclusively in animal form; guardian spirits in the form of women are also called *fylgjur*, but for our purposes we will focus on the roles played by the *fylgjur* appearing as animals.

Fylgjur can be seen by others in dreams or by the possessor under special circumstances, such as when the possessor's own death is imminent.[80] *Njáls saga* recounts how Þórðr and Njáll were sitting outside when Þórðr noticed a goat in the meadow. The goat was lying in a hollow covered in blood. Thinking it strange, Þórðr mentioned it to Njáll, who assured him that there was no goat, or anything else, there. Realizing that this was his *fylgja* that Þórðr had seen, Njáll warned him to be careful. Despite the warning, shortly after the death of his animal guardian, Þórðr's own death followed. The ability to perceive his own *fylgja* was only a precursor to his death.[81]

Animal *fylgjur* often take the form of animals that fit the character of their possessors. As Turville-Petre pointed out in "Dreams in Icelandic Tradition", a wizard or a cheater may be attended by a fox *fylgja* while beautiful women might be attended by swans.[82] *Fylgjur* appearing in dreams commonly do so preceding a battle. In these instances the *fylgjur* of the participants of the battle often play out what will come. In *Hárvarðar saga Ísfirðings*, Atli í Otradalr has a night in which his dreams are so haunted that everyone else is kept awake by him. When asked what made his sleep so fitful he answers, "ek þóttumk ganga út ór búrinu, ok sá ek, at vargar runnu sunnan á vǫllinn átján saman, en fyrir vǫrgunum ran refkeila ein"[83] (I seemed to walk out of the

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[78] G. Turville-Petre, "Dreams in Icelandic Tradition," Folklore 69.2 (1958), 99.
[79] Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas," 155.
[80] Turville-Petre, "Dreams in Icelandic Tradition," 100.
[81] see Claude Lecouteux, *Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies: Shapeshifters and Astral Doubles in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Clare Frock (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2003), 146, and Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas," 154.
[82] Turville-Petre, "Dreams in Icelandic Tradition," 99.
[83] Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson ed. "Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings" in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzk Fornritafélag, 1988), 349.

storehouse, and I saw that wolves ran from the south on the field, eighteen together, but before the wolves ran a vixen). Atli was woken before the encounter played out in his dream, but realizing the danger he was in, he prepared himself for battle. The word that Atli uses for the animals he sees approaching in his dreams is *hugr*, which is used alongside *fylgja* and *hamingja* to describe these fetch-like doubles.[84] The wolves represented the enemy assailants, and the vixen at their front was the *fylgja* (or *hugr*) of a wicked wizard.

The appearance of *fylgjur* in dreams did not necessarily predict only single battles. In *Vápnfirðinga saga* a woman had a violent dream that brought her to tears. She had dreamt that several bulls and oxen killed each other. Her dream was a foretelling of a blood feud that would haunt two families for multiple generations.[85] Dream foretelling through the presence of animal *fylgjur* could also take place before the birth of the person whose *fylgja* was present. In *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* we hear of a dream in which a yet unborn girl appears as a pen swan. The two lovers that the girl would have appear as eagles which fight each other to death, predicting the end of her two poet lovers. A falcon representing the girl's future husband then comes and flies away with her.[86] Predictions of far-off futures suggests that the connection between people and their fetches extended beyond the immediate moment.

Dreams play a very prominent role in medieval Icelandic literature when it comes to understanding things yet to come. Often it is a matter of understanding who is represented by what (such as enemies represented by wolves, wizards by foxes, and maidens by swans), and when the events represented will take place (ranging from an immediate battle to foretelling of people yet unborn). These are by no means abilities attributed to everyone in the saga corpus, and Icelandic developed specific words to describe various supernatural dream-related attributes. Gísli Súrsson, who is visited by two dream women in his sleep, is described as "draumamaðr mikill ok berdreymr."[87] A *draumamaðr* is a man who dreams greatly, and *berdreymr* refers to having clear dreams. Gísli's dreams are actually often quite cryptic, but his ability to interpret them allow him to know what the future may hold. On the opposite end of the spectrum we have the word

[84] Turville-Petre, "Dreams in Icelandic Tradition," 99.
[85] Jón Jóhannesson ed. "Vápfirðinga saga" in *Austfirðinga Sögur*, (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzk Fornritafélag, 1950), 48-49.
[86] Turville-Petre, "Dreams in Icelandic Tradition," 100.
[87] Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson ed. "Gísla saga Súrssonar" in *Vestfirðinga Sögur*, (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzk Fornritafélag, 1988), 70.

draumstolinn describing those who never dream, or "someone from whom dreams have been stolen."[88] Dreaming is key in the function of *fylgjur* as doubles since it is said that doubles travel when the possessor is asleep, and it is through dreams that the doubles of others are most often perceived as animals.[89]

The importance of sleep is made quite evident in an episode from *Brennu-Njáls saga*. It retells how two men named Þorgeirr set out to attack Njáll's friend Gunnarr. On their way, the two assailants are overcome by great drowsiness. That same night, Njáll was unable to sleep. When asked why he couldn't sleep, Njáll replies that much is before his eyes; "ek sé margar fylgjur grimmligar óvina Gunnars"[90] (I see many fierce *fylgjur* of Gunnarr's enemies). Njáll is unable to see these *fylgjur* until the men have fallen asleep. That Njáll can see the *fylgjur* without being asleep himself could potentially be explained by Njáll's second sight. Regardless, Njáll is not the only person in the sagas credited with seeing a *fylgja* while awake.

The examples mentioned so far explore the role of *fylgjur* as perceived in dreams and visions, but *fylgjur* could also be seen as corporal. *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts* tells of how when Þorsteinn was a child, he tripped over his own *fylgja*. He had been rushing into the house when suddenly he fell over something that he had not seen, making his grandfather laugh. When he asked his grandfather why he was laughing, he was a told that a white bear cub had followed Þorsteinn in, but had stopped suddenly upon seeing Þorsteinn's grandfather. Þorsteinn in his rush and unable to see the bear, had tripped over it.[91] Several aspects of this episode are quite telling. Despite the fact that Þorsteinn's grandfather, much like Njáll, is able to see the *fylgja* while awake, it nevertheless appears undetectable to others. This *fylgja* is clearly physical since Þorsteinn is able to trip over it. Most importantly it is the discovery of this *fylgja* that makes people realize that Þorsteinn was not the son of the parents who were raising him. It was immediately understood that he must have more powerful ancestors to have this *fylgja* attached to him.[92] This association implies a link between *fylgjur* and families, not just individuals, which falls well in line with the belief that *fylgjur* stalk a particular family.[93] It is perhaps not surprising then that the Icelandic

[88] Lecouteux, *Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies*, 52.
[89] Lecouteux, *Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies*, 53.
[90] Einar Ól. Sveinsson ed. *Brennu-Njáls Saga,* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzk Fornritafélag, 2010), 170.
[91] Lecouteux, *Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies*, 68.
[92] Lecouteux, *Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies*, 68.
[93] Ármann Jakobsson, "Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Mediaeval Icelandic Undead,"*Journal of English and Germanic Philology* July (2011), 282.

word for good fortune, *hamingja*, also had the Old Icelandic meaning of "guardian spirit".[94] As was pointed out in previous chapters, a link certainly exists between bears and Bǫðvarr bjarki's family in *Hrólfs saga kraka*.

The role of a *fylgja* as a double is closely tied to that of *hamr*. As Turville-Petre states it, "This belief in fetches may not be identical, but it has much in common with the belief in shape-changing."[95] In the case of animal forms, both can act as an alter ego for characters. As Lecouteux points out, "Hamr and fylgja are linked to sleep and trance, and they can travel to distant places."[96] Not only can *hamr* also be linked with sleep, but there are examples in which second sight is required in order to see a *hamr* as well. The term *hamr* could even be used to describe animal doubles appearing in dreams.[97] While these attributes are not congruous with those of the wolf *hamr* used by Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli in *Vǫlsunga saga*, they serve as a testament to the fluidity of these terms as used in medieval Iceland.

Landnámabók describes an episode in which two men fought each other in the form of their doubles and were seen by a third man. The two combatants, Dufþakr and Stórólfr, are both described as being "*hamrammr mjǫk*" and the man who sees them is called an "*ófreskr maðr*" (a man possessing second sight).[98] Dufþakr and Stórólfr had a dispute over pasturing rights. One night the man with second sight saw a bear leave from Stórolfr's farm and a bull from Dufþakr's. The two doubles met and fought until the bear got the upper hand. The following morning, the valley where the doubles had fought was visibly disturbed, and both Dufþakr and Stórólfr were wounded. Although it required second sight to see these doubles (just like the *fylgjur* in *Njáls saga*), their actions nevertheless had very real physical consequences.

The term used to describe when a person travels outside of their body in the shape of an animal is *hamfarir*.[99] *Landnámabók* tells how when Ingimundr enn gamli decided to settle in Iceland, he sent two Finns "í hamfǫrum", traveling as animal doubles, to find a silver image of the god Freyr that he had possessed.[100] Although the Finns found the location of the object, they did not bring it back to Ingimundr. The fact that *Landnámabók* tells us specifically that the Finns did

[94] Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 183.
[95] Turville-Petre, "Dreams in Icelandic Tradition," 109.
[96] Lecouteux, *Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies*, 69.
[97] Turville-Petre, "Dreams in Icelandic Tradition," 109.
[98] Jakob Benediktsson ed. *Íslendingabók Landnámabók*, 355-6.
[99] Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas," 142.
[100] Jakob Benediktsson ed. *Íslendingabók Landnámabók*, 218.

not bring the object back implies the possibility of their being able to do so. Further proof of an animal double's ability to act physically can be found in *Kormáks saga*. A witch is said to take on the shape of a walrus and threaten a ship. After she was recognized by the eyes of the walrus, the walrus was attacked with a spear and submerged itself. The witch was later said to have taken ill and ultimately died.[101] Just like in the fight between Dufþakr and Stórólfr, the damage sustained by the double is visited on the human host.

In the previous chapter I discussed the connection between animal warriors and the god Óðinn. Although we are not told that people who are *hamramr* are Óðinn's chosen, according to *Ynglinga saga* in *Heimskringla*, Óðinn himself was a shape-shifter: "Óðinn skipti hǫmum. Lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þá fugl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lǫnd at sínum øredum eða annarra manna."[102] (Óðinn changed shapes. Then the body lay as if asleep or dead, but he was then a bird, or an animal, a fish or a serpent, and went in one moment to far off lands on his own errands or other men's). Óðinn's body lies still much like Bǫðvarr bjarki's when he fights in bear form. The fact that his body seems to sleep brings to mind the evening fight in double form between Dufþakr and Stórólfr. The mention of Óðinn going on errands for other men is reminiscent of the two Finns that Ingimundr sends to Iceland in search of his Freyr figure. Óðinn's ability to double himself seems to serve as the type specimen for doubling into animal form in medieval Icelandic literature, but mentioning him going on errands for others seems a bit out of place for the Alfǫðr, and *Ynglinga saga* tells of his death before his doubling ability is ever used for another's errand. It could be that this parallel between Óðinn and the Finns preserves the memory of a source that influenced the medieval Nordic animal double tradition.

The animal double tradition present in medieval Icelandic literature contains many aspects that are shamanistic. Finno-Ugrian lore has a prevalent motif in which a shaman's guardian spirit fights in animal form.[103] Given the extended historical contact between Scandinavian people and the Sami, it is quite likely that the prevalence of animal doubles in medieval Icelandic literature is owed in part to Finno-Ugrian influence. This seems particularly evident when we consider that no evidence survives anywhere else in the Germanic tradition outside of the Nordic sphere for a warrior able to fight in bear form while his human body rests elsewhere as in the case of Bǫðvarr

[101] Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas," 156.
[102] Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* I, 18.
[103] Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas," 156.

bjarki in *Hrólfs saga kraka*.[104] As was noted before, Bǫðvarr's particular case may be a result of the Bear's Son motif found in the version of his story told in *Hrólfs saga*. However Stórólfr, the man who fought through his bear double in *Landnámabók*, was the son of Ketil Hœng, whose home had extended contact with the Sami.[105] That bear lore was particular rich with settlers from regions with more Sami contact is not beyond the realm of plausibility.

We have seen that whether regarded as *fylgjur* or *hamr*, the ability to double one's self seems to be tied to families. In *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, the family of the eponymous hero appears to have ties both to the animal double tradition and the animal warrior. In the opening chapter of the saga we are told that Úlfr Bjálfason, better known as Kveld-Úlfr (Evening-Wolf), would become ill-tempered in the evening. He is described as *hamramr* and as having the tendency to sleep in the evening. The fact that these characteristics earn him the nickname Evening-Wolf heavily implies that Kveld-Úlfr's double would travel freely in wolf form during the evenings. In his final battle to avenge his son, Kveld-Úlfr and several of his men are said to *hamask*, entering a *berserksgangr* like rage.[106] A look at the names of Kveld-Úlfr's ancestors reveals an animal theme. He is the son of Bjalfi and Hallbera, who was the daughter of Úlfr óargi and sister of Hallbjǫrn hálftroll. "The anthroponyms Wolf (Ulf), Female Bear (Bera), Male Bear (Björn), and the meaning of *bjalfi*, 'fur,' suggest that this family has the gift of metamorphosis."[107] This name pattern parallels the one of Bǫðvarr bjarki's family, albeit Bǫðvarr's family's names center much more specifically on bears.

Egils saga is believed to be one of the earliest of the *Íslendingasögur*, or sagas about early Icelanders.[108] *Harðar saga Grímkelssonar*, one of the later *Íslendingasögur*, also preserves the tradition of animal doubles within the names of a family's members. *Harðar saga* is dated to the late fourteenth century.[109] It tells us that Björn blásíða was, "son Úlfheðins Úlfhamssonar,

[104] Clive Tolley, "Hrólfs saga kraka and Sámi Bear Rites," *Saga-Book* 31 (2007) 6.
[105] Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas," 148.
[106] The animal warrior rage exhibited by Kveld-Úlfr's descendants will be further explored in the following chapter.
[107] Lecouteux, *Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies*, 129.
[108] Torfi Tulinius, "Writing Strategies: Romance and the Creation of a New Genre in Medieval Iceland," in *Textual Production and Status Contests in Rising and Unstable Societies*, ed. Massimiliano Bampi and Marina Buzzoni, (Venice: Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2013), 33.
[109] Robert Kellog, trans., "The saga of Hord and the People of Holm," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders II*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 193.

Úlfssonar, Úlfhams sonar ins hamrama"[110] (son of Úlfheðinn, son of Úlfhamr, son of Úlfr, son of Úlfhamr the *hamramr*). In *Egils saga* the presence of both traditions (animal warrior and animal double) are subtle. While it is heavily implied that Kveld-Úlfr could shift his shape, the saga never has him do so explicitly. And while Egill often demonstrates *berserkr*-like attributes as we will see in the following chapter, he is never actually called a *berserkr*. By the time that *Harðar saga* reached the state in which it has come down to us in the late fourteenth century, these subtleties were gone. The presence of *úlfheðinn* clearly points to animal warriors while the repetition of *hamr* implies the presence of an animal double, in this particular case a wolf. By the late fourteenth century the two traditions appear to have converged in certain cases in a much more blatant way than that employed by the author of *Egils saga*, be that Snorri or someone else. The clearest case of the convergence is the final stand of Bǫðvarr bjarki in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, where Bǫðvarr, an unambiguous animal warrior, unambiguously fights through the use of an animal double.

[110] Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson ed. *Harðar Saga*, (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzk Fornritafélag, 2009), 46.

Chapter IV *Changing Perspective*

Berserkir are very common in medieval Icelandic texts. They not only appear in literary texts like the sagas and verses of skaldic and Eddic poetry, but also in annals, the law text *Grágás*, and historical writings such as *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*.[111] In these texts the *berserkir* play a number stereotyped of roles. We have already touched on *berserkir* as a group of twelve elite warriors in a king's retinue in *Snorra Edda* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Another common role for *berserkir* is found in conversion stories where the *berserkir* act as heathens to be overcome by Christian missionaries. However, as Benjamin Blaney points out, the most common role for *berserkir* to play is that of the unwelcome suitor. Blaney describes the *berserkr* unwelcome suitor trope as follows:

> In this role the berserk, often considered merely an outlaw or thug, demands from a man his wife, daughter, or sister and often his property as well. When the man refuses, the berserk challenges him to a duel (*hólmganga*). The challenged man either fights the berserk himself or offers his daughter or sister to anyone who will take his place and defeat the berserk. The hero, usually a guest in the man's house, steps in and defeats the supposedly invulnerable berserk by using a special weapon (a special sword, or a second sword which the berserk has not dulled with his 'evil eye,' or some non-iron weapon, e.g., a wooden club, a stone, or even his teeth).[112]

Berserkir can be found as unwelcome suitors across saga genres. By comparing their appearances as unwelcome suitors in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, we can see how the perspective on *berserkir* shifted over time.

Blaney argues that in the *Íslendingasögur*, which are often considered to be better crafted than most *fornaldarsögur*, berserk suitor episodes play a more intricate role in the saga than they do in many *fornaldarsögur* where they appear to simply be fulfilling a stereotype that does not contribute anything to the larger story. It is generally believed that most *fornaldarsögur* postdate the classical *Íslendingasögur*, though there is still no consensus on that matter.[113] Whatever the case, most of the early *Íslendingasögur* tend to be less episodic in nature than the more adventurous

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[111] Benjamin Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor: The Literary Application of a Stereotyped Theme," *Scandinavian Studies* 54 (1982): 279.
[112] Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 279.
[113] An argument for an early date of several *fornaldarsögur* can be found in Torfi H. Tulinius' *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in thirteenth-Century Iceland*, 55.

fornaldarsögur. This is likely due to the growing influence of the episodic chivalric romances of continental Europe.

Blaney centers his argument on a comparison of berserk suitor episodes in four sagas. The first *Íslendingasaga* he breaks down is *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. This saga is very compact and is notable for its tight structure in which most events have some bearing on the main plot. Chapters two and three of the longer version of the saga have an unwelcome suitor episode and establish the themes of conflict between personal and family honor as well as personal and family love.[114] A *berserkr*, invulnerable to iron, shows up to the farm of Ari Þorkelsson and instigates a duel over Ari's wife and land. Ari falls in the duel, but his brother Gísli (not to be confused with the eponymous hero) challenges the *berserkr* to another duel. Ari's wife advises Gísli to borrow a special sword called Grásíða from a thrall who reluctantly agrees. Gísli kills the *berserkr* with the special sword, marries Ari's widow, but refuses to return the sword to the thrall. Grásíða breaks when both Gísli and the thrall kill each other fighting over the sword. "This same sword, reforged into a spear, is used later to kill Vésteinn, who had an affair with the wife of [the eponymous] Gísli's brother Þorkell. Gísli uses the same weapon to slay his brother-in-law Þorgrímr in revenge."[115] Blaney points out that the symbolism of the weapons links the episode of the *berserkr* to that of the main plot by foreshadowing the conflict to come. Rather than being a random episode, the duel with the *berserkr* establishes the themes that set in motion the plot of the second generation and lead to Gísli's outlawry.

Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar has two episodes dealing with *berserkir*. The first one occurs when Grettir is staying with Þorfinnr in Norway. Two *berserkir*, leading ten others, attack Þorfinnr's farm while he and his men are away celebrating Yule. The *berserkir* are outlaws, and they target Þorfinnr's family, consisting of a wife and daughter, seeking revenge. Grettir trumps the *berserkir* by outsmarting them. Grettir acts friendly towards the *berserkir* and gets them to drop their guards until he is able to trap them in a shed and fetch weapons to defeat them with. Defeating the *berserkir* and defending his family puts Grettir in good terms with Þorfinnr, who had been rather cold to Grettir up to that point.

[114] Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 284.
[115] Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 285.

The second *berserkr* episode occurs later on in the saga while Grettir is staying with the farmer Einarr. A *berserkr* shows up and challenges Einarr to a duel for his daughter. While still on horseback, the *berserkr* follows some of the traits stereotypically attributed to them, such as howling and biting the rim of his shield. Seeing this, Grettir kicks the shield deeper into the *berserkr's* mouth splitting his jaw. He then drags him from his horse and beheads him. Adding insult to injury, Grettir composes stanzas about the confrontation.

Blaney correctly points out that while in both these scenes *berserkir* make an attempt to have their way with the women of a farm where the hero is a guest, both scenes deviate from the template which he outlines in the quote above. Neither incident contains a formal duel.[116] Grettir also never marries the women that he rescues. More importantly, these two encounters with *berserkir* play into the larger theme in the saga of Grettir being at odds with society but excelling when opposed to supernatural beings.[117] Although Grettir can never seem to fit seamlessly into Icelandic or Norwegian society, he is able to put an end to society's supernatural threats better than anyone else. His conflicts with *berserkir* fall well in line with his battles against *draugar* such as Glámr and Kárr the old. The way he dispatches the *berserkir* is also very telling. Blaney states that Grettir's method of killing a *berserkr* by kicking his shield into his mouth is, as far as he knows, a unique way to dispatch an unwelcome suitor, and it allows Grettir to show that he is not only strong but also clever and resourceful.[118] These *berserkir* episodes are not merely isolated incidents placed there for entertainment's sake, but rather play into one of the major themes of Grettir's life as retold in the saga.

The last *Íslendingasaga* that Blaney breaks down is *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*. The unwelcome suitor episodes in this saga are particularly intricate. The first one occurs when Egill and his eleven companions stay as guests with Friðgeirr, the nephew of Egill's best friend Arinbjǫrn. Noticing that the household lacks cheer, Egill inquires about the mood. He is told that a *berserkr* named Ljótr has challenged Friðgeirr to a duel over his sister. Egill, finding Friðgeirr to be too small and inexperienced, offers to take his place in the fight against Ljótr. Egill handedly defeats the *berserkr*, and as Blaney points out, aside from Egill not marrying the young woman

[116] Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 286.
[117] Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 287.
[118] Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 288.

that he defends, this episode matches up with the basic structure of the unwanted suitor theme. Egill is heroic in his defense of Friðgeirr and his sister.

The very next chapter of *Egils saga* has another duel, and a much less heroic side of Egill. This time Egill is the challenger, and he wants to fight a man named Atli over property that belonged to Egill's father in-law. During the fight Egill strikes Atli with his sword to no avail because the blade of his sword has been dulled by Atli. After his weapon fails him, Egill rips out Atli's throat with his teeth. Neither Egill nor Atli is ever called a *berserkr* in the saga, but during this duel both men show *berserkr* qualities, Atli the dulling of his enemy's weapon possibly by using his evil eye, Egill through his animalistic savagery.

These two duels placed side by side in the saga highlight the two sides of Egill's nature. During the first duel we see Egill being courageous, loyal, and generous to his friends, while during the second duel we see his greed in staking a claim to property in Norway, where he cannot reside, and his animalistic, "werewolfish, berserk nature."[119] These sets of qualities are seen present in Egill's family throughout the saga. This is first seen in the sons of Kveld-Úlfr, Þórólfr and Skalla-Grímr. Þórólfr was a handsome, noble, and popular man, while Skalla-Grímr was ugly and, like his father, showed animal warrior tendencies. When Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr avenge Þórólfr's death, they are said to have *hamask* in their fighting, implying an animal rage not unlike *berserksgangr*. *Berserkir* are said to become incredibly weak after undergoing *berserksgangr,* and likewise Kveld-Úlfr takes to his bed in weariness after this fight. Skalla-Grímr also has another episode in which his fit of rage is turned on Egill and a friend.

The fact that there are only two dueling scenes in *Egils saga* and the fact that they occur in successive chapters suggests that there is a special relationship between the episodes that the author is drawing attention to.[120] Throughout the saga we are presented with scenes that highlight the contrastive nature of Egill's character. In the first duel Egill takes the place of another in order to fight a *berserkr,* as fits the trope. In the second duel it is Egill himself who issues the challenge against a man who is never called a *berserkr,* and Egill himself shows *berserkr* tendencies. Placing these two scenes side by side allows for a clear illustration of both of Egill's sides, the noble and

[119] Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 289.
[120] Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 290.

the dark. The duels are not operating as isolated incidents but rather play into the larger themes of Egill's conflicting nature and the animal warrior traits that run in his family.

Blaney contrasts these three *Íslendingasögur* with the *fornaldarsaga Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*. In this saga we are presented with a barer version of the unwelcome suitor motif. Blaney describes this late saga as the type where individuals are characterized in a black and white manner; "The hero seldom has any flaws, the villain hardly ever any redeeming qualities."[121] In the early chapters a monstrous man named Hárekr challenges a king to a duel for his daughter. The daughter sends a message to Víkingr promising to marry him if he rescues her. Víkingr is equipped with a special sword by his father, the only weapon that can harm Hárekr. During the duel Víkingr severs Hárekr in half burying the sword in the ground down to the hilt.[122] Víkingr postpones his marriage for three years, and spends much of this time rescuing his bride to be again from Hárekr's family.

The basic elements of the unwelcome suitor motif outlined by Blaney are all present, however they are exaggerated. We are not just told that Hárekr is invulnerable to weapons, the saga also says that he went bald by age seven and that his head was hard as steel. Víkingr not only kills Hárekr, he cuts him completely in half with a blow that even buries his sword to the hilt in the ground. Blaney suggests that these exaggerations are added for the entertainment of the audience, and that rather than awe or fear they provoke laughter. More importantly, although the unwelcome suitor motif drives the early chapters of the saga, it does nothing to build a deeper understanding of Víkingr as a character; instead "he remains a hollow stereotype."[123] The motif is embellished showing a certain artistry, but one that acts only on the individual scene at hand and does not drive any deeper theme of the saga. The *berserkr* has by this point become a stereotyped plot device.

This change on the perspective of *berserkr* from a versatile character that could be a hero (as in *Snorra Edda*, and to an extent *Egils saga*) to the flat trouble makers seen in *Hrólfs saga* or *Grettis saga* seems to have in large part been due to influence from continental romances. The scene of the first duel from *Egils saga* described above appears to be a borrowing from the late

[121] Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 282.
[122] Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 283.
[123] Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 283.

twelfth century chivalric romance *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion* by Chrétien de Troyes.[124] Yvain finds himself as a guest in the house of the sister of his good friend Gawain (Gawain here matching the role of Arinbjǫrn in *Egils saga*). Yvain notices the lack of cheer in the household, and before leaving he enquires about it. He is told that a giant called Harpin will attack unless the brother of the household's daughter defeats him in a duel (Harpin here matching Ljótr). Finding that the brother is not up to the task, Yvain takes his place in the duel.

Blaney argues that the unwelcome suitor motif was already present in Iceland, and that the similarities between the Harpin episode in *Yvain* and the Ljótr episode in *Egils saga* are only coincidental.[125] However the presence of native parallels does not disprove the possibility of borrowing. In fact, if a motif is already current in a society, it would make borrowing that much easier since the author would be working with material that is already familiar to his audience. We must also consider the fact that *Egils saga* contains other allusions to foreign texts, including the *Bible*, both in this chapter and elsewhere in the saga.[126] There is further evidence for chivalric borrowings in *Egils saga*. After the Head-ransom episode, Egill begins to take on the role of a royal emissary. As Torfi states, "The saga seems to be presenting the skald Egill as a royal retainer… giving him a position parallel to that of the knight in royal service in the 12th-century romances."[127] Earlier in the saga the author had already commented on how skalds sat closest to King Haraldr hárfagri in the hall much like knights in the Arthurian romances.

If indeed the episode with Ljótr in *Egils saga* is a borrowing from *Yvain*, then an explanation is needed as to why the challenger went from a giant in *Yvain* to a *berserkr* in *Egils saga*. A very simple and satisfactory explanation to this issue comes again from familiarity. In the medieval Icelandic imagination, the threat of a *berserkr* was simply more realistic. We must remember that *berserkir* had a presence in both law and historical texts. As Ármann Jakobsson said to me, a story containing trolls would not seem scary to a modern audience, but if the same story were told using aliens it would likely resonate better with today's audiences.[128] Trolls simply no longer hold the place in the imaginations of most people today that they once did. Aliens, on the other hand, even for those who do not believe in them, can still satisfy the role of the monstrous

[124] Torfi, "Writing Strategies," 38.
[125] Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 292.
[126] Torfi, "Writing Strategies," 39.
[127] Torfi, "Writing Strategies," 40.
[128] This was discussed in a conversation during the New Chaucer Society Congress in Reykjavik, July 2014.

and the unknown in a narrative. In much the same way, a *berserkr* would have resonated better in Iceland in roles where a giant might have been used in the continent. Given that there was likely already a native tradition of *berserkir* as unwelcome suitors in Iceland, it would certainly have been easy to borrow scenes such as the one from *Yvain* and simply replace the monstrous suitors with *berserkir*.

Specific cases of continental influence such as the one in *Egils saga* can also be found in the early *fornaldarsögur*. One example is in the scene from *Vǫlsunga saga* described above in chapter two where Sigmundr heals Sinfjǫtli using a leaf. In the lai *Eliduc*, by Marie de France, a young girl falls into a terminal faint when she hears false reports of the death of Eliduc. A weasel that comes into the chapel where the girl lay is killed by the valet who was present. Shortly thereafter the mate of the weasel comes in, and finding that his mate is dead, searches for a flower that revives the dead weasel. Having seen the weasels do this, the people present take the flower from the weasels and use it to revive the girl. In *Vǫlsunga saga* Sigmundr only receives the leaf that he uses to revive Sinfjǫtli after seeing a weasel use a leaf to revive a fellow weasel that it had injured in the throat. Given that the healing by use of a leaf is unique to *Vǫlsunga saga* in the Icelandic context, and the parallels with the weasels, we must assume that this is a borrowing from the earlier continental lai.[129] The lais of Marie de France are found in the Norse tongue in *Strengleikar*, a collection including eleven of the twelve lais found in the manuscript Harley 978, and ten similar pieces coming from other sources.[130] Although *Eliduc* is omitted from *Strengleikar*, this episode from *Vǫlsunga saga* suggests that the story was known nonetheless. Clover sees this as evidence that *Eliduc* was likely in circulation independently in the Norse tongue. What certainly seems clear is that continental influence can be found across saga genres from a very early point.

If *Eliduc* was known to the author of *Vǫlsunga saga* then it seems logical that *Bisclaveret*, a lai by Marie de France concerning a werewolf, would also have be known to him. The physical shape changing that Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli undergo could be due to influence from the continental lai. Despite that, the fact that the leaf used to revive Sinfjǫtli comes from a raven, Óðinn's bird, means that we should not discredit the traces of an initiation ritual that Schjødt points out. What this shows is the versatility of animal traditions in medieval Icelandic literature. The saga author

[129] Carol Clover, "*Vǫlsunga saga* and the Missing Lai of Marie de France," in *Sagnaskemtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson*, ed. Rudolf Simek et al. (Vienna: Hermann Böhlaus Nachf, 1986), 83.
[130] Clover, "*Vǫlsunga saga* and the Missing Lai of Marie de France," 79.

is able to seamlessly incorporate a foreign motif into the animal warrior tradition. This versatility is even more evident in *Hrólfs saga kraka* where folklore and continental motifs are numerous, but native animal traditions are still preserved.

Hrólfs saga is by no means a simple saga to assign to a genre, but there can be no denying its many chivalric elements. As Ármann Jakobsson points out, although the style of *Hrólfs saga* is very heterogeneous, the chivalric elements in it are abundant.[131] Splendors of castles are described, and a florid language is used. Courtly words such as *riddari* (knight) are commonly employed, as can be seen in the lengthy passage of dialogue between Hjalti and Bǫðvarr at the end of the saga in the scene corresponding to the *Bjarkamál*. Ármann points out that the long dialogue in this passage is reminiscent of *Karlamagnús saga* and *Þiðreks saga* showing that *Hrólfs saga* is, "no less courtly than several of the translated Arthurian romances, which are… more colloquial than the later indigenous romances."[132] *Hrólfs saga kraka* is most often called a legendary saga, largely due to its material dealing with the heroic. However there are other *fornaldarsögur* that do not share the courtly vocabulary of Hrólfs saga.

The very structure of Hrólfs saga is heterogeneous. The early chapters of the saga concern themselves with the family of the eponymous hero, much like *Egils saga*. However when the saga reaches the point of Hrólfr's adulthood, the focus shifts from him to his companions. We are given the backstory of several of Hrólfr's champions up to the point that they reach his hall; Bǫðvarr bjarki again features prominently here. This cyclic composition allows the champions of the king to share the limelight with him, as is done in the Arthurian romances and the translated sagas mentioned above.[133] Once the champions are introduced, the saga continues to follow individual strands or *þættir*. Each adventure functions like a standalone episode, not unlike those of a wandering chivalric knight; again Bǫðvarr's journey to Hleiðargarðr comes to mind. The saga does not function as a whole in the Aristotelian sense, but rather consists of several strands that "are interlaced into a single narrative which is characterized by amplification."[134] In this sense it very much resembles courtly romances.

[131] Ármann, "Le Roi Chevalier," 145.
[132] Ármann, "Le Roi Chevalier," 146.
[133] Ármann, "Le Roi Chevalier," 146.
[134] Ármann, "Le Roi Chevalier," 147.

The setting of *Hrólfs saga* is chivalric. Much like King Arthur, King Hrólfr's story is based on historical tradition (whether or not they really existed, they were perceived as historical people by the medieval audience). In these works of literary fiction, kings like Arthur, Charlemagne, Theoderic of Verona, and Hrólfr kraki are transferred to a chivalric court setting.[135] This makes the presence of *berserkir* troublesome. As we saw with the borrowing from *Yvain* in *Egils saga*, *berserkir* could easily take on the role of chivalric villains. By the time that *Hrólfs saga* reached the form in which we have it today, *berserkir* were very much type casted into this villainous role. A *berserkr's* purpose was now to allow the hero of the story to prove his merit, much like Yvain did against the giant Harpin. In a chivalric court, there was no place for a hero that was a *berserkr*. Bǫðvarr and his fellow champions now had to prove themselves against the very beings that they themselves had been in the earlier tradition. As soon as he first meets them, Bǫðvarr fights and vanquishes King Hrólfr's *berserkir*. Ármann says:

> When Bǫðvarr bjarki enters the court of King Hrólfr, the mood, dominated by vulgar berserks, is rather tense; relics from the past, they wander around in the hall demanding that people admit their own inferiority. Bǫðvarr is a warrior of a different kind… a benefactor of the small… He is a new type of warrior—a chivalric knight—and after he overwhelms the berserks, the court more resembles that described in Arthurian romance.[136]

Bǫðvarr continues to be the foremost of Hrólfr's champions, and the saga author allows him to continue fitting that role, but his prowess can no longer be attributed to his former *berserkr* nature. Although he was once the type-specimen of the *berserkr* animal-warrior tradition, in *Hrólfs saga* Bǫðvarr is firmly connected to the animal-double tradition. Rather than abandoning Bǫðvarr's link to animal traditions, the saga author introduces the bear episode thereby allowing Bǫðvarr to fit comfortably in the new chivalric setting without diminishing his magnificence.

[135] Ármann, "Le Roi Chevalier," 148.
[136] Ármann, "Le Roi Chevaleier," 149.

Conclusion

As I have shown, the usage of animal motifs in medieval Icelandic literature was abundant. Throughout the centuries the animal-warrior tradition added color to both heroes and villains in Old Norse legends. Animal-double traditions ornamented the stories of both gods and mortals. Even within a firmly Christian context, animal traditions could allow a Christian hero like Njáll to know when danger was coming. The close relation between these resilient animal traditions gave them the versatility that would allow them to adapt to various scenarios as the example of Bǫðvarr bjarki illustrates.

A careful reading of the primary sources mentioning Bǫðvarr clearly shows, both he and the other champions of King Hrólfr kraki were traditionally *berserkir*. Although *Snorra Edda* is our only surviving source to explicitly state so, traces of evidence from this tradition can be found across all of the primary sources that have come down to us. Like *berserkir*, Hrólfr's champions are twelve in number. They are reputed to never flee fire or iron, the very things that *berserkir* are famously invulnerable against. *Berserkir* are Odinic warriors and the fate of Bǫðvarr and Hrólfr's other champions is always intricately tied to Óðinn across the primary sources. Whether they scorn Óðinn's gifts as in *Skjǫldunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, or he is only mentioned during the final battle like in the *Gesta Danorum*, the king of the gods always seems to play a role in the fall of these mighty warriors.

Once the story of Hrólfr kraki and his famous champions was transferred to a chivalric courtly setting, their status as *berserkir* had to be done away with. By the time that *Hrólfs saga kraka* reached its current form, *berserkir* had been reduced to stereotyped villains. There was no place for an animalistic frenzied warrior in a chivalric court. *Berserkir* were better suited to the role of obstacles the hero would conquer, like the giant Harpin, than the role of heroes themselves. Although Hrólfr's champions remained twelve and fled neither fire nor iron, in the courtly setting of *Hrólfs saga* they became the vanquishers of *berserkir* rather than *berserkir* themselves.

Despite no longer having Bǫðvarr and his fellow champions be *berserkir*, the author of *Hrólfs saga* did not abandon the theme of animal traditions but rather embellished it. By the late fourteenth century several animal traditions in Icelandic literature were being reshaped. The fluid forms of animal doubles, whether guardian spirits like *fylgja* or physical shape changing like

hamskipti presented the author with options to draw from when amplifying Bǫðvarr's history within animal traditions. By introducing the backstory of Bǫðvarr's parents Bjǫrn and Bera, and by tying in the Bear's Son motif, the author of *Hrólfs saga* further strengthened Bǫðvarr bjarki's pre-existing connection to the fearsome beast.

The fact that King Hrólfr and most of his champions were asleep when Hjǫrvarðr sprung his ambush in Hleiðargarðr presented the author with another opportunity. Tradition always held that Hjalti would attempt to waken Bǫðvarr during the final battle. Since *fylgjur* are associated with dreams, and taking on a *hamr* (shape-shifting) would leave the user in a sleep like state, the author of the saga could attribute to Bǫðvarr a bear shape in which he would defend the king before being woken up by Hjalti. Fighting in bear form is not out of place in *Hrólfs saga kraka* given its many folktale elements and brushes with the fantastic. Attributing this bear form to him allowed the saga author to further raise the position and esteem of Bǫðvarr bjarki since we are told that the battle was nearly decided in their favor before Hjalti disturbed him.[137] The introduction of the bear episode in *Hrólfs saga kraka* allows for the presence of an animal-warrior through the use of an animal-double without disturbing the courtly environment in which the saga is set. By adapting the bear scene into the saga, the author demonstrates the versatility of animal traditions allowing the resilient motifs to live on in another incarnation of Bǫðvarr bjarki's tale.

[137] Slay, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 119.

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