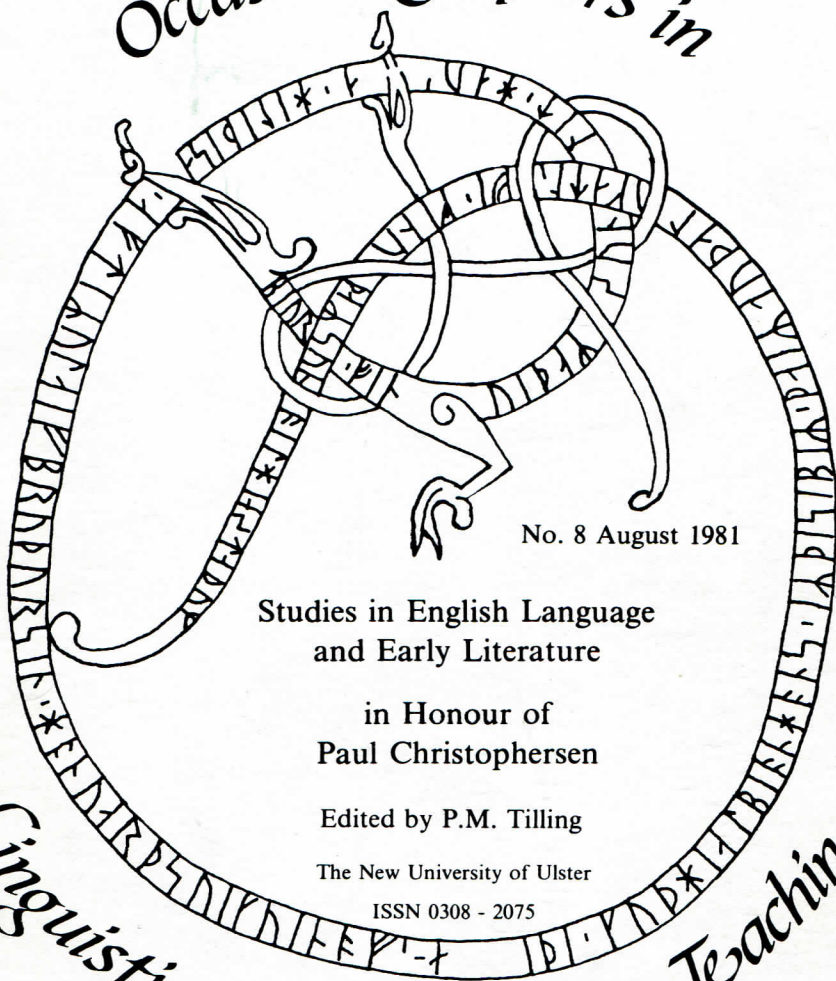


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Á ÞÁ BITU ENGI JÁRN

A Brief Note on the Concept of

Invulnerability in the Old Norse Sagas

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During his description of the battle of Hafrsfjord, the author of *Grettis saga* writes:

Haraldr konungr lagði at skipi þóris haklangs,
því at þórir var inn mesti berserkr ok fullhugi.
Var þar in harðasta orrosta af hvárumtveggjum.
Þá hét konungr á berserki sína til framgöngu.
Þeir váru kallaðir ulfheðnar, en á þá bitu engi
járn, en er þeir geystust fram, þá helzt ekki við.

(*Grettis saga*, ch. 2).

The use of a very similar phrase to describe the invulnerability of King Harald's berserks in the description of the battle of Hafrsfjord contained in *Egils saga*¹ may possibly be due to both descriptions being taken from a common source, but the fact remains that the idea that 'iron could not bite' on a berserk is very common in the sagas. This type of invulnerability is also associated with 'semi-troll' men and certain heroes.

The idea of a warrior such as a berserk, who fought in a state of frenzy, being accredited with invulnerability is hardly surprising. During a frenzied fighting fit (berserksgang) such a warrior would likely be unaware

of pain; and it is a short step from the idea of a warrior who cannot feel pain inflicted by weapons to the idea of a warrior who cannot be harmed by weapons. One of the powers attributed to the Norse war-god Othin was the power to 'bind men's minds'. This power could either be used against his enemies in the form of the 'herfjöturr' (war-fetter) in which his victims were deprived of all power of movement, and lost all ability to use their weapons; or it could be used on Othin's followers so that they would no longer feel pain. What is more difficult to explain is the reason why this invulnerability should only be effective against iron; the berserk being capable of being killed by another means, such as being beaten to death with a wooden club. It is unlikely that this type of limited invulnerability is simply due to a literal interpretation of a stock descriptive phrase, and the evidence would seem to indicate that the origin of this idea is to be found in a period earlier than the Saga Age; earlier, even, than the Viking Age itself.

One of the most graphic descriptions of how this type of invulnerability may be overcome occurs in *Egils saga* when Egil fights a berserk called Atli:

þeir hjuggu títt ok hart, ok ónýttust skjótt skildirnir. Ok er skjöldr Atla var mjök ónýtr, þá kastaði hann honum, tók þá sverðit tveim höndum ok hjó sem tíðast. Egill hjó til hans á öxlina, ok beit ekki sverðit. Hann hjó annat ok it þriðja. Var honum þá hægt at leita höggstaðar á Atla, at hann hafði enga hlíf. Egill reiddi sverðit af öllu afli, en ekki beit, hvar sem hann hjó til.

Sér þa Egill, at eigi mun hlýða svá búit, því at skjöldr hans gerðist þá ónýtr. Þá lét Egill laust sverðit ok skjöldinn ok hljóp at Atla ok greip hann höndum. Kennði þá aflsmunar, ok fell Atli á bak aftr, en Egill greyfðist at niðr ok beit í sundr í honum barkann. lét Atli þar líf sitt.

(*Egils saga*, ch. 65).

It is clear from the sagas that this type of limited invulnerability was believed to be a gift from Othin. As members of an elite warrior class, the berserks naturally had special affinities with the war-god. According

to Snorri Sturluson:

(Oðins) menn fóru brynjulausir ok váru galnir
sem hundar eða vargar, bitu í skjöldu sína, váru
sterkir sem birnir eða griðungar. Þeir drápu
mannfólkit, en hvártki eldr né járn orti á þá.
Þat er kallaðr berserkgangr.

(*Ynglinga saga*, ch. 6).

The *Hávamál* also credits Othin with the power of shielding his followers from fire and iron. The *Ketils saga hængs* describes how Othin granted victory, and immunity from the effects of iron to Framarr, although Othin's treacherous nature caused him to finally desert Framarr in battle, and the warrior fell mortally wounded, crying: 'Brást nú Baldrs faðir, brigt er at trúá honum.' (ch. 5). Knowledge of this invulnerability to iron seems to have special associations with Othin even when the power of invulnerability has not been granted by Othin himself. In the *Völsunga saga* (ch. 42) Gudrun prepares the armour of her sons Hamdir and Sorli (who are not berserks) in such a way that they are immune to iron. After the brothers have mutilated King Jormunrek, the people set upon them but, owing to their mother's spells, they are invulnerable to swords and spears and cannot be harmed until Othin appears and advises the crowd to stone them to death. A similar episode occurs in Saxo (book VIII). During a battle between the Danes and the Hellespontines a sorceress, also named Gudrun, uses her spells to inflict a type of herfjöturr on the Danish army, causing them to fight among themselves. Othin appears to the Danes and, in addition to breaking the spells of Gudrun, also advises them to stone the Hellespontines because they used spells to harden their bodies against weapons.

The *Sögubrot af fornkonungum* relates how a spell was cast on Harald war-tooth in his youth so that 'at hann skyldi eigi bíti járn, ok svá var síðan, at hann hafði aldregi hlíf í orrostu, ok festi þó ekki vörn á honum.' (ch. 4). In Saxo (book VII) this invulnerability is said to have been the gift of Othin, to whom Harald dedicated the souls of all those

he killed in battle as a reward for this power. The book goes on to relate how, when attacking the bridal chamber of Wesete, Harald was beaten about the mouth with a wooden cudgel, as Wesete was unable to injure him in any other way. According to Saxo, it was the loss of Harald's two front teeth and the subsequent, unexpected growth of two new teeth that earned him the nickname 'hyldetand' (presumably a false etymology based on 'hylle' (cover) and 'tand' (tooth)). Book VIII relates how Othin later killed Harald in battle by beating him to death with a wooden club.

The use of a wooden club as a weapon against someone who is invulnerable to iron is a common motif in the sagas. In *Örvar-Odds saga* Odd faces a formidable adversary in the person of Ogmund Eythjof's-Killer. The saga writer gives this description of Ogmund and his companions:

Svá var sagt frá yfirlitum þessa manns, at hann var svartr á hárlit, ok hekk flóki ofan yfir andlitit, þar sem topprinn skyldi vera, en alls ekki var at sjá til andlitsins nema tennr ok augu. Þá hefir hann átta menn með sér, er þannig váru í yfirbragði. Þá bitu engi járn. Þeir váru líkari jötnum en mönnum fyrir vaxtar sakir ok illsku.

(*Örvar-Odds saga*, ch. 13).

In chapter 39 of the saga Odd kills Ogmund's companions by beating them to death with a wooden club as they cannot be harmed by ordinary weapons. During the same battle Ogmund kills Odd's friend Vignir by biting out his throat.

Earlier in the saga (ch. 14) the author describes how Odd kills the Arngrimssons (a band of twelve brothers who are all berserks) by clubbing them to death. According to the saga, Odd had left his weapons behind and gone to a wood to cut a replacement gable-head for his ship. As he only had a small wood-axe with him when he encountered the Arngrimssons, he went back into the wood and cut himself a club to use as a weapon. In the version of this story that occurs in *Saga Heiðreks konungs ins vitra* Odd beats the berserks to death with the new wooden rudder he has just cut for his ship.

Although both versions of the story give a rationalisation for Odd using a club rather than a sword, it is most likely that the belief that a wooden club was a more effective weapon than a sword against a berserk forms the basis of these episodes.² In *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* Hrolf meets Grimar and his eleven warriors who, like Ogmund and his companions, are gigantic, ugly men who are immune to iron. Once again, Hrolf overcomes their invulnerability by using a wooden club as his weapon. Saxo presents a similar episode in book VII when Siwald and his seven sons, who all exhibit the classic signs of berserksgang, are killed by Halfdan. Although Saxo makes no mention of Siwald and his sons having any power of invulnerability, Halfdan chooses an oak club for a weapon. Two other examples are to be found in Saxo book VII. The first example concerns the killing of twelve champions by Halfdan. Prior to the battle Halfdan sends his companions to wait in ambush; he then goes into a wood, cuts down an oak tree and fashions it into a club, and uses this weapon to kill the champions single-handed. The second example concerns the battle between Halfdan and Erik, the son of Frode. On hearing that Hakon, Erik's champion, can weave spells to make himself invulnerable to swords, Halfdan chooses to meet him armed with a huge wooden mace, studded with iron knobs. Saxo surmises that Halfdan hoped to prevail by the strength of wood over sorcery. This is similar to an episode in book I where Gram arms himself with a wooden mace to which he has fixed a knob of gold in order to fight Sigtryg. Saxo attributes Gram's victory to the hardness of gold over one whom 'fate forbade should be killed by iron'.

The similarity of the many examples of this motif that occur, coupled with the fact that frequently the author has only an imperfect knowledge

of the viking berserk are to be found among the bands of frenzied fighters who made up the elite fighting forces of the Germanic tribes of the Migration Period has been frequently commented on.³ In addition, it may be noticed that many of the 'semi-troll' berserk-like figures who occur in the Fornaldarsögur bear a close resemblance to descriptions of these early frenzied fighters. One may compare the description of Ogmund Eythjof's-Killer (p. 16 above) with the description of the warriors of the Chatti tribe given by Tacitus in the *Germania*:

Et aliis Germanorum populis usurpatum raro et privata cuiusque audentia apud Chattos in consensum vertit, ut primum adoleverint, crinem barbamque submittere, nec nisi hoste caeso exuere votivum obligatumque virtuti oris habitum. super sanguinem et spolia revelant frontem, sequetum demum pretia nascendi rettulisse dignosque patria ac parentibus ferunt: ignavis et imbellibus manet squalor. fortissimus quisque ferreum insuper anulum (ignominiosum id genti) velut vinculum gestat, donec se caede hostis absolvat. plurimis Chattorum hic placet habitus, iamque canent insignes et hostibus simul suisque monstrati. omnium penes hos initia pugnatum; haec prima semper acies, visu nova.

(*Germania*, ch. 31).

One may also compare the description of the elaborate coiffure of the Suebi warriors when going into battle, a practice intended to increase the apparent height of the warriors and make them more terrifying to their foes (*Germania*, ch. 38),⁴ with Saxo's description of the elaborate hairstyle worn by the invulnerable Harald War-tooth when fighting in battle alongside Asmund, king of the Wikars (book VII). Although Saxo comments on the paradox of fighting in the fiercest parts of the battle while wearing such a hairstyle and being dressed not in armour, but in a light cloak, Harald's behaviour exactly corresponds to the early Germanic practice. There are several descriptions of bands of Germanic and Celtic warriors who fought without any protective armour, dressed only in a light cloak, or else fighting completely naked.⁵ Such a practice presumably indicates a belief in some

kind of supernatural protection,⁶ perhaps of the kind mentioned by *Diodorus Siculus* (book 5.30) when he writes of bands of otherwise naked warriors who wore helmets adorned with special symbols which were intended to afford the wearer divine protection in battle.

Tacitus twice mentions the inferiority of the weapons possessed by the Germans, compared with those of the Romans. In the *Annals* (book 2.14) he writes that spears 'of a sort' are limited to the front rank, the more usual weapon being clubs burnt at the end, or with short metal points. In the *Germania* he describes the customs of the Aestii in battle:

Matrem deum venerantur. insigne superstitionis
formas aprorum gestant: id pro armis hominumque
tutela securum deae cultorem etiam inter hostes
praestat. rarus ferri, frequens fustium usus.
(ch. 45).

The idea of the emblem of a wild boar affording protection in battle persisted long in Germanic tradition. Such an effigy adorns the top of the Anglo-Saxon Benty Grange helmet, and scenes showing the wearing of such helmets occur on the helmet plates found in 10th century Vendal graves in Torslunda. The protective nature of such helmets is mentioned in *Beowulf* (ll. 1111-12; 1286; 1453-54). It is also significant that the weapon described as being most common among the Germanic tribes is the same weapon that is so often used in the sagas to kill a berserk who is invulnerable to iron weapons.

It is a well-documented phenomenon that a tribe facing aggression from enemies with superior weapon technology often evolves a new type of magic which is effective only against the type of weapon they are facing. An example of this phenomenon may be found in the events of the Zulu Bambada Rebellion of 1906 when new spells were created among the Zulu tribes which were claimed to be able to turn bullets to water.⁷ Although these spells claimed to give the tribesmen immunity to bullets, they did not claim to give immunity to the usual weapons used by the tribesmen themselves. It is

possible that the saga stories of berserks who are immune to iron weapons, but who can be killed with wooden clubs, represent an old folk belief that had its origins in the early Germanic warriors whose battle-magic claimed to protect them from the swords of the Roman armies, but afforded them no protection from the wooden clubs that were the more common weapon of their own armies.

Before leaving the subject of wood being used against a warrior who is immune to the effects of iron, it is worth considering the account of the death of Othin's son, Balder, which Snorri presents in the Edda. Balder was invulnerable to all weapons because Frigg had extracted a promise from 'fire and water, iron and all kinds of metals, stones, earth, trees, ailments, beasts, birds, poison and serpents' that they would not harm him. Protected by this invulnerability, Balder used to act as a living target for all sorts of missiles as sport for the other gods. The malevolent Loki brought about his death by tricking the blind Hoder into throwing at him a dart made from mistletoe wood - the only thing from which Frigg had not extracted a promise. The basis of this story once again concerns a favorite of Othin's who is immune to all other weapons, but who can still be killed by the use of some kind of wooden weapon.

A variation of the belief in the effectiveness of some kind of club being used against a warrior with this type of limited invulnerability can be seen in the idea that, although a sword will not 'bite' on such a warrior, the sword itself can be used as a club, thereby overcoming the invulnerability. Saxo (book IV) describes how Fridleif killed Gunholm, on whom iron would not bite, by beating him to death with his sword hilt. Unfortunately, Fridleif gripped the sword blade so tightly that his right hand remained permanently useless, as he had cut through the sinews of his fingers. In the two duels fought between Kormak and Thorvard (*Kormaks saga*, chs. 22 and 23) Thorvard is on both occasions unable to be cut by iron, as he has sought

help from Thordis, a sorceress; yet each time Kormak wins the duel by the mighty power of his sword strokes. Although these blows were unable to cut the skin, their crushing force is sufficient to break several of Thorvard's ribs and his arm.

The essentially pagan nature of the berserks is noticeable in some of the sagas that deal with the activities of the Christian missionaries in Iceland prior to the conversion. In the following passage from *Njáls saga* it is the power of Christianity that overcomes the berserk's invulnerability to iron and fire:

Gestr Oddleifsson bjó í Haga á Barðaströnd. Hann var manna vitrastr, svá at hann sá fyrir örlög manna. Hann gerði veizlu í móti þeim þangbrandi. Þeir fóru í Haga við sex tigu manna. Þá var sagt, at þar væri fyrir tvau hundruð heiðinna manna ok þangat væri van berserks þess, er Ótryggur hét, ok váru allir við hann hræddir. Frá honum var sagt svá mikit, at hann hræddist hvárki eld né egg, ok váru heiðnir menn hræddir mjök. Þá spurði þangbrandr, ef menn vildi taka við trú, en allir heiðnir menn mæltu í móti.

'Kost mun ek yör gera,' segir þangbrandr, 'at þér skuluð reyna, hvar betri er trúin. Ver skulum gera elda þrjá. Skuluð þér vígja einn, heiðnir menn, en ek annan, en inn þriði skal óvígör vera. En ef berserkrinn hræðist þann, er ek vígða, en vaði yðvarn eld, þá skuluð þér taka við trú.'

'Þetta er vel mælt,' segir Gestr, 'ok mun ek þessu játa fyrir mik ok heimamenn mína.'

Ok er Gestr hafði þetta mælt, þá játuðu miklu fleiri. Þá var sagt, at berserkrinn færi at bænum, ok váru þá gervir eldarnir ok brunnu. Tóku menn þá vörn sín ok hljópu upp í bekkina ok biðu svá. Berserkrinn hljóp inn með vörnnum. Hann kemr í stofuna ok veðr þegar þann eldinn, er inir heiðnu menn vígðu, ok kemr at eldi þeim, er þangbrandr hafði vígt, ok þorir eigi at vaða ok kvaðst brenna allr. Hann höggv sverðinu upp á bekkinn, ok kom í þvertréit, er hann reiddi hátt. Þangbrandr laust með roðukrossi á höndina, ok varð jartegn svá mikil, at sverðit fell ór hendi berserkinum. Þá legg þangbrandr sverði fyrir brjóst honum, en Guðleifr hjó á höndina, svá at af tók. Gengu þá margir at ok drápu berserkin.

(*Njáls saga*, ch. 103).

A similar episode occurs in *Vatnsdæla saga* when Bishop Fridrek is asked if he

knows how to deal with two brothers, both called Hauk, who are berserks and are terrorising the neighbourhood:

Byskup mælti: 'Látið gera elda þrjá á gólfi í skálanum.' Ok svá var gert.

Síðan vígði byskup eldana ok mælti: 'Nú skal skipa bekkina af mönnum þeim, er beztir eru áræðis, með stóra lurka, því at þá bíta eigi járn, ok skal svá berja þá til bana.'

(*Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 46).

The two brothers entered the hall and walked through two of the fires, getting badly burned in the process. This made them terribly afraid of the fire and they tried to rush to the benches. There they were clubbed to death (Síðan váru þeir lamðir til bana). In this example it is interesting to note that, although the brothers lose their invulnerability to fire when it has been hallowed by the bishop, they still retain their invulnerability to iron and can only be killed with wooden clubs.⁸

There is a second method of killing a person who has this limited invulnerability which is frequently found in the *Fornaldarsögur*. In this variation the warrior may be killed with a special sword, although he is immune from all other weapons. Two versions of this idea occur. In the first version there is a sword that has special significance only for the warrior concerned; occasionally this is the warrior's own sword, more often it is a sword that is in some way connected with the history of the warrior. In the second version the hero is in possession of a special sword (often a sword made by, or previously owned by, a giant) which is capable of killing any warrior who is usually invulnerable to all other weapons. Two examples will suffice to illustrate the first version of this motif. The first example concerns the death of Herek járnhauss and occurs in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* (ch. 2 ff). Herek came to King Hring and demanded the king's lands and his daughter. When Hring refused this demand, Herek challenged him to single combat (hólmgang), which was to take place in three day's time. Hring offered to give his daughter in marriage to anyone who could defeat

Herek, and he was advised to seek the aid of Víking, a fifteen-year-old boy who lived on a nearby island. At this point in the story the saga-writer explains how Víking came into possession of the sword Angrvadill, which had previously belonged to Herek's father Kol Hunchback, and had also belonged to Herek's brother Bjorn Bluetooth, a fierce warrior who killed men in battle by stabbing them with his half ell-long tooth. Angrvadill, the saga-writer explains, is the only sword that can kill Herek. At the hólmgang Herek was, of course, killed by Víking. When Herek saw the sword in Víking's hand he said he would never have agreed to fight if he had known that he had Angrvadill.⁹ The second example occurs in *Flóamanna saga* (chs. 15 and 16) and tells how the berserk Svart Ironskull came to Jarl Olaf in Scotland and demanded Olaf's sister, Gudrun, for his concubine. When Olaf naturally refused this demand, Svart challenged him to hólmgang. The jarl promised either to come himself, or else to appoint a champion to fight in his place. Olaf then called an assembly and offered Gudrun as the wife of whoever killed Svart. Thorgils, who was spending the winter at Olaf's court, offered to fight as his champion. That night Thorgils had a dream in which his friend Audun came to him with the sword Bladnir. Audun said that he was Svart's brother and said that Svart could only be killed with Bladnir. He warned Thorgils that he must bury the sword in the sand prior to the hólmgang so that when Svart asked about it he could honestly say that the sword was not above ground.¹⁰ Everything took place as Audun predicted; Thorgils killed Svart with Bladnir and married Gudrun.

The account of the death of Balder as presented in Saxo (book III) differs considerably from the version in the Edda (p. 20 above). According to Saxo, Balder was immune to all ordinary weapons, but could be killed with a special sword that was in the keeping of Miming, the satyr of the woods.

In the preceding examples emphasis is laid on the fact that a particular weapon is bound up with the fate of a certain individual. In *Hrólf's saga*

Gautrekssonar (ch. 19) Hrolf and his men are captured by a giant and imprisoned in his house. Hrolf escapes by first blinding the giant by putting out his eyes with a large fork, and then using the giant's own sword to kill him. Hrolf chose the giant's sword as he thought it would be the only weapon that would bite on him. In chapter 20 Hrolf uses this same sword to kill King Halfdan's twelve berserks. None of the berserks was wearing armour, as none of them had ever been harmed by ordinary weapons before. Later in the saga (ch. 27), Hrolf uses the giant's sword to kill a berserk named Harek. Hrolf's first blow split Harek's head down to his shoulders, killing him instantly. Although the saga describes Harek as ruthless and dangerous, and more like a troll than a man, he is not specifically described as being invulnerable to iron.

The belief that a giant's sword can kill a creature that is invulnerable to even the best of man-made swords also occurs in *Beowulf* when the 'best of swords' fails to harm Grendel's mother:

Bā se gist onfand,
 þæt se beadolēoma bītan nolde,
 aldre sceþðan, ac sēo ecg geswāc
 ðēodne æt pearfe.

(*Beowulf*, 1522-25).

It is only the chance finding of a giant's sword that enables Beowulf to kill the she-monster:

Geseah ðā on searwum sigeēadig bil,
 ealdsweord eotenisc ecgum þyhtig,
 wigena weorðmynd; þæt [wæs] wæpna cyst,-
 būton hit wæs mære ðonne ænig mon ðōer
 tō beadulāce ætberan meahte,
 gōd ond geatolīc, gīganta geweorc.
 Hē gefēng þā fetelhilt, freca Scyldinga
 hrēoh ond heorogrim, hringmæl gebrægd
 aldres orwēna, yrringa slōh,
 þæt hire wið halse heard grāpode,
 bānhringas bræc; bil eal ðurhwōd
 fāgne flāschoman; hēo on flet gecrong.
 (1557-68).

Often this limited type of invulnerability takes the form of a warrior's ability to cast a spell over his opponent's sword so that it will not bite

on him. This is the reason that Beowulf has to attack Grendel with his bare hands:

þone synscaðan
 ænig ofer eorþan Irenna cyst,
 gūðbilla nān grētan nolde;
 ac hē sigewæpnum forsworen hæfde,
 ecga gehwylcre.

(801-5).

Frequently the spell is worked by the evil eye, so that it becomes necessary to shield the sword from the warrior's eyes in some way. For example, in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* Gunnlaug lends money to Thororm, a berserk. When Gunnlaug asked for the loan to be repaid, Thororm refused and challenged Gunnlaug to hólmgang. The King warned Gunnlaug about Thororm's ability to blunt swords, and advised him what to do:

'Þessi maðr deyfir hvert vápn. Nú skaltu
 mínum ráðum fram fara, ok er hér sverð,
 er ek vil gefa þér, ok með þessu skaltu
 vega, en sýn honum annat.'

(*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ch. 7).

When the two men met at the hólmgang, Gunnlaug was able to defeat the berserk by following the king's advice:

Ok er þeir váru til hólms búnir, þá spyrr
 þórormr, hvernig sverð þat væri, er hann
 hafði. Gunnlaugr sýnir honum ok bregðr,
 en hafði lykkju um meðalkafla á konungsnaut
 ok dregr á hönd sér.

Berserkrinn mælti, er hann sá sverðit:
 'Ekki hræðumst ek þat sverð,' segir hann ok
 hjó til Gunnlaugs með sverði ok af honum
 mjök svá skjöldinn allan. Gunnlaugr hjó
 þegar í mót með konungsnaut, en berserkrinn
 stóð hlífarlauss fyrir ok hugði, at hann
 hefði it sama vápn ok hann sýndi, en
 Gunnlaugr hjó hann þegar banahögg.

(ch. 7)

A similar example to this is to be found in *Svarfðæla saga* chs. 7-11.

Saxo gives several examples of the ability to blunt swords by the evil eye. In book VI there is the story of Wisin, a champion of great repute, who used the power of the evil eye to blunt swords. Safe in his immunity to weapons, he behaved in true berserk fashion, terrorising the neighbourhood

and abducting the wives of local dignitaries. On hearing of Wisin's outrages, Starkad met him in battle and defeated his power of the evil eye by covering his sword with a thin skin. In book VII Halfdan defeats Hildiger, who could also blunt swords by looking at them, by attacking him with his sword wrapped in rags. In all these examples the warrior must be able to actually look at the sword in order to be able to blunt it; hiding the sword from his vision renders the magic powerless. This corresponds with other beliefs concerning the evil eye, where it is necessary to cover the eyes of the magician (often by placing a bag over his or her head), so that he or she can be killed by ordinary means.¹¹ The fact that a belief in the power of the evil eye to blunt cutting instruments has continued into modern Danish folk-lore may be seen by the following example, quoted by Feilberg:

'Ich lernte das Holzschumachen in Bratbjerg.
Dort gab es eine Nachbarfrau, deren Mutter der
Hexerei beschuldigt wurde. "Es scheint mir,"
sagte ich einst zum Meister, "dass die Frau
dort einen so scharf anstarrt." - "Ja," sprach
der Meister, "sie vermag es so zu machen, dass
dein Nabenbohrer nicht schneiden kann."¹²

The ability to blunt weapons by looking at them was claimed to be one of Othin's powers,¹³ and in *Rígsþula* (str. 43) young Konr is said to have gained the power to blunt swords from his knowledge of runes, knowledge of which is specifically associated with Othin. This power is associated with, and probably has its origins in, another form of the evil eye which is also found in the sagas. An example of this form of the evil eye occurs in *Sörla þáttr* (ch. 9) when Hedin advises Ivar to attack Hogne from behind, as no-one can kill him face to face because he has the 'oegishjálmr' in his eyes. Fritzner translates this as 'einen Schrecken einjagenden Helm'. The phrase 'hafa ægishjálrm í augum' is still used in Iceland to denote a magical overawing power of the eye. In *Saxo* (book IX) there is an episode in which Siward, who has been badly wounded, is visited by a man of 'amazing size' called Rostar. Rostar heals Siward's wound and then pours

beliefs of the Germanic warriors should have been transformed into a form of powerful magic. Indeed, a passage from *Helgisaga Olafs konungs Haraldssonar* actually attributes invulnerability to the sword to the wearing of wolf-skins, yet this invulnerability is not seen to be proof against the more common early Germanic weapon of the club:

Svá segja menn, at Björn digri hjó með sverði til þóris hunds um daginn. En þar, sem á kom, beit eigi heldr en vendi berði um. En þórir ok þeir tólf saman váru í vargskinnstökkum þeim, er Finnar höfðu gert þeim með mikilli fjölkynngi. Þá er Björn sá, at sverðit beit eigi, þá kallaði hann á konunginn ok mælti: 'Eigi bíta vápnin hundana.' 'Beri þér þá hundana,' sagði konungrinn. Þá tók Björn sér klubbu mikla ok laust þóri hund, svá at fell við, ok æ síðan bar hann hallt höfuð jafnan. Ok þá hljóp hann upp ok lagði Björn með spjóti ok mælti: 'Svá beitung vör björnuna á mörkinni morðr,' sagði hann.

(*Helgisaga Olafs konungs Haraldssonar*, ch. 92).

TRANSLATIONS

p. 13 *Grettis saga*, ch. 2. Harald made for Thorir's ship because he was the greatest berserk, and very brave. There was the fiercest fighting on both sides. Then the king ordered his berserks forward. They were called wolfskins; but iron could not bite on them and when they charged nothing could withstand them.

p. 14 *Egils saga*, ch. 65. They struck quickly and hard and the shields were soon useless. When Atli's shield was totally useless, he threw it from him, took the sword with both hands and struck as quickly as he could. Egil struck at his shoulder, but the sword did not bite. He struck a second and a third time. It was easy for him to find places for blows on Atli, as he had no protection. Egil swung the sword with all his might, but it did not bite wherever he struck. Egil saw then that nothing could be done as things were, as his shield was now becoming useless. Egil let go of his sword and shield, and leapt at Atli gripping him with both hands. Then the difference in strength was known and Atli fell back to the ground. Egil crouched down and bit through his windpipe. There Atli lost his life.

p. 15 *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 6. Othin's men went without mailcoats and were as frantic as dogs or wolves; they bit the rims of their shields, and were as strong as bears or boars. They killed people, but neither fire nor iron could harm them. That is known as running berserk.

p. 15 *Sögubrot*, ch. 4. That no iron could bite on him, and it was so afterwards that he never carried protection in battle, and yet no weapon got a hold on him.

p. 16 *Örvar-Odds saga*, ch. 13. So it was said of the appearance of this man: that he had black hair and a thick tuft hung over his face where the forelock should have been, and nothing could be seen of his face except teeth and eyes. He had eight men with him, who were of similar appearance. No iron would bite on them. They were more like giants than men for size and ugliness.

p. 21 *Njáls saga*, ch. 103. Gest Oddleifsson lived at Hagi on Badastrand; he was the wisest of men as he could foretell men's destinies. He had a feast for Thangbrand and his company. They went to Hagi sixty strong. It was said that two hundred heathen men were there already, and that a berserk was also expected, who was called Otrygg, and everyone was terrified of him. It was even said that he feared neither fire nor sword. The heathens were very afraid of him. Thangbrand asked whether the people wished to take the new faith, but all the heathen men spoke against it.

'I will give you a chance', said Thangbrand, 'to test which is the better faith. We shall kindle three fires; you heathens shall hallow one, I shall hallow the second, the third shall be unhallowed. If the berserk is afraid of the fire I hallow, but walks unscathed through your fire, then you shall take the faith.'

'This is well said,' said Gest, 'I accept on behalf of my household and myself.' When Gest had spoken there was a loud approval from many others. Then it was said that the berserk was approaching the house. The fires were prepared and kindled to a blaze. The men took their weapons and jumped onto the benches and waited. The berserk leapt into the hall fully-armed and at once strode through the fire which the heathens hallowed, but when he came to the fire that Thangbrand had hallowed he could not walk through it and said he was burning all over. He struck with his sword at the benches, but his sword caught in a crossbeam as he swung it high. Thangbrand struck him on the hand with a crucifix and, miraculously, the sword fell from the berserk's hand. Then Thangbrand plunged his sword into his breast and Guthleif hacked at his hand so that it was cut off. Many then came forward and killed the berserk.

p. 22 *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 46. The bishop said, 'Let three fires be raised on the floor of the hall.' So it was done. Then the bishop hallowed the fires and said: 'Now the benches must be manned by those who are most courageous, with great clubs, as iron will not bite on these; and so they shall be brought to death.'
..... Then they were beaten to death.

p. 24 *Beowulf*, 1522-25. Then the stranger found that the battle-ray (sword) would not bite, not harm her, but the edge failed the prince in his need.

p. 24 *Beowulf*, 1557-68. Then he saw, amid other weapons, a victory-lucky sword, an ancient sword made by giants, strong-edged, a glory to warriors. It was the choicest of weapons, except that it was too large for any other man to carry it to battle-play - good and splendid, the work of giants. The champion of the Scyldings, savage and grim, grasped the hilt and drew the ring-patterned blade, never despairing, angrily struck, so that the sword landed hard on her neck and broke the rings of bone; the sword passed through the doomed flesh. She fell to the floor.

p. 25 *Beowulf*, 801-5. This wicked felon was one whom no sword on earth could harm, not the choicest of iron blades; but he (*Beowulf*) had given up victorious weapons, all swords.

p. 25 *Gunnlaugs saga*, ch. 7. This man blunts every weapon. Now you should follow my advice; here is a sword I will give you, with it you are to fight, but show him another one...
When they went to the holm, Thororm asked what kind of sword it might be that he had. Drawing it Gunnlaug showed him, but he had a loop round the hilt of the sword that the king had given him, and he drew it around his hand. 'I am not afraid of that sword,' said the berserk when he saw it. He struck with his sword at Gunnlaug, cutting away almost the whole of the shield. Straghtaway Gunnlaug struck back at him with the king's gift. The berserk stood without protecting himself, since he thought that he (*Gunnlaug*) had the same weapon that he (the berserk) had seen, and Gunnlaug struck him his death-blow at once.

p. 28 *Helgisaga Olafs konungs Haraldssonar*, ch. 92. Men say that Bjorn the stout struck with his sword all day at Thorir, but wherever it landed, it would not bite. For Thorir and his men were in the wolf-skin coats which Finnar had made with much magic.

When Bjorn saw that his sword would not bite, he called to the king and said, 'Weapons will not bite on the dogs'.

'Then beat the dogs,' said the king.

Then Bjorn took a large club and struck Thorir hund so that he fell down, and ever after carried his head to one side. And then he leapt up and stabbed Bjorn with a spear and said, 'This is how we hunt bears in the northern woods.'

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NOTES

1. Engli var ósárr á konungsskipinu fyrir framan siglu nema þeir, er eigi bitu járn, en þat váru berserkir (i.e., 'No-one was unwounded on the king's ship before the mast, except those on whom iron would not bite, and they were berserks'). (*Egils saga*, ch. 9).
2. A third variation occurs in *Hervarar saga* in which Odd and Hjalmar are able to kill the Arngrimssons because they are in a weakened state, having just come out of the berserksgang.
3. See especially: Dumézil, G. (1939), *Mythes et Dieux des Germains*. (Paris), pp. 80 ff.; Ellis Davidson, H.R. (1973), *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*. (Harmondsworth), pp. 66-7.
4. A similar practice among Celtic tribes is described in *Diodorus Siculus* V, 28.
5. See, for example: *Diodorus Siculus* V, 29; V, 30; *Polybius* ii, 28; ii, 29; *Tacitus, Germania*, ch. 6.
6. 'In warfare, as in so many other aspects of Celtic life, there appear to have been supernatural overtones, as is suggested by the *gaesatae* who fought naked in obedience to an archaic ritual tradition which apparently taught that nudity afforded some supernatural protection.' Chadwick, N. (1972), *The Celts*. (Harmondsworth), p. 134.
7. On this subject, see: Gluckman, M. (1963), 'The Magic of Despair', in *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa*. (London), p. 144.
8. No mention is made of the use of wooden clubs in the much shorter version of this story in *Kristni saga*.
9. Although in the usual version of *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* Herek is not described as a berserk, in two variant readings he is called 'þenna bölvaða berserk' and 'þenna bölvaða hund ok berserk'.
10. This motif occurs in the Danish folk ballad 'Revengaard og Memering'. Grundtvig, S.H. (1853), *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser*. (Copenhagen), I, 205, no. 13.
11. See, for example: *Fyrbyggja saga*, ch. 20; *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ch. 30; *Völsunga saga*, ch. 40.
12. Feilberg, H.F. (1901), 'Der böse Blick in nordischer Überlieferung', *Zeitschrift der Vereins für Volkskunde* XI, p. 425.
13. *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 6; *Hávamál*, str. 148.
14. Grimm, J. (1835), *Deutsche Mythologie* 11. (Göttingen), p. 217.
15. *Polybius* ii, 28; ii, 29. *Tacitus, Germania*, ch. 43.
16. Dumézil, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-4.