Anyone familiar with Old Norse literature is familiar with berserkers and úlfheðnar, the male bear or wolf warrior who sometimes experiences a battle-rage which gives him extraordinary powers (Hoops, 1976). Several scholars have hinted that these berserkers and úlfheðnar might have equivalents in Old Irish literature and the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*. These scholars, however, have not elaborated on these hints. Therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate whether berserkers and their wolf-equivalents do indeed occur as an early medieval motif in Old Irish literature and the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* poem.

1. Berserkers in Old Norse Literature

In order to study the possible existence of the berserker phenomenon in Old Irish and Anglo-Saxon literature, this motif must first be defined as it is found in Old Norse sources. First, it is necessary to separate the obviously Old Norse term ‘berserker’ from its original literature and put it into a more general literary and cultural perspective. Henceforth, when I use the term ‘berserker’, it will refer to its general meaning: a shape-shifting warrior, who in some way is linked to a martial animal and experiences a battle rage. When I use the term berserkr, which is in keeping with the Old Norse spelling, it will refer to the Old Norse bear-berserkers only.

1.1. A Berserker Model

Based on the conclusions from the primary literature in Old Norse a model of berserker characteristics can be drawn up with which to

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identify a character as a berserker. The main characteristic of a berserker is his feral battle rage, which is a feature that must be present to identify a character as a berserker. Because of the scarce text material, the rest of the features do not necessarily have to be present for a positive identification as a berserker. Of course, the more of these features are present in a warrior, the more likely that he is indeed a berserker.

I: The berserker often has a theriophoric name or a martial animal association. This is sometimes linked to a taboo on eating the flesh of the animal they are associated with.

II: The berserker often has supernatural associations. These associations often have to do with extraordinary parents, such as gods, trolls, animals, and berserkers, an exceptional conception / birth, magic, or the worship of a particular god.

III: The berserker is often described as being precocious in youth, skilled in war, and extremely tall and ugly.

IV: The berserker experiences a battle rage that is often uncontrollable, indiscriminate and accompanied by some sort of feral transformation. This battle rage is often initiated by howling, being insulted or (in)directly threatened.

V: While experiencing a battle rage the berserker is capable of extraordinary feats. These feats are often similar: they become invulnerable, immensely strong and fearless and they attack in the van of battle.

VI: The berserker seems to belong to one of two sets of perimeters:
A. He belongs to a group, is a villain, lives outside society and is bent on attacking.
B. He is a loner and a hero, is in the service of a king and thus part of society and functions as a protector.

The most important Old Norse sources for berserkers are: Egils saga (c.1230), Hröðs saga Kraka (c.1400), Hervarar Saga (c. 1250) and Örvar Odds saga (c.1270), Haraldskveöð (c.900), Ynglinga saga (c.1225), Háhrarðsljóð (c. 800), Vatnsdœla saga (c. 1270), Skáldskaparmál (c. 1220), Eyrbyggja saga (c.1350), Gesta Danorum (c. 1203), Grettis saga Asmundarsonar (c. 1330), Laxdœla saga (c. 1250), Svæðska saga (c. 1350). Most of these sources tell of a past between 900 and 1100 AD (Simek,1987).

When berserkers occur in groups, they are either roving vikings or the core of a king’s retinue. Other berserkers, for example Eythjof, Egil and Böðvar Bjarki, seem to