ANATOLY LIBERMAN

In Prayer and Laughter

Essays on Medieval Scandinavian and Germanic Mythology, Literature, and Culture

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Liberman, Anatoly
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Chapter 3

Óðinn's Berserks in Myth and Human Berserks in Reality

The Old Icelandic word *berserkr* (plural *berserkir*) has made its way into many European languages. In English dictionaries, it appears as *berserker,* but below I will be using the Icelandic form without final *r* and the plural *berserks.* Berserks are mentioned for the first time by the skald Þorbjǫrn Hornklofi in a poem commemorating Harald Fairhair's victory in the battle of Hafrsfjǫrðr ca. 872. These are the relevant lines: "Grenioðo berserk*ir* / guðr v*ar* þeim a sinom / emioðo úlfheðn*ar* / ok ísarn glumdo" (*NIS* I:25–26, lines 5–8 of strophe 8, 'the berserks roared, / the battle was in full swing, / the wolfskins howled / and shook the irons').

The skalds, who, unlike the singers of epic lays, described contemporary events, embellished the truth only within limits, and for this reason their poetry has always been treated as a reliable source of information. Unfortunately, we learn nothing from Þorbjǫrn about the berserks except that they roared. The wolfskins (or wolf-coats) behaved in a similar way: they howled; both the berserks and the wolfskins were warriors able to make a lot of noise while fighting. From the text it is even impossible to tell whether they belonged to the same (and then whose?) army and whether *grenioðo berserkir* is a poetic synonym of *emioðo úlfheðnar,* in which case *berserkir* means the same as *úlfheðnar.*

Compounding was a productive way of word formation in the Old Germanic languages. Þorbjǫrn may have coined the noun *berserkr* himself, but in view of its later popularity this is unlikely. In the eddic lays, *berserkr* occurs only two times

and only with reference to the heroes of old. In *Hárbarðslióð*, 37[1–2], Þórr boasts of having fought *brúðir berserkia* 'berserks' brides'. These words gave rise to the idea that women could also 'go berserk'. Even Grøn 1929:300 thought so, but the other interpretation, according to which *brúðir berserkja* is a kenning for 'giantesses', deserves more credence.

The next piece of evidence on berserks comes from Snorri. In *Heimskringla*, Chapter 6, he describes Óðinn's skills. The last lines of the chapter run as follows (quoted from Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson's edition, 1941:25–26):

> "Óðinn kunni svá gera, at í orrustu urðu óvinir hans blindir eða daufir eða óttafullir en vápn þeira bitu eigi heldr en vendir, en hans menn fóru brynjulausir og váru galnir sem hundar eða vargar, bitu í skjǫldu sína, váru sterkir sem birnir eða griðungar. Þeir drápu mannfólkið en eldr né járn orti á þá. Þat er kallaðr berserksgangr." ('Óðinn could cause his enemies to be blind or deaf or fearful in battle, and he could cause their swords to cut no better than wands. His men fought without armor and acted like mad dogs or wolves. They bit their shields and were strong as bears or bulls. They killed people, and neither fire nor iron did them any harm. This is called berserk rage [= going berserk].')

Finally, the sagas, recorded, like *Heimskringla,* in the thirteenth century, tell numerous stories about berserks. In the legendary sagas, berserks are the choicest warriors, kings' bodyguard (*Hrólfs saga kraka* is an especially noteworthy example: see the discussion in Olrik 1903:201–222), but elsewhere they appear as marauders. Most episodes have identical 'morphology'. Around Christmas, a big strong man, often with eleven companions, comes uninvited to a farm, ready to take away as many valuables as possible and force the women to cohabitation. If the farmer is at home, he is sick or weak and is unable to drive away intruders. But usually he is away in a distant province of Norway. The chief berserk (and the visitors are berserks) is eager to prove his right in a duel with anyone who will risk to fight him. A brave Icelander happens to be visiting at this time and either accepts the bandit's challenge or outsmarts the gang. The result is the same: all the miscreants are killed. At this juncture, the farmer returns and lavishes praise and gifts on the rescuer of his family's honor and property. The deed is recounted in a *vísa* and becomes famous.

Berserks tolerate no resistance. Every attempt to oppose them makes them furious. They begin to howl, foam at the mouth, and bite their shields. As a rule, swords and fire can do them no harm, though a Christian missionary can break

the spell laid on fire (berserks are pagan). Luckily, they live up to the formula of their magical invulnerability: unafraid of swords and flames, they can be cudgeled to death. Blaney followed Güntert 1912 and Huchting-Gminder 1933, examined this material in a dissertation (1972), and summarized his findings in a 1982 article. A broader, and therefore less focused, account of berserks in the extant sources is Beard 1978. Ninck 1935:34–67 also offered a useful survey of the saga material.

Research into the berserk question developed along two main lines: religious (association with Óðinn) and psychological (the origin and symptoms of the rage); they trace to the obscurity in which the meaning of the word *berserkr* is enveloped. The element *-serkr* means 'shirt', while *ber-* can be understood as 'bear' or as 'bare'. The whole comes out as either 'bearshirt' or 'bareshirt'. Those who favor the first interpretation connect berserks with the well-attested bear cult. Supporters of the bareshirt theory stress the role of nudity in Germanic warfare. Those lines occasionally cross, because nudity was also endowed with religious significance and because, according to Snorri, berserks were strong as bears and fought without armor.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, students of Scandinavian mythology did not doubt that *berserkr* means 'bareshirt' (see a typical high-flown description of the 'Wuotan-Rudra' army in Leo 1853:61). However, as early as 1847 even amateurs, such as C. F., rambling among Celtic and Germanic words, suggested that it was "very unlikely… that the inhabitants of those northern climes should go to battle naked—for shirts in our acceptation of the term they certainly had not." When Sveinbjörn Egilsson (*LP*) expressed his preference for 'bearshirt', most scholars followed him. It took over seventy years for the pendulum to swing again in the opposite direction. In 1932 Erik Noreen offered a near complete sur-vey of the attempts to etymologize *berserkr* and argued for 'bareshirt'. Since then opinions have been divided. For example, Hans Kuhn 1949:107 and 1968: 222, von See 1961:129–135, and McCone 1987:106, to mention the authors of particularly influential works, supported Noreen, while Huchting-Gminder 1933: 239, Lid 1937:23, and Breen 1997:8, note, cont. on p. 9 sided with Höfler (see more about him below), who insisted all his life that *ber-* means 'bear'. I will not go into a detailed discussion of Breen's argument (p. 9) but note that *berserksgangr* is not parallel to *Wolfgang* or *Gangulf,* for **bergangr* has not been attested; 'going' like a berserk is quite different from 'going' like a wolf. The recent find of a red tunic with a wedge sown in does not tip the scale in this discussion (Näsström 2006:120).

Since *úlfheðnar* (plural) is a bahuvrihi compound of the *Redcap* type, it is tempting to take *berserkir* in Þorbjǫrn's verse for another bahuvrihi, namely

'bearshirts'. As already mentioned, the parallelism between *grenioðo berserkir* and *emioðo úlfheðnar* is obvious, but it is unclear how far it goes. The troublesome thing is that **berr* 'bear' did not occur in Old Icelandic outside the compound *berfjall* 'bearskin' (cf. Kommentar 3, 169–170), so that *berserkr* must be either a partial borrowing of German *Bärenhaut* or a relic of ancient usage. However, *berserkr* does not turn up in runic inscriptions, and there is no certainty that Þorbjǫrn knew the word *berfjall* or some other word(s) like it that would have allowed him to associate berserks with bears. When we hear the phrase *bare one's teeth,* we do not begin to think of bears, even though the gesture may signify anger.

Contrary to **berr,* the nouns *bera* 'female bear' and *bersi, bessi / bassi* 'bear' have been recorded in Old Icelandic. *Ber-* is the historic stem of *bjǫrn (< *bernu-); bessi* is from **bersi.* Their existence does not prove that **berr* was also current in early Scandinavian. From the semantic point of view *úlfheðinn* 'wolfskin' is not an exact counterpart of *berserkr,* because wolves have skins, whereas bears do not wear shirts. *Serkr* 'timber' in addition to 'shirt', designated a certain number of skins (whence the Russian numeral *sorok* 'forty'), but we do not know when *serkr,* a technical term of fur trade, was coined. If it is contemporaneous with the Viking age, the ancient bahuvrihi *berserkr* 'bearskin' can hardly be posited. The main difficulty with *berserkr* 'bareshirt' is that it presupposes the unrecorded substantivized adjective **berserks* 'bareshirted'; however, compound adjectives of this type were rather numerous. Although the bearshirt hypothesis is hard to disprove, it cannot serve as a solid foundation of any theory of berserks. Of importance is also the following consideration. The word *berserkr* must have been ambiguous for centuries. As noted, I gravitate toward the theory that its original meaning was 'bare-shirt'. But folk etymology may have suggested understanding 'bare-shirt' as 'bear-shirt', and, once it began to compete with 'bare-shirt' (assuming that it did), it could serve as the foundation of *Bjǫrn-* in the names of real and fictional berserks (cf. Breen 1997:14).

Berserks attract historians of religion because of Snorri's reference to them as Óðinn's men. Lily Weiser 1927:43–85 and Otto Höfler 1934:269–275, 324–329 looked on Óðinn's retinue, whose activities they took for granted, as one of many Germanic secret unions. The wild hunt (a procession of dead bodies), military bands like Jómsvíkingar, fallen warriors fighting and feasting in Valhǫll (*einherjar*), groups of adolescents preparing for initiation, and even such couples as Sigmundr and his son Sinfjǫtli from *Vǫlsunga saga* were cited in Weiser's and Höfler's books along with berserks as examples of such male unions. Their ideas are known far beyond the circle of Scandinavian scholars (cf. Ivantchik 2005:188). According to Höfler, Óðinn's disparate functions stem from his role as leader of a union, and

under his pen the word *union* became almost a synonym for *society.* I expressed my skeptical attitude toward Höfler's idea while discussing Óðinn's role in the wild hunt (Chapter 1, above) and will here confine myself to a few remarks. The *einherjar* were not a union, and nothing in their activity was secret. The wild hunt, known only from folklore, need not have had its roots in the ancient organization of Germanic tribes, and a fast flying procession of corpses, even with a leader at their head, is not a cultic league. Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli roam the woods as wolves after, not before, the youngster's initiation. No secrecy surrounded berserks either. In the legendary sagas, they are elite troops, and in the family sagas they are represented as plundering, raping gangs.

The first to bring forward these considerations was von der Leyen 1935:164–165, who even risked the conjecture that Höfler had been partly inspired by the latest events in Germany (secret unions, the *Führer,* and so on). Von der Leyen's review and Höfler's long-winded but unconvincing rejoinder (1936) are now forgotten. Höfler 1936:48 denied the influence of 'the latest events' on his conception, but everybody in Germanistik was aware of his political views. Mees 2003:42–43 wrote: "Höfler's professional thesis *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (1934) is quite clearly a manifestation of the *völkisch* enterprise championed by National Socialist academics in the German university system at the time (in the 1930s his publisher, Diesterweg's, was a leading source of *völkisch* antiquarian works)…. And although Höfler was subsequently declaimed as a leading Nazi Germanist, he did not substantially change his approach to the interpretation of ancient sources when most of the rest of his peers sheepishly purged their writings of overtly fascistic leanings after the war." Höfler was unrepentant; yet in his 1976 contribution to the *RGA*[2] nothing is said about berserks as a secret cultic union, though the Óðinn connection is made much of, and the word *Verband* 'union' occurs twice in the entry.

It may be useful to separate two alleged characteristics of berserks: their participation in (secret) unions and their religious significance. Peuckert 1957:93–100 rejected both, while Eliade 1961:142–147 (not surprisingly) and Hornung 1968: 270–271 followed Höfler. Closs 1968:301 accepted berserks' *bündische Grundlage* (base in a union organization) but dissociated them from religion. He pointed out that in their aggression they do not merge with the transcendental and that their ability to act like and turn into wild beasts (the latter ability is exemplified by Bǫðvarr Bjarki, who fought Hrólf's enemies in the shape of a bear while his human body slept) is incompatible with a shaman's merger with the spirit of an animal as it is known from northern Asian shamanism. Compare it with what is said about shamanism in Chapter 1.

However, for objectivity's sake I will quote a passage from a book by Ralph Metzner 1994:76–77:

> "In her paper 'The Transformed Berserk', Jungian scholar Marie-Louise von Franz suggested that the berserker trance was a kind of visionary state, an out-of-body experience in which the soul of the warrior, sometimes in animal form, raged in battle, while the physical body lay as if asleep. This would be comparable to what shamans and some yogi adepts report as combat in *nonordinary reality* or the *spirit world.* There are indications that combat in the spirit world was an aspect of the experience of the berserker warriors, as it is in Eurasian shamanic traditions. Shamanic warriors might have a spirit ally, in animal or humanoid form, who helps them in battle with hostile spirits and also foresees and warns of danger. Such a spirit ally was referred to as *fylgja* in Old Norse and as *fetch* in archaic English. In regard to von Franz's thesis, it is my belief that such out-of-body spirit battles did take place, particularly in the training and preparation of the berserkers and the wolfskins. But there was obviously also actual physical combat, which sometimes took place in a profoundly altered state of consciousness, involving superhuman feats of strength and endurance."

I find nothing in von Franz's article (1988) or in Metzner's commentary that has not been said in some form before and that advances our understanding of berserks or their origin. Reference to *fylgja* and *fetch* strikes me as fanciful. Von Franz (whose article is a translation of a conference paper; I did not consult the German original) was in general not interested in things Scandinavian. She analyzed the vision of the Swiss saint Brother Niklaus of Flüe in Jungian terms. Her pronouncements do not go beyond the following: "For the old German to wear a bearskin means to be a beriserkr [sic]—a berserk" (p. 23). She, naturally, agreed with Jung that World War II was a Wotanic experiment and that the world was preparing for another Wotanic experiment (p. 27). St. Klaus's vision, she says, "is trying to show him… that the spiritual pilgrim and the Beriserkr are both Christ…. The Christ-Berserk of Brother Klaus's vision thus unites irreconcilable opposites, subhuman wildness and Christian spirituality, the rage of the warrior and Christian *agape*—love of mankind" (pp. 23–24). I must admit (not without regret) that I have as much difficulty understanding Jung and the Jungians as I have understanding Steiner and his adherents (see the beginning of the previous chapter). Both say great things but in a language I am unable to comprehend. In

the best-known compendia of Germanic and Scandivanian religion and in the monographs written after the war (for example, Helm 1946, Turville-Petre 1964, and Å. Ström 1975), berserks are not even mentioned. De Vries 1956–1957, I:454–455 was partly supportive of Höfler; his position did not change in the twenty years that separate the first and the second edition of his book. The dictionaries and encyclopedias of the Scandinavian Middle Ages and Scandinavian mythology contain guardedly 'objective' entries on berserks. Höfler's own entry (1976) is a predictable exception.

Berserks' fury has often been equated with religious ecstasy, another subject touched upon in Chapter 1, but, although Þorbjǫrn's wolfskins and berserks howled, not every type of frenzy is of religious origin. Warriors often key themselves up to the highest pitch of excitement. *Furor germanicus* was famous, and so is *furor heroicus* in general (see the examples from Irish and Germanic sources in Henry 1981; Güntert 1912:29–32 believed that the Irish had borrowed their description of battle frenzy from the Scandinavians). Berserks also screamed while fighting. It seems that in trying to understand the nature of berserks no reference to religious ecstasy, be it their own or Óðinn's, is needed. This conclusion is compatible with what I said about *Wut* as the root of Wodan's name: scholars of Germanic religion tend to refer to ecstasy as something self-evident and fraught with meaning. See also p. 455, below.

We now have to answer the question why Snorri decided that berserks were Óðinn's men, that they fought without armor, behaved like wild beasts, were invulnerable, bit their shields, and killed people (what people?). Ever since Mogk 1923 developed his 'novellistic' theory, it has been customary to accuse Snorri of taking great liberties with his material. But a medieval writer's freedom 'to lie' was limited. Snorri interpreted his sources, expanded short cryptic statements, and added comments. However, he would not consciously invent facts or fabricate evidence, and this is why the passage about berserks in *Heimskringla* causes surprise. In his *Prose Edda,* Snorri retold all the tales he knew. Óðinn never appears in it surrounded by berserks. At Baldr's funeral, four berserks were present: it is said that they could not hold fast the steed of the giantess Hyrrokkin; *berserkir* here means 'the strongest warriors'. Snorri's Óðinn, like the Óðinn of old lays, performs his deeds unaided. Occasionally he travels in the company of two other gods. We have to conclude that Snorri did not know any myths of Óðinn's retinue. As pointed out at the end of Chapter 1, Snorri must have used *Historia Norvegiae*, for portraying Óðinn in *Heimskringla,* and, most probably, he borrowed his description of berserks from contemporary folklore. He projected these outcasts and their behavior to the mythological past and assigned them to Óðinn, the supreme war god,

partly perhaps under the influence of legendary tales like *Hrólfs saga kraka.* In myths, berserks did not form Óðinn's bodyguard (nor did he need any).

Even if Snorri erroneously equated the berserks of the family sagas with some mythic warriors, we are left wondering what caused their frenzy, which no one would have mistaken for religious ecstasy. The word *berserkr* developed along the same lines as did the word *víkingr* 'viking': both became terms of abuse. When the activity of the vikings came to an end, professional soldiers lost their occupation and status and degenerated into riffraff preying on farmers. The plundering rabble of the Icelandic sagas is fact, not fiction. The near formulaic nature of the episodes notwithstanding, bands of able-bodied men in their prime, unused to agricultural pursuits and trade, wandered all over Scandinavia and made life of farming communities miserable. Earl Eiríkr Hákonarson outlawed berserks in 1012, as is told in Chapter 19 of *Grettis saga,* and this may have been the reason they migrated to other countries, including Iceland. The Icelandic *Jus Ecclesiasticum* (1123) and the law code *Grágás* made berserks subject to the lesser outlawry.

Perhaps these vagrant bullies were smart enough to appropriate a name famous in legend, but *berserkr* may have become slang for 'gang member'. In any case, a berserk described in the sagas traditionally challenged a farmer to a duel, killed him, and robbed the dishonored survivors of their possessions, a behavior uncharacteristic of royal retainers (cf. Kommentar, 132). Three of the Hebrides chessmen found at Uig are shown biting the top rim of their shields. The set is dated to the twelfth century. Most likely, by the time the figures were carved the berserk scare had become part of history and folklore. (See a reproduction of such a chessman in Konstam 2002:119.)

The homeless unmarried men in their prime were not sweet-tempered. Many of them became psychopaths, flying into a rage at the slightest provocation. When thwarted, they immediately lost control of themselves. Shield biting and the rest were part of a well-rehearsed performance, an *effektnummer,* as Axel Olrik called it. Feigning hysteria is a dangerous game; its symptoms become the actor's second nature (Güntert 1912:25-26; Grøn 1929:44–45, 49; Lie 1946:203; Reichborn-Kjennerud 1947:139–150). Grøn stressed the epidemic character of such medieval psychoses as St. Vitus's dance, flagellants' movement, and children's crusades and dwelled on the psychotic nature of the frenzy caused by resistance. He cited several examples of this disease transmitted from father to son (Kvedulfr–Skallagrímr–Egill is a classic case), and discussed berserks against the background of lycanthropy and beliefs in shape changing, beginning with Ancient Greece.

Other people thought of different explanations of *furor bersercicus*. Saxo Grammaticus, for whom every deviation from the norm was the result of magic, believed

that a trolls' drink caused berserks' rage. In the sagas, no psychotropic drugs are mentioned. But in 1784 Samuel Ödman referred to the experience of some East Siberian peoples and suggested that berserks used a poisonous mushroom, *fly agaric,* to arouse themselves. Since no evidence supports this hypothesis, it could be expected to die at once, but this did not happen. Grøn surveyed all the literature on berserks and mushrooms and dealt Ödman's theory a strong blow. Yet it lives on. Its supporters are Fabing 1956 and Leuner 1970:280–282. Huchting-Gminder 1933:239–240 and especially Reichborn-Kjennerud 1947:150 dismissed mushrooms as nonsense, though the latter believed that intoxication played a role in berserks' fury. One can only repeat that running amuck and going mad after eating mushrooms or smoking hashish are striking parallels to *berserksgangr,* but no source mentions alcohol or drugs as causing berserks' frenzy. Further discussion of berserk mycology and related issues looks like a waste of time.

As stated above, the uncertainty of the meaning of the word *berserkr* (bearshirt? bareshirt?) resulted in two lines of research: berserks have been examined in connection with the cult of the bear and with the nudity of Germanic warriors. In Scandinavia, the Eurasian cult of the bear is mainly known from medieval literature and folklore; the evidence of burials is not unambiguous (Petré 1980; Å. Ström 1980). Old Germanic names like *Björn* also testify to the veneration of animals (this material has been investigated in minute detail: see Breen 1997 and the literature cited there). The relevance of all such facts for understanding berserks depends on whether *berserkr* means 'bearshirt'. Assuming that this is a correct gloss (not a strong assumption!), it should still be admitted that no one would be able to fight with a hot and heavy skin on one's shoulder (E. Noreen 1932:251–252). However, there is a consensus that men fought only with animal masks on (Höfler 1940:110–120; 1976:299; G. Müller 1967:200). Given this explanation, *berserkr* turns into 'one wearing a bear mask', hence 'bear' and, by implication, 'bearshirt'. This semantic string is not improbable but less than fully persuasive. Among 169 names of Óðinn, only two (*Bjarki* and *Björn*) mean 'bear' (Falk 1924:4); neither is prominent in his mythology.

We have every reason to take Tacitus's *more patrio nudis corporibus* at face value, but going to battle without coats of mail, in one's 'bare shirt', is not the same as fighting in the nude, even if Jost's ingenious etymology of OE *orped* 'brave' is correct (1934:81; *orped,* allegedly from *ōr-pad* 'without clothes' and thus 'ready for battle; brave'). Nudity does not seem to supply a clue to the understanding of berserks. Whether bearshirts or bareshirts, Þorbjǫrn's berserks must have fought without armor because they believed in their magical invulnerability or at least in their immunity to 'iron'. This belief survived the heroic age and burst into bloom

in the sagas, in which fire was also said to do berserks no harm. Beard 1981 suggested that the topos of a hero invulnerable to iron and being able to blunt swords does not antedate the first encounters between Germanic tribes and the Romans, since this was the period when the need for a charmed life against iron arose for the first time. By the epoch of Þorbjǫrn, to say nothing of Snorri, the phrase *á þá bitu engi járn* 'no iron could "bite" them' had become a worn-out formula. The berserks of the eleventh and twelfth centuries inherited the verbal paraphernalia of old and spread rumors that they could dull swords with their eye. The sagas swallowed these fantastic details hook, line, and sinker; yet there must have been a grain of truth in the legend: according to Grøn and others, people really may not feel pain in the heat of battle.

With Óðinn, the bear cult, and magical invulnerability out or almost out of the picture, only one religious detail remains to be mentioned. According to the sagas, berserks preferred to attack farms at Christmas. To be sure, in life bandits could strike at any time, but since in the sagas berserks were represented as pagan, they felt particularly unhappy at Yuletide. This is also the season when the Icelandic *huldufólk* 'hidden people' (fairies, elves, and others) become restless and change their abode. Nothing at all follows from the timing of berserks' attacks about their nature or origin.

The study of berserks is based on an unsafe foundation. Serious research competes with wild guesses and cavalier attacks on the subject (cf. Peeters 1957). It may, therefore, be of some use to offer a short conclusion. At the end of the ninth century, some warriors were still called *berserkir* (the word is probably old). They either resembled or were identical with *úlfheðnar* 'wolfcoats'. Both groups roared and howled when they fought. They may have worn animal masks, but this need not be the reason they were called *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar*. Despite the closeness of the words *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar, berserkr* more probably meant 'bareshirt' (= 'fighting without armor') than 'bearshirt' (= 'fighting with a bear mask / bearskin on'). No evidence supports Snorri's statement that ancient berserks were ever thought to be Óðinn's associates. The berserks of the family sagas resembled the berserks of old only in name, and nothing in their behavior can be used for reconstructing the institution of the past. At no time did berserks form unions, and, to become a berserk, no initiation was required. The way from elite troops to gangs can be demonstrated with some confidence. All the rest (cultic leagues, eating poisonous mushrooms, and so forth) is (science) fiction.

A short supplement is in order here. My investigation of berserks began by chance. In 2002 I got a call from the History Channel, where soon after 9/11 a program on untraditional warfare was being put together. The caller asked whether

I could speak on berserks, by all accounts, untraditional fighters. I answered that we had no information on 'original' berserks. However, I agreed to participate in the program and began to read everything on the subject. The more I read, the more involved I felt because I had been putting together my thoughts on Óðinn for years. My reading confirmed my negative attitude toward some of the basic ideas popular in modern religious studies. I could not accept Dumézil's treatment of the Germanic pantheon, observed few traces of Höfler's or Weiser-Höfler's Germanic secret unions, and found the role of initiation in Scandinavian myths exaggerated; I also refused to classify every deviation from rational behavior with ecstasy. To make matters worse, after nearly half-a-century in linguistics (with a strong structuralist bias) I resisted the attempts to extend the principles of linguistic (especially phonological) structuralism to the rest of the humanities: from geography (as Trubetzkoy suggested) to mythology (in the spirit of Lévi-Strauss and Dumézil). In similar fashion, I have no enthusiasm for discerning syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations in myths (cf. Schjødt 2008:353). May phonologists deal with them. Those ideas had occupied me for decades (see the opening pages of Chapter 1, above); a study of berserks served only as a catalyst without which I may not have offered a full-length contribution to Óðinn's mythology.

I found myself in opposition to several most influential students of Scandinavian myths, though I cannot complain of preaching in the wilderness or having no allies. In 2003 I went to the saga conference in Bonn and gave a talk on berserks. It did not pass unnoticed. The text from the materials of the conference was reprinted in Brazil, and I was asked to contribute to an American Festschrift and to a Moscow miscellany. Since that time I have run into several neutral or sympathetic mentions of my publications and a critical response from J. P. Schjødt 2007. He is an advocate of Dumézil, views Lévi-Strauss's achievement in a positive light, admires Höfler (even though he is ready to detect weaknesses in Weiser's reasoning: see Schjødt 2008:352–353), and bases his theories on the idea of initiation, understood very broadly. Schjødt looks to the cult of the bear as the clue to the nature of berserks. Here everything is a matter of chronology (as always, in dealing with Óðinn, the result depends on where we start). We cannot know whether Snorri and his contemporaries thought of bears when they wrote about berserks. Folk etymology is a powerful factor. Germans tend to believe that squirrels (*Eichhörnchen*) prefer to build nests (they are called dreys) in oaks, and some may even think that those rodents have tiny horns. Be that as it may, squirrels do not favor oaks and are hornless. It is more probable that the original berserks were *bare-shirts* rather than *bear-shirts*—more probable, but not certain.

I would make a clear distinction between the early (legendary) berserks and those described in sagas and not depend on the 'vague' echoes in *Hrólfs saga kraka.* To my mind, Óðinn on a tree is not an initiate (see Chapter 1), and I refuse to equate war bands with *secret* unions (to repeat, I do not see such unions anywhere in early Germanic history). It appears that 'real Óðinn' is the god we know from the *Eddas* and the skalds rather than from *Ynglinga saga*. But having spent the whole of my professional life reconstructing the past, I realize that our most imposing edifices are houses of cards and that in the war of arguments and counterarguments victory is often granted to the weaker warrior. Too bad, we do not know which one of us represents the weaker side, and Óðinn is in no hurry to act.

A Note added in proof

Long after this book was sent to the publisher, I became aware of Samson 2011. Now I have read the book but will quote only DuBois's summary:

> "As Samson outlines in his study's opening chapter, scholarship on the ambiguous and often contentious topic of the berserkir has tended toward opposing extremes (p. 28). On the one hand are 'excessively enthusiastic' scholars who readily combine evidence from differing eras, geographic contexts, and textual traditions to arrive at a unified, transcendent image of a persistent berserkir institution. At the other extreme are 'hypecritical' scholars who emphasize the fragmentary nature of the evidence regarding the berserkir.... Samson aims to situate his analysis between these extremes..." (p. 368)
>
> (Bearshirt or bareshirt?) "Both terms would represent Norse adaptations of the concept of animal-costumed warriors attested more broadly in the Migration era and having ancient Indo-European antecedents" (p. 369).

Chapter 19

The Origin of the Name *Edda*

The history of the book title *Edda* is enveloped in total obscurity, for this word emerged as a byname (nickname). The long list of Icelandic bynames Finnur Jónsson 1907 put together contains weird specimens of ancient slang. Many, if not most of them, have not continued into modern Icelandic in any capacity, and hundreds do not occur except as bynames. They are awaiting the anthropologist who will explain how people sensitive to the smallest insult and ready to kill for an ambiguous verse, put up with unimaginably demeaning soubriquets. Against this background it does not come as a surprise that the meaning and origin of the word *Edda* also remain a mystery.

De Vries (*AEW*) offered an incomplete survey of opinions on *Edda*. The authors of Icelandic etymological dictionaries added nothing to the works of their predecessors. A synopsis of the oldest views on this subject can be found in Studach 1829:V, note. All the attempts to trace the history of *Edda* assume that this name has something to do with either old lore or skaldic poetry, or Oddi, the place where Snorri grew up. But titles like *Grágás, Fagrskinna, Mǫðruvallabók, Flateyjarbók, Hauksbók,* and *Kringla* conceal irreconstructable associations or allusions to the outward appearance of the manuscript, its place of origin, the first word in it, and the like, but never to its content. Nor is *Hungrvaka* a cookbook. (For years I have been wondering whether *Morkinskinna*, a coincidental calque

of OE *þrustfell,* contains a punning reference to the 'rotten' skin once associated with leprosy; see Liberman 2002.)

It was first believed that *Edda* is a variant of *Veda* (so, for example, in Holmboe 1852:120). Long 1883 mentioned this derivation as self-evident (p. 243). In the same year, Guðbrandur Vigfússon [GV] and York Powell brought out *Corpus poeticvm boreale*. In the introduction to volume 1 (pp. XXVI–XXXVII), the history of the name *Edda* is told in great detail, and in 'Excursus 4' to volume 2 (p. 514) a new etymology of *Edda* from *Ertha* 'Terra Mater' of the Teutons is put forward. According to GV, "a western man has learnt a snatch of a High German song on that favourite subject with all Teutons, the *Origin of Mankind and Mother Earth,* from a Southern trader or comrade. ... In this song the word 'Erda' (or *Grandmother Erda*) occurs; he puts it into his own tongue as neatly as he can, and the result is 'Edda'. Or, if he himself did not make the change, the minstrel would have done so, who sung it after him, for the Lay had passed through many Northern mouths before it got written down in our Codex."

This etymology is now cited (if at all) only to show that GV was a poor philologist. Yet he may have borrowed his idea from Jacob Grimm 1841:22, who reconstructed the putative cognates of *Edda* as Go. **izdô* and OHG **erdâ* (cf. his brief comment in Grimm 1878:62, "ëdda [proavia, vielleicht: origo generis? oder summa, auctoritas, acumen als name für die alten dichtungen?]"). But Grimm refrained from identifying the root, while GV took this imprudent step. He could not decide whether *Edda* was a borrowing from German or a cognate of **ertha* and he first said that *dd* in *Edda* was from *zd* (which is wrong, for *r* in *jǫrð* is old, that is, not from *z* by rhotacism). But then he spoke about a snatch of a German song transmitted by a Western man; surely, such a man would not have reproduced *ertha* as *edda*. Heinzel 1885:69 pointed out in his review that GV's etymology is nonsense, and Eiríkr Magnússon [EM] 1896:224–226 destroyed what little was left of it (he does not seem to have read Heinzel). The critics were right, but some of Sophus Bugge's derivations of Scandinavian names are not better, and Bugge was a first-rate philologist.

GV, like Jacob Grimm before him, was inspired by the fact that OI *edda* meant 'ancestress' or 'grandmother'; the word occurs in *Rígsþula*. Rígr visits Ái and Edda, spends three nights in their cottage, and in due time Edda gives birth to Þræll ('slave'), the progenitor of all future slaves by Þír ('bondswoman'). The common noun *ái* has survived into Modern Icelandic ('great-grandfather'), but *edda* has dropped out of the language, and its etymology is unknown. Few people in those days lived to be really old, so that an everyday word for 'great-grandmother' could not have had wide currency (the same holds for 'great-grandfather'). Moreover,

edda has a shadowy existence outside *Rígsþula*. The main question is whether Snorni knew it. Here EM's remarks (1896:226–229) have retained their importance. He quoted and compared the relevant passages in the *Codex regius* and the *Codex Upsaliensis* of the *Prose Edda*. The *Codex regius* contains a list of *heiti* for 'woman', including "sværa heitir vers móðir, amma, þriðja edda, *eiða* heitir móðir." Flanked by *amma* 'grandmother' and *eiða* 'mother', *edda* may mean 'great-grandmother'.

Ái's mate Edda might also be understood as 'great-grandmother'. But in the *Codex Upsaliensis*, the oldest extant manuscript of the *Prose Edda,* the series of appellatives for kinswomen is missing from the list of *ókend heiti* for 'woman', though the manuscript begins with the crucial sentence: "Bok þessi heitir edda. hana hevir saman setta Snorri sturlo sonr" 'This book is called *Edda*; Snorri, son of Sturla, put it together'. The *Codex Upsaliensis* is probably not far removed from the original; on this point opinions do not differ. EM concluded that someone (not necessarily Snorri) who knew the word *edda* 'great-grandmother' and the fact that Snorri's book was called *Edda* would hardly have left out the passage with a comment on *edda*. Snorri, he thought, was not familiar with the noun *edda* 'great-grandmother' and could not have had it in mind when he called his work *Edda*. If the book title does not go back to Snorri, the same argument is valid for the compiler or scribe of the *Codex Upsaliensis*.

The most inventive development of the great-grandmother idea is Hagen's (1904). He offered a detailed overview of earlier scholarship, but did not mention EM's doubts about Snorri's knowledge of the common noun *edda*. His starting point was that Snorri knew it and that he wanted to call his book *(ars) metrica,* "but without actually using the word metrica. And since he did not understand the real etymological meaning of the word, he translated it only after first connecting it with the similar word *matrix,* which is plainly a derivation from the word *mater* 'mother', and which is recognized as meaning 'great-grandmother, urgrossmutter, eltermutter, oldemoder, *edda*" (1904:130–131). In the remaining four pages of the article, he explained how Snorri arrived at such a derivation and how etymological games of the Middle Ages resulted in the production of bizarre words and ideas.

Hagen ignored two difficulties. He did not address the question EM raised, and he assumed that Snorri tried to find an appropriate name for *Skáldskaparmál* and especially for *Háttatal*. But Snorri's *Gylfaginning* is not less important than his guide of the skaldic meters, even though in later times *eddureglur* referred to versification, not to mythology. Only Neckel 1908b noticed Hagen's idea. He expressed his admiration for it and pointed out the specific nature of the

title *Edda: Edda,* so Neckel, is not a title in the same sense as *Guðrúnarkviða, Sverrissaga,* or *Skáldskaparmál;* it is a nickname given for fun, like *Ormr inn langi,* or *Sigrfluga* (King Sverrir's banner). But despite his enthusiasm for Hagen he returned to the great-grandmother theory. In his opinion, Snorri had chosen as his book title the word preserved in *Rígsþula* because the idea of an old mother, *matrix*, matched so aptly the concept of *(ars) poetica.* Written twelve years after EM's paper, Neckel's review contained a sympathetic reference to Jacob Grimm and Müllenhoff but passed by EM's central thesis, namely that Snorri appears to have been ignorant of the word *edda*. Neckel 1908a also devoted an article to the etymology of *edda*, but it does not discuss Snorri's book.

The latest defender of *Edda* 'great-grandmother' was Gutenbrunner 1942. Contrary to Hagen, Gutenbrunner believed that *Edda* had originally served as the title of *Gylfaginning* only, for each of the other two parts of the *Prose Edda* had its own name. Since *Edda* resembles such words as *Eigla, Njála,* and *Grettla,* he suggested that the tales of the gods had once been called *Eddumál* or *Eddusaga, Edda* being an abbreviation of the longer title. This idea is uninviting: *Eigla* appeared as the short (clipped) form of *Egilssaga*, but the alleged abbreviation *Edda* turns out to be indistinguishable from its source *edda*. Also, we have no clue to the prehistory of the name *Edda*; therefore, Gutenbrunner's reconstruction falls to the ground.

The author of another derivation of *Edda* was Árni Magnússon, who knew and rejected the great-grandmother etymology and as early as 1787 traced *Edda* to *óðr* 'wits; poetry'. The semantics of *óðr* is discussed in all works on Óðinn (see Chapter 1 of this book) and is here of interest only insofar as it connects the name of the god who stole the mead of poetry with the name of the first book on the foundations of skaldic art. Árni Magnússon's derivation found its champion in Konráð Gíslason. The few people who still read Konráð Gíslason know how confusing his style is: dozens of outwardly disjointed examples form a loose argument; there is almost no narrative and no culmination. However, it usually pays off to plod through his works, for he was a man of immense erudition and considered no detail insignificant (many of the etymologies in Cl.-V. are probably his). His 1884 article is typical. It begins in medias res with the following observation: "The verb *grenna*, derived from the adjective *granar* 'tenuis', has been glossed as follows" (1884:42). By the middle of the article it becomes clear that he wants to establish the existence of the alternation *ð ~ dd*. Such phonetic niceties naturally did not bother Árni Magnússon, but Konráð Gíslason needed a 'law' to bolster his derivation. Once he had shown, as he hoped, that *grenna* 'satisfy one's appetite' and *greddir* 'having had one's fill' can be related, he addressed the history of the words

stedda 'mare' and *ledda* 'lead plummet of the fishing line', presumably derived from *stóð* 'stud' and *lóð* 'bullet'. With such parallels, *Edda* and *óðr* also appeared to be related.

GV 1885 immediately attacked that etymology. He showed that *ledda* and *lóð* (both designating 'lead', the name of the metal) are late borrowings and that neither of them is derived from the other; the origin of *stedda* is obscure and should therefore be better left alone. As a final thrust of his rejoinder, he proposed the pair *góðr* 'good' ~ *gedda* 'pike' (fish), thus adding a gratuitous insult to injury. With the analogs s*tedda ~ stóð, ledda ~ lóð* gone, the bottom was knocked out of the entire argument. Gering also found Konráð Gíslason's derivation unacceptable. In his annotations to the bibliography of Scandinavian philology for 1884, he summarized GV's letter and added his own comment: "The new explanation is invalidated by the fact that as a skaldic term *óðr* is rarely used. Under certain circumstances, μανία could also mean 'poetic ecstasy', but μαντική ['prophetic gift'] never means 'poetics'"(Löschhorn and Gering 1885:152). EM 1896:230–232 too subjected Konráð Gíslason to devastating criticism. Later, Hagen 1904: 127–129 devoted some space to the refutation of the *óðr-edda* etymology; his objections were valid but not new.

Compromised ideas tend to be indestructible. The great-grandmother etymology of *Edda* had a distinguished supporter (Gutenbrunner) in 1942. The reason for its longevity is clear: *edda* is the only link between *Edda* and the rest of Old Icelandic vocabulary. The same holds for the *óðr–Edda* etymology. Mogk 1893:77, who endorsed it, said that both Magnusen and Müller had derived *Edda* from *óðr* (I could not find the relevant passage in Magnusen's books; see P. Müller 1811:66–68). Sijmons 1899:16–20 shared Mogk's view but with reservations. When Mogk changed his mind (1901–1909:570–571), Flom 1905:575 took him to task for it. Alexander Jóhannesson 1932:19; *IsEW*:44 and 102 joined those scholars. The supporters of Konráð Gíslason's etymology recognize its weakness, but semantic considerations outweigh all others.

A variation on Konráð Gíslason's theme can be found in Willy Krogmann 1934. He objected to the pseudoparallels *stóð / stedda, lóð / ledda ~ óðr / Edda,* expressed his surprise that no one had contested them (!), and derived *Edda* from **ōþ-iðōn* 'singing' or 'art of singing', or 'the corpus of songs' (**ōþ-iðōn* is not glossed) > 'poetry', an abstract noun like Go. *hauhiþa* 'height'. Unfortunately, **óþ-iðón* is a figment of Krogmann's imagination, and even if such a word had existed, *ø* < *o* would not have had to lose labialization after syncope and umlaut, and **ð* would not have become *dd* (Andersen 1936:67–70).

A third widely known etymology of *Edda*, like the previous ones, is also centuries old. Its originator, Björn á Skarðsá, traced *Edda* to *Oddi*, the farmstead on which Snorri grew up. Snorri lived there from the age of three (1180) to 1197, when his foster father Jón Loptsson died, and he must have profited immensely by the collection of manuscripts Jón had. Björn's etymology was not completely forgotten. Blind 1895 pointed out that Rasmus Anderson 1880 had shared Björn's view. Anderson surveyed the other derivations of *Edda* and referred to those who "have suggested that it [i.e., *Edda*] may be a mutilated form of Odde (Oddi), the home of Saemund the Wise, who was long supposed to be the compiler of the Elder Edda." In his book on Norse mythology, Anderson mentioned only *edda* 'great-grandmother', *Veda*, and Swed. *veta* 'know' (1879:116; the same in later editions). The present-day popularity of the *Edda-Oddi* theory goes back to a lecture and an article by EM.

On November 15, 1895, EM spoke on the origin of the literary term *Edda* at the Viking Club. He discussed the great-grandmother theory, GV's derivation of *Edda* from *Erda*, and Árni Magnússon–Konráð Gíslason's *óðr-Edda* idea and suggested that *Edda* was formed from *Oddi*. The report printed in *The Academy* (Anonymous 1895) reflects the enthusiasm of the audience. The paper was considered to be "among the most important of any that had yet been given before the Viking Club" and "certainly one of the most learned" and the result "such ... as could not well be impugned ... new and startling" (Jón Stefánsson); "apparently no one had previously known the true meaning" of the term (E. H. Baverstock). In expressing his agreement with Jón Stefánsson, A. F. Major, hon. sec., observed that "where an Icelander could find nothing to criticise, an Englishman could not venture to say much" and added: "If we talked of the Codex Upsaliensis, if in our own early literature we spoke of the Exeter Book and the Vercellae Book, why should not Icelander scholars have talked of the book of Oddi?" Finally, the president (the Rev. A. Sandison) said that EM's "destructive criticism was most fair, though crushing; while the constructive part of his paper was, if possible, even more brilliant, and so lucidly set forth that to him, at any rate, it had carried conviction."

In his talk, EM did not mention Björn á Skarðsá and presented his etymology as absolutely new. (In Magnússon 1895, only the misprints—*pollr* and *pella* instead of *þollr* and *þella*—are corrected, and it is said that no genuine Icelandic root ending in *óð* ever combines with the suffix [sic] *edd.*) Blind could not attend the lecture and was much surprised to learn that EM's discovery had been called new and startling (hence his reference to Anderson's book). He knew nothing about Björn á Skarðsá, but EM was well aware of his existence. In the published text of

his talk (1896), there is a brief mention of Björn, but it is skillfully embedded in a long paragraph about other matters (pp. 229–230): "Coming now to the consideration of the derivations of Edda as a book title, the first that presents itself is Arni [sic] Magnússon's. After rejecting the great-grandmother interpretation and Biörn of Skardsa's [sic] suggestion that edda was derivable from Oddi, the home of Sæmund the Learned, whom Biörn took to be the author of the Prose Edda, he proposes to derive the term from 'óðr', which originally means 'wits', the faculty of thinking and reasoning." The following footnote is given to the word *Oddi*: "Vigfusson, who has made a very careful study of Biörn's Edda speculations, does not mention this point, and I have no means of verifying the source of Arni's statement" (p. 229, note 2). It must be said in all fairness that, although EM was not the first to suggest the connection between *Edda* and *Oddi*, it was he who made this connection look plausible. In 1880, Anderson still spoke about *Edda* as a mutilated form of *Oddi*, while EM purported to show that the two forms can be related by means of umlaut. As analogical cases he cited *Vatnshorn ~ Vatnshyrna* 'the book of Vatnshorn', *knot ~ knetr* ('nut' ~ 'nuts'), *kom- ~ kemr* ('come' ~ 'comes'), *sof- ~ sefr* ('sleep' ~ 'sleeps'), *brodd- ~ bredda* ('goad' ~ 'big knife'), *boli ~ belja* ('bull' ~'cow'), and *þollr ~ þella* ('pine tree' ~ 'pine tree sapling') (1896:237, note 1, continued on p. 238).

Not all of EM's examples strengthen his argument. *Belja* 'cow' is 'a bellowing animal' and is not derived from *boli* 'bull'. *Broddur* 'sharp point' and *bredda* 'knife' are probably related, but the situation is not clear, for *bredda* surfaced only in the fifteenth century (ÁBM). The *þollr* (= *þollur*) ~ *þella* pair also poses problems. EM gave Swed. *tall* 'fir tree' as a cognate of *þollr*, but *tall* is a cognate of OI *þǫll* (Mod. Icel. *þöll*) 'young fir tree', not of *þollr.* Nor does *þoll(u)r* mean 'fir tree': *þoll(u)r* is simply 'tree'; however, it can be related to *þǫll* (*þöll*). *Þella* 'fir tree' is a cognate of *þǫll* < *þalnō* (*AEW*), but its ties with *þoll(u)r* need further proof.

If we look at the products of *i*-umlaut in short vowels, we will find the alternation *a ~ æ > a ~ e* as in *nafn* 'name' ~ *nefna* 'to name', *e ~ i* (as in *segl* 'a sail' ~ *sigla* 'to sail'), and *o ~ ø* (as in *norþr* 'north' ~ *nørðre* 'more northern') (Noreen 1970:57–58). Because of the alternation OI *ø ~ e, sofa* 'sleep' acquired the third person singular *søfr / sefr*, and the plural of *knot* 'nut' became *knøtr / knetr*. The alternation *o ~ e* permeated morphology, but it seldom underlay word formation (and when it did, the derivation was never straightforward). EM had no trouble finding the pair *Vatnshorn ~ Vatnshyrna* (he could have added *Hrafnkell ~ Hrafnkatla*), but evidently there is no pair of this type with *o ~ e.* It is most unlikely that

Snorri or any of his contemporaries should have used the paradigm *knot ~ knetr, sofa ~ sefr* to invent a word like *Edda*, an alleged partner of *Oddi*, and if the association was not obvious, there would have been no point in inventing such a name. We do not think of *Boston* and *lot* when we hear *best* and *let*, though the alternation *e ~ o* occurs in *get ~ got* and *length ~ long*.

If Snorri wanted to immortalize Oddi, why did he not call his book *Odda*? And of course we do not know that *Edda* is Snorri's coinage; even Snorrí's authorship of the *Prose Edda* was not recognized as widely as we might wish. EM must also have had second thoughts, for he suddenly explained that *Edda* is related to both *Oddi* and *Oddr* and that "it is the female counterpart of Oddr or Oddi, as, for instance Æsa is of Asi, Hrefna of Hrafn, Olöf of Olafr, &c. She is the passive, while Oddr or Oddi is the active principle in the evolution of the species, simply: WOMAN. *This is the Edda of Rígsmál*. From Oddi, as a local name, the derivative fem. Edda for a particularly notable book preserved at a place of such a name, is in every way appropriately evolved both as to form and sense. This I maintain is the derivation of the Edda of Cod. Upsaliensis, which, as far as any tangible evidence goes, has nothing to do with Rígsmál. In both cases, however, Edda descends from the stems odd- and oddan- in a perfectly correct manner" (1896:238). Ái's wife *Edda* and Snorri's *Edda* turned out to be the same word after all, twice derived from the root *odd(an)-*. This conclusion is quite incredible.

Like Konráð Gíslason's etymology, the one proposed by EM is still considered probable. The editors of the *Saga-Book* included EM's article in the 1992 anniversary volume of the Viking Club. De Vries (*AEW*) looked upon his etymology as the best one still in circulation (the *OED, Edda*, preferred Konráð Gíslason's). ÁBM called both etymologies unconvincing, but, like James Murray, he would rather trace *Edda* to *óðr* than to *Oddi*. Sijmons 1906:XCI–XCII gave up *óðr* and accepted *Oddi* as the source of *Edda*.

An original etymology of *Edda* occurred to Hugo Pipping 1926:103–105. His cited the Swedish proverb *som man är klädd, så blir man hädd* 'as one is dressed, so is one judged'. He remarked that in its present form the proverb makes little sense, for *häda* means 'defame, revile', rather than 'assess, judge', and concluded that people once said not *hwar ær swa hædher, som han ær klædher,* but *hwar ær swa ædder, som han ær klædher,* with **ædder* being the past participle of **ēra* 'to honor'. He set up OI **ædder* 'honored', explained *Edda* as the feminine of that participle, and glossed *Edda* as 'a book about valued (respected, honored) things', though he did not exclude the possibility of *Edda* being the past participle of **eira* < **aizian* 'bound in brass'. He compared *Fagrskinna* 'beautiful leather' with his first gloss and *Eirspennill* 'brazen clasp' with the second.

Pipping's reconstruction is needlessly complicated. In Swedish, the cognates of OI *heiðra* 'show respect, honor' and *hæða* 'mock, revile' appear to have been confused, so that *häda* 'revile' took on both senses, but the meaning 'honor' has been preserved in the proverb in which it serves as a doublet of *hedra*. Hellquist mentioned Pipping's opinion without discussion (1939, *häda*). With regard to *Edda*, Pipping's conjecture is of no value, for the participle **eddr* ('honored' or 'bound in brass') would have needed great currency to become the title of a book, but it has not been attested a single time. Besides that, the names of manuscripts were always nouns. Pipping's etymology has never been subjected to serious criticism. *AEW* simply dismissed it as *verfehlt* 'wrong'.

Finally, we come to an idea of our contemporary. In 1979 Faulkes examined the earlier proposals and mentioned the derivation by Magnús Ólafsson (1609 = 1979:189) who traced *Edda* to Latin *edo,* a counterpart of Icel. *yrkja* 'make verses' (p. 189). This etymology was known to Árni Magnússon and Jón Ólafsson frá Grunnavík. Faulkes supported it because of an allegedly close parallel: in thirteenth-century Iceland, the noun *kredda* 'creed, belief' from Lat. *credo* also existed. *Kredda* turned up only in Þrándr's reply in *Færeyinga saga,* but it has continued into Modern Icelandic and now means 'superstition, illogical belief'. The entry in Fritzner offers full discussion of this word and a valuable bibliography on the emergence and use of similar religious terms. Here is Faulkes's conclusion about *credo:kredda* / *edo:edda*:

> "This parallel makes it possible to imagine Snorri, or one of his small circle of interested friends who must have constituted the first readership of his book, coining the word *edda* from *edo* in conscious imitation of the word *kredda,* which he knew was derived from *credo,* as a half-humorous description of the treatise, thus implying that the Edda stood in a similar relation to Latin artes poeticae as Þrándr's kredda to the official credo. There may also at the same time have been an awareness of the pun on the other word *edda,* which might have been taken to reflect the fact that the treatise dealt with a kind of poetry that in the thirteenth century must have been thought by many rather old-fashioned." (p. 38).

Whether Snorri knew 'the other word' (*edda* 'great-grandmother') is far from clear, but this circumstance is irrelevant in the present context. Here only the derivation of *Edda* from *edo* is at issue. Faulkes reported that in 1976, in a typewritten Festschrift for Halldór Halldórsson (published in a single copy), Stefán Karlsson had proposed the same etymology, though he preferred to derive *Edda* from *edo* 'edit, compile', rather than from *edo* 'compose in verses'.

Despite the support of this etymology by two such eminent scholars, I do not think it is more convincing than any of its predecessors. A literary riddle is appealing only insofar as it can be solved. We are not in the world of the Sphinx, Samson, or Turandot. In the tales about them, riddles were asked to trap the victim. But even the trickiest skaldic puns presupposed an audience capable of deciphering them. Unless the enemy's head is the coveted prize, where is the joy of asking insoluble riddles? However little Latin thirteenth-century laymen might know, they probably understood *pater noster, credo, ave, amen,* and a few other words and phrases of this type. But *edo* is a technical term that 'the first readership' of Snorri's book need not have known. The proportion *credo:kredda = edo:edda* would not have occurred to them, as it did not occur to Konráð Gíslason or GV centuries later, while Magnús Ólafsson's derivation (*Edda* from *edo*) is a product of sterile Latinity (every word of every language was traced to Latin when it could not be traced to Hebrew or Greek), and, characteristically, he did not refer to *kredda*. Snorri wrote on Icelandic myths and Icelandic poetry for the Icelanders who were beginning to forget their past. A Latin pun would have been most inappropriate under such circumstances. Speaking about himself and Stefán Karlsson, Faulkes 1977:39 noted: "[T]he fact that two people have independently come to revive this etymology is itself a testimony to its plausibility, and I hope that scholars will reconsider it and perhaps add it to the list of possible or likely explanations of the word *edda*." The coincidence is indeed remarkable, but the sought-after etymology is as elusive as ever.

This brings our survey to a close. Its highlights are as follows. 1) *Edda* is most probably not a word reflecting the content of Snorri's book ('old lore', 'ars poetica', 'ars metrica', 'venerable past', and so forth). It is rather a conventional, perhaps even jocular byname referring to the appearance of the original manuscript or to some extraneous factor. 2) Whatever Edda meant, the word must have been clear to Snorri's contemporaries. *Edda* 'ancestress' or 'great-grandmother' was known too little. As long as there is a suspicion that even the scribe of the *Codex Upsaliensis* was ignorant of this word, it is safer not to explain *Edda* as *edda*. With some ingenuity, *Edda* can be associated with *óðr* and *Oddi*. But the flaws of both derivations are such that both etymologies should be abandoned. No one would have understood *Edda* as meaning *Óðbók* or *Oddabók*. There were more natural ways to suggest a connection between the book and *óðr* or *Oddi* than coining a word whose sound shape did not suggest an answer to the riddle. 3) The word *Edda* was invented as the title of one particular book, more or less, we can assume, on the spur of the moment and the inventor need not have been Snorri. It is therefore futile to look for the prehistory of this word and set up asterisked forms

(**ezda, *erda*, and the like). Hypotheses based on such forms carry no more weight than those which trace *Edda* to Sanskrit *Veda* or German *ertha*.

Predictably, I have rejected so many proposals because I have one of my own. There was a fashion of giving Icelandic manuscripts bird titles. Such are the legal codes *Grágás* 'grey goose', *Gullfjǫðr* 'gold feather (quill?)', and *Hryggjar-stykki* 'a kind of duck'. It is hard to believe that *Grágás* got its name because it was copied with a quill made from a feather of a grey goose. Perhaps *Edda* was also one of such titles: *Edda* would be an appropriate 'pet name' of *æðr* pronounced [æ:ðr] f. 'eider duck'. Thus, if I were pressed for a choice, I would explain *Edda* as 'little eider duck', an analog of *Grágás*.