

Berserks: A History of Indo-European “Mad Warriors”¹

MICHAEL P. SPEIDEL

University of Hawai‘i at Manoa

Berserks—blustering, mad warriors scorning wounds and death—embody the spirit of reckless attack. Though the berserk warrior tradition spans some three thousand years, its history has yet to be written. The following gives an outline of that history in five parts. The first part deals with the earliest known berserks at the end of the bronze age. The second traces berserks through the bronze, iron, and middle ages. The third part describes the berserk mind, and the fourth probes for patterns when berserks appear as attack troops alongside disciplined forces. The last, more tentative part looks at structures and functions of mad warrior styles worldwide by comparing Indo-European berserks with other similar warriors, such as Aztec *quachics* and India’s *amoks*.

The new sources brought forward here widen the geographical range of the berserk tradition to include Mesopotamia. They add several centuries to the time span during which berserks are now documented and shed light upon the mentality of early warriors and their frenzies as they forged fearlessly into battle. Berserk warriorhood thus emerges as a long-lived, cross-cultural phenomenon that lends color and coherence to the early millennia of recorded history.

Snorri Sturlusson in the *Ynglinga saga*, written shortly after A.D. 1220, defines berserks as mad fighters without body armor:² “Woden’s men went without hauberks and raged like dogs or wolves. They bit their shields and were strong like bears or bulls. They killed men, but

¹ I wish to thank my colleagues Margot Henriksen and Idus Newby for their kind help with this article.

² Snorri Sturlusson, *Heimskringla*, *Ynglinga saga* 6. Gunter Müller, “Zum Namen Wolfhetan und seinen Verwandten,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 1, 1967, 207f.

neither fire nor iron hurt them. This is called *berserksgangr*." Berserk warriors thus scorned armor, willfully foregoing body armor. They also raged uncontrollably in a trance of fury. These two qualities define berserks, although many sources mention only one or the other, even in cases where warriors were both naked and mad.

Any troops either fighting madly or showing off recklessly, but not both, may be called merely "berserk-like." The Arab Ageyl were berserk-like when in 1917, before the attack on Wejh with Lawrence of Arabia, they stripped off their cloaks, head cloths, and shirts, saying that thus they would get clean wounds if hit, and their precious clothes would not be damaged. The reasons they gave were not all, for men are also proud of showing their bodies and elated with the wind streaming over their skin—Lawrence himself was as much taken with their "half-nakedness" as were the Romans with their Celtic foes. True berserks, however, are both naked and mad at the same time. This article will show that they stand in an age-old, well-defined tradition and, though not given their due by modern scholarship, form an outstanding feature of Indo-European culture.³

BERSERKS AND THE END OF THE BRONZE AGE

Babylonian-Assyrian civilization by and large followed third-millennium Sumerian tradition. In warfare this meant plodding, orderly rows of soldiers, the "phalanx" seen on the "Standard of Ur." There, helmeted, cuirassed, and heavily armed soldiers trudge one behind another, as one expects soldiers to do in disciplined city-states and city-empires. In the seventeenth century B.C. the battle-chariot revolution swept over all of West Asia, and the part-Aryan Mitanni took Assur,⁴ but we do not know how these events changed Assyria. In the late thirteenth century, however, under Tukulti-Ninurta, something altogether foreign took place in Assyria.

Early in his reign, Tukulti-Ninurta (1243–1207 B.C.) fought the Hittites and in 1228 warred against the Babylonians. Having routed

³ Ageyl: T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, New York, 1935, 163. Celtic foes: Polybios 2, 29, 7. Indo-Europeans: J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans*, London, 1989, 110, treats them as an error. In J. P. Mallory and D. Q. Adams, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, London, 1997, berserks do not rate an entry, though they are recognized on p. 632f.

⁴ Hartmut Schmökel, *Geschichte des Alten Vorderasien*, Leiden, 1957, 187; William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power*, Chicago, 1982, 9ff.

and captured the Kassite king of Babylon, he commissioned an epic about his campaign to justify his uncalled-for aggression.⁵ The resulting work is unique; unlike the many royal inscriptions that survive from ancient Assyria, the epic lavishly describes and praises the fighting style and battle madness of the king's warriors.⁶ It claims not only that Tukulti-Ninurta's gods struck his foes with fear and blindness and blunted their weapons, but that his warriors turned into furious shape-changers like Anzu, the Assyrian eagle-dragon, and that they scorned armor:⁷

They are furious, raging, taking forms strange as Anzu.
 They charge forward furiously to the fray without armor,
 They had stripped off their breastplates, discarded their clothing,
 They tied up their hair and polished (?) their . . . weapons,
 The fierce heroic men danced with sharpened weapons.
 They blasted at one another like struggling lions, with eyes aflash (?),
 While the fray, particles drawn in a whirlwind, swirled around in combat.

This poem is highly revealing. Standing outside Greek and Roman literary tradition, it escapes the hackneyed argument that descriptions of foreigners—by even the most serious and knowledgeable classical authors—are not to be trusted because they repeat time-worn clichés (*topoi*).⁸ We thus learn from the epic that in fits of battle-madness Middle Assyrian warriors “took strange shapes,” shed their armor, doffed their garments, tied up their hair, war-danced with weapons in hand, glowered fiercely, roared, and charged wildly into a raging whirlwind battle. Nowhere else are Assyrian warriors made out to be as wild or to behave as strangely.

Flashing eyes, frenzy, and swirling-storm tactics are customs natural to berserk-like warriors everywhere, including those of Mesopotamia.⁹

⁵ Walter Mayer, *Politik und Kriegskunst der Assyrer*, Münster, 1995, 213ff; 220.

⁶ 205. W. G. Lambert, “Three Unpublished Fragments of the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 18, 1957–58, 38–51.

⁷ Tukulti-Ninurta Epic 5, A, 31ff as translated by Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses. An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, I, Bethesda, Maryland, 1996, 227; also Peter Bruce Machinist, *The Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta I. A Study in Middle Assyrian Literature*, Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1978, 121 with the Akkadian text. Geo Widengren, *Der Feudalismus im Alten Iran*, Cologne, 1969, 10f. For throwing off armor see the same epic 4, A, 39 (Machinist 111; Foster 225).

⁸ E.g., Klaus von See, “Der Germane als Barbar,” *Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik* 13, 1981, 42–72, 44f.

⁹ Eyes: Ammianus 16,12,46: “elucebat quidam ex oculis furor.” Even Romans did this: Tacitus, *Histories* 3,3: “flagrans oculis”; see below, note 25, and C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, London, 1952, 99. Animals: Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*, New York, 1964, 385; an Assyrian

Yet these are also customs common among Indo-European berserks, and hence could have arisen from Indo-European tradition.

By 1500 B.C., Indo-European speakers held sway from Northern India to Western Europe: east, north, and west of Assyria. Before their dispersal, their ancestors had shared a language, a religion, a heroic poetry, and, what is less well known, some striking warrior styles. Their wolf-warriors, for example, fought with wolf hoods over their head and howled like wolves, while their horse-slashers dove beneath attacking horsemen to stab the steeds.¹⁰ Berserk was one of their characteristic fighting styles, hence one may indeed ask whether Tukulti-Ninurta's mad warriors were not Indo-European berserks.

Sound method demands that the bigger the gap in time and space between comparable customs, the more elaborate the shared custom must be to prove a common origin. Shedding one's armor in sight of the enemy is an elaborate, specific, and most unlikely gesture. Having no armor is one thing; throwing it off in sight of the enemy is quite another—and not just armor, but garments as well! While this is altogether unknown to Near Eastern tradition,¹¹ it is, as we will see, found fairly often among ancient and medieval Celtic and Germanic warriors. If one adds to this the raging battle-madness and shape-shifting

warrior demon with human body and fantastic animal head (Niniveh, about 645 B.C.): Julian Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1999, 30. Storm: V. Hurovitz-J. Westenholtz, "LK3: A Heroic Poem," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 42, 1990, 1–49, esp. p. 5; Otto Höfler, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen I*, Frankfurt, 1934, 323–341; Stig Wikander, *Vayu*, Uppsala, 1941; Heinrich Beck, "Die Stanzen von Torslunda und die literarische Überlieferung," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 2, 1968, 237–250, 247f; Widengren, *Der Feudalismus im Alten Iran*, 19.

¹⁰ These styles are set forth in greater detail in my forthcoming "Wild Warriors." So far, no study has focused on the history of these styles as a whole, but good work on details has been done by Höfler, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen I*; Otto Höfler, *Der Runenstein von Rök und die germanische Individualweihe*, Tübingen, 1952; Widengren, *Feudalismus*; Helmut Birkhan, *Germanen und Kelten bis zum Ausgang der Römerzeit* (Sb. Öst. Akad. Wiss. 272), Vienna, 1970; Andrew Alföldi, *Die Struktur des voretruskischen Römerstaates*, Heidelberg, 1974; Kim R. McCone, "Hund, Wolf, und Krieger bei den Indogermanen" in W. Meid (ed.), *Studien zum indogermanischen Wortschatz*, Innsbruck, 1987, 101–154; Dean A. Miller, "On the Mythology of Indo-European Heroic Hair," *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 26, 1998, 41–60. Typically, modern surveys of Indo-Europeans and their customs such as Rüdiger Schmitt's "Indogermanische Altertumskunde," in Johannes Hoops, *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 2nd ed., Berlin, 1973ff, 2000, 384–402, fail to mention warrior styles. Indo-European dispersal occurred perhaps as late as 1600 B.C.: Robert Drews, *The Coming of the Greeks*, Princeton, 1988, but see also Asko Parpola, "The Problem of the Aryans and the Soma," in George Erdosy, *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia*, Berlin, 1995, 353–401.

¹¹ Machinist, *Epic*, 111; commenting (p. 325) on this not being Mesopotamian.

common to Tukulti-Ninurta's warriors and Indo-European berserks, it seems likely that their fighting styles share the same origin.

Tukulti-Ninurta's warriors were thus either strongly influenced by Indo-Europeans or were themselves Indo-Europeans. Neither possibility is far-fetched. Assyrians often took large numbers of prisoners into their army. Tukulti-Ninurta could have come by his mad warriors early in his reign, when he captured, as he says, "28,800 Hittites from beyond the Euphrates."¹² Besides, he calls his berserks "bondsmen" (*ardani*), which could mean his sworn war band, but the meaning of the word *ardani* shades also into "servants" and could thus mean prisoners of war.¹³

Perhaps the Assyrians adopted the berserk style from their northern Indo-European neighbors, the Iranians, who also fielded long-haired, naked, hence wild warriors.¹⁴ Even a non-Indo-European mountain people could have transmitted the custom—there is no ground to think that a warrior style is bound to speakers of only one language family. Without incoming foreigners, however, cultural and military change as radical as the appearance of berserk warriors is unlikely. Complex, disciplined societies with a stable population like that of Assyria do not turn wild again on their own: there are no examples of this in world history.¹⁵ A Hittite or other Indo-European presence—mercenaries or prisoners of war—is the most likely explanation for Tukulti-Ninurta's mad warriors, all the more so since Assy-

¹² See Mayer, *Politik und Kriegskunst der Assyrer*, 210. This would explain how they had come across the Euphrates: Hittite soldiers, attacking Assur. Enrolling the conquered: Florence Malbran-Labat, *L'armée et l'organisation militaire de l'Assyrie*, Paris, 1982, 89ff.

¹³ Widengren, *Feudalismus*, 14ff. Schmökel, *Geschichte*, suggests that when in the sixteenth century B.C. the part-Aryan Mitanni conquered Assur, they might have brought along such warrior customs, which the Assyrians then would have assimilated. No certain Aryan names are known among the middle Assyrians: Andarasena=Indrasena is not listed as Aryan by Manfred Mayrhofer, *Die Indo-Arier im alten Vorderasien*, Wiesbaden, 1966, nor by Annelies Kammenhuber, *Die Arier im Vorderen Orient*, Heidelberg, 1968, but then the Shardana in Egypt and Ugarit were also much assimilated, even in their names: Robert Drews, *The End of the Bronze Age. Changes in Warfare and the Catastrophe ca. 1200 B.C.*, Princeton, 1993, 153ff. The Mitanni, however, were charioteers, while Tukulti-Ninurta's men were on foot.

¹⁴ Widengren, *Feudalismus*, 17f; Machinist, *Epic*, 325. Franz Rolf Schröder, "Ursprung und Ende der germanischen Heldendichtung," *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift* 1939, 325–367, 337f; Schmökel, *Geschichte*, 205 and Widengren, *Feudalismus*, 10 and 33, think of Aryan Mitanni influence.

¹⁵ Cultural (language) change within a stable population is argued for India by George Erdosy, *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia. Language, Material Culture, and Ethnicity*, Berlin, New York, 1995, 23f—without convincing parallels, though.

ians of the thirteenth century B.C. adopted much else in politics and warfare from their Hittite neighbors.¹⁶

The date of Tukulti-Ninurta's battle—1228 B.C.—sets it in a very specific context: the end of the until then flourishing Egyptian, West Asian, and Greek bronze age, when waves of fighters from the north destroyed Mycenae, Troy, Hittite Hattusas, and the kingdoms in Syria. Egypt itself barely fended off the invaders. The newcomers were battle-deciding infantry. For 400 years chariots had dominated the battlefields. Now, at the end of the thirteenth century, all of a sudden infantry overcame them.

A recent well-researched study has shown how this happened.¹⁷ Chariotry always needed some infantry “runners” who kept up with the chariots to support them when it came to hand-to-hand fighting and to finish off the crews of disabled enemy chariots. Such runners were daring elite troops, “those who bear the hand-to-hand fighting, beautiful in appearance.” They even served in the rulers' guards. By and large, they were foreigners hired for their stamina and recklessness, such as the Sardinian *shardana* of Ramses II (1279–1212 B.C.) and Ramses III (1186–1155 B.C.).¹⁸ Over time it became apparent that these “runners,” if they were many, could by themselves defeat chariotry—all they had to do was to wound with their javelins one horse of a chariot. That would stop the chariot, allowing the runners to attack the crew in a fight for which they were better trained and equipped than mail-clad charioteer archers. Hitherto the first-known campaign based on these new tactics was that in 1208 B.C. by Meryre of Libya who, to conquer Egypt, hired warriors “from all the northern lands.” To fend off such invasions, established rulers likewise hired foreign infantrymen, and as the famous Mycenaean “Warrior Vase” shows, these were equipped with body armor for close combat against opposing infantry.

For Tukulti-Ninurta's warriors this means that they were among the finest, or at least most modern, warriors of the time. This may be why the king was so proud of them and had them described in such detail. Tukulti-Ninurta's campaign of 1228 becomes now the earliest known instance, for the new, battle-deciding infantry, for its body armor and

¹⁶ Mayer, *Politik*, 221ff; 235f.

¹⁷ Drews, *End of the Bronze Age*, passim, esp. 135–163.

¹⁸ “Beautiful. . .”: Merneptah's phrase: Drews, *End*, 142. *Shardana as Indo-Europeans* (with illustrations): V. Gordon Childe, *The Aryans, A Study of Indo-European Origins*, London, 1926, 72–76.

its tactics, 20 years before Meryre's Egyptian campaign. Assyria thus hired foreign foot soldiers like other kingdoms of the time, and was not the exception scholars had it thought to be.¹⁹ It befitted the Assyrians to be the first to have berserk troops in their service—always keen to modernize their army, they soon were to pioneer cavalry.²⁰

What is more, we now see what spirit bore these infantrymen to victory: the berserk mind. Even if some of the new metal, iron, was available, it seems to have had little to do with the berserks' victory: the epic describes the men's spirit so intensely that one must believe it was the decisive factor. Certainly spirit, discipline, and training matter as much in warfare as technology. As chariot runners these elite troops wore no body armor, as infantry in close combat they did. They thus may well have known both kinds of fighting, with and without body armor, which would give them the confidence that they could win against the Kassite Babylonians even without breastplates, proudly and recklessly fighting naked.

As for tactics, Tukulti-Ninurta's men needed no better order than that of a swirling whirlwind. Of similar troops at the time one might say that "the barbarian skirmisher fights on his own; with no comrade to right or left, he depends on his own round shield. Mobility rather than solidarity was essential."²¹ No cavalry is mentioned in Tukulti-Ninurta's battle, and indeed it would not be invented for another hundred years.²² This gave berserks around 1200 B.C. the edge in speed and boldness that they would later have to share with cavalry.²³ Massed, heavy-armed infantry was also only just beginning to make its appearance. This seems to be why Tukulti-Ninurta's wild men were his main force, while in later centuries berserks tended to be only a few champions, hired by a ruler.

The rise of foreign infantry in all West Asian countries of the time confirms the conclusion drawn from the fighting style of Tukulti-Ninurta's berserks, namely that they were foreigners, almost certainly Indo-Europeans. Several other features of Tukulti-Ninurta's warriors, then, may also belong to northern warrior styles. Celtic and Germanic

¹⁹ Exception: Drews, *End*, 147.

²⁰ William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power*, Chicago, 1982, 14, 18; Drews, *End*, 164ff.

²¹ Drews, *End*, 152, 158, 161; Reckless: *ibid.*, 157.

²² Warriors rode horses already in the bronze age, witness a Mycenaean drawing from Mouliaia on Crete (Barry Cunliffe, *The Oxford Illustrated Prehistory of Europe*, Oxford, 1994, 284), but cavalry troops came later: Drews, *End*, 164ff.

²³ I owe this observation to Stephen Morillo.

ecstatic fighters, too, fought like lions or other grim animals.²⁴ They, too, frightened their foes by flashing their eyes,²⁵ by snarling or roaring, and by tying up their long hair; before going into battle at Strasbourg in A.D. 354, King Chonodomar of the Alamanni wound a round, gold-embroidered band into his hair. Thracian warriors bound their hair into a topknot.²⁶ Long, well-ordered hair was a hallmark of Indo-European warriors, best known perhaps from Herodotus' account of the Spartans at Thermopylae.²⁷

Further reason to believe that the berserk style of Tukulti-Ninurta's warriors is Indo-European comes from their shape-shifting. When in the grip of fury, Celtic and Germanic berserks contorted their faces and bodies in frightening ways. Among Irish heroes, Cū Chulainn is famous for this.²⁸ Likewise tenth-century Egil: when he came to claim the *wergeld* for his slain brother, he showed the king how mad he was by drooping one eyebrow down towards his cheek, raising the other up to the roots of his hair and moving his eyebrows alternately up and down.²⁹ Celtic heroes, moreover, grew huge in battle.³⁰ Mad shape-shifting, whether Celtic and Germanic or done by Tukulti-Ninurta's men, is a telling trait of Indo-European berserks.

Half-naked fighters appear also among the Hittite king's guard, but only Tukulti-Ninurta's epic tells us that in the second millennium B.C. such "naked" fighters fought recklessly mad, throwing off armor as well as garments, inducing trance-like battle madness by dancing and shape-changing, flaunting flowing hair, flashing eyes, and attacking

²⁴ *Hrólfs saga Kraka*; Alföldi, *Struktur*, 36f. Güntert, *Geschichten*, 20; Wilhelm Grönbech, *Kultur und Religion der Germanen*, 12th ed., Darmstadt, 1997, 274; Georges Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior*, Chicago, 1970, 139–147; lions: *Iliad* 7, 256; Karl Hauck, "Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten IV," *Festschrift Siegfried Gutenbrunner* (ed. O. Bandle et al.) Heidelberg, 1972, 47–70.

²⁵ See above, note 9. Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 1,39: "acies oculorum"; Tacitus, *Germania* 4: "truces et caerulei oculi"; Ammianus 16,12,36 "elucebat quidam ex oculis furor"; also 31,13,10; Helgaqviða Hundingsbana 1,6: "hvessir augo sem hildingar"; *Volsunga saga* 42; Rudolf Much, *Die Germania des Tacitus*, Heidelberg, 1967, 101; Grönbech, *Kultur*, 266; Bowra, *Poetry*, 99.

²⁶ Homer, *Iliad* 4, 533; silver bridal decoration from Letnitsa, Bulgaria (Cunliffe, *Prehistory*, 385). Snarling, roaring: Ammianus 16,12,46.

²⁷ Herodotus 7, 208; Xenophon, *Lacedaemonians* 10, 3; Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 22, 1; Tacitus, *Germania* 38; Appian, *Celtica* 8; Ammianus 16, 12, 24; Sidonius, *Carmina* 12. Michael P. Speidel, "Commodus and the King of the Quadi," *Germania* 78, 2000, 193–197; Miller, *Mythology*, 1998, 41–60.

²⁸ Táin Bó Cuailnge; Helmut Birkhan, *Kelten*, Vienna, 1997, 968ff (ríastrad).

²⁹ Christine Fell, *Egils Saga*, London, 1975, 84 (chapter 55).

³⁰ Birkhan, *Kelten*, 1997, 975.

like a whirlwind.³¹ Armor-scorning and mad-fighting are the essential characteristics of berserkdom, and here they appear together, while elsewhere the two are often found in isolation. The Tukulti-Ninurta epic thus confirms much that one must otherwise glean from less explicit sources in later centuries. It is a major source for the berserk warrior style.³²

BERSERKS OF THE BRONZE, IRON, AND MIDDLE AGES

The guardian carved in relief on a huge monolith at the King's Gate in the Hittite capital of Hattusas (Boghaz Köy, Turkey) clearly is a half-naked Indo-European bronze-age warrior.³³ Armed with ax and sword, he wears only a short "kilt" around his loins. He flaunts a tall, elaborate comb helmet with ear and neck guards. Since wearing no body armor but a helmet was an Indo-European berserk custom,³⁴ the guardian very likely was a berserk. Standing in the King's gateway, however, he no doubt ranked very highly; hence archaeologists have wondered whether he is not wearing a cuirass after all, perhaps a leather jerkin. Yet as his nipples show, he is clearly barechested. Moreover, he is also bare-footed, and other sculptures confirm that some of the Hittites' highest ranking warriors wore only a kilt.³⁵ Hittite elite warriors clearly took pride in fighting "naked," even those who served in the king's guard. Such nakedness meant reckless blustering in the face of the

³¹ Not to mention calling on one's gods in battle and believing they would fight alongside one, striking one's foes with fear and blindness and blunting their weapons. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, *Ynglinga saga* 6; Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* II, 56 (2nd ed., Berlin, vol. I, 1956, vol. II, 1957). *Rig Veda* 2, 12, 8; 10, 121, 6; 6, 25, 6; Heinrich Zimmer, *Altindisches Leben. Die Cultur der vedischen Arier*, Berlin, 1879, 294; *Iliad*, passim; Tacitus, *Germania* 1, 3 (Hercules); Heinrich Beck, *Einige vordelzeitliche Bildenkmäler und die literarische Überlieferung*, Munich, 1964 (Sb. Bayer. Ak. Wiss., Phil.-Hist. Kl. 1964, Heft 6), 32; in the middle ages: Heinrich Beck, "Feldgeschrei," *Hoops* 8, 1994, 305–306. "God with us": Vegetius 3, 5, 4; Maurice 2, 18, 3; 7, B16, 10. It is even possible that the epic implies the wearing of helmets when it says that (only) the breastplates and garments were taken off.

³² Being this old, moreover, berserkdom cannot have been spread by fighting on horseback, which began only by the end of the second millennium (Drews, *End*, 164ff); contra: Wikander, *Vayu*, 92ff, who suggests that ecstatic cult forms (and warrior styles) spread with cavalry warfare from the Aryans to the Thracians and hence to the Germans.

³³ J. G. Macqueen, *The Hittites and their Contemporaries in Asia Minor*, London, 1986, frontispiece.

³⁴ Below, Figs. 1, 3.

³⁵ O. R. Gurney, *The Hittites*, Harmondsworth, 1952, 107, 200f.

enemy which points to the berserk fighting style. We cannot be certain about their battle madness, but the parallel of Tukulti-Ninurta's warriors makes it likely that the Hittite guard fought not only naked but also recklessly, perhaps like true berserks.³⁶

Similar helmeted and kilt-clad but otherwise naked guards, armed with swords and spears, are shown on a bronze-age fresco in the Mycenaean palace at Pylos in southwestern Greece.³⁷ In reliefs at Abydos in Egypt the Indo-European Shardana "runners" of the Ramessid pharaohs have an elaborate dress when they serve as guardsmen; in battle, however, they too wear only kilt and helmet.³⁸ Another berserk-like warrior comes from the bronze age of northern Europe: a tenth-century statuette, found at Grevenswænge in Denmark, portrays a naked warrior, wearing only a helmet, a neck ring, and belt.³⁹ Like the Hittite guardian, these Mycenaean, Sardinian, and Danish bronze-age warriors in their battle garb indeed look like berserks, but we do not know for certain whether they fought in a trance of madness.⁴⁰ Here, too, however, some help comes from the Tukulti-Ninurta epic, as it speaks of reckless frenzy and thereby suggests that naked bronze-age warriors blustered and fought recklessly like berserks.

The tradition of naked warrior images continues without break through the iron age. Eighth-century, archaic Greek statuettes portray warriors naked but for helmet, neckband, and belt, sometimes with a shield flung to their back, a telling berserk gesture.⁴¹ When seen in the larger context of bronze- and iron-age art in Europe and West Asia, these statuettes make it likely that in archaic times some Greek warriors also fought naked, that is, as berserks.

A statue from the sixth century B.C. found at Hirschlanden in Württemberg shows a similar, fully naked Celtic warrior wearing only hat or helmet, neckband, belt, and sword (Fig. 1).⁴² With Celts we are

³⁶ Compare Trajan's berserk guards, below, Fig. 2; also the Malabar amoks, below.

³⁷ Drews, *End*, 140f; 174f.

³⁸ Drews, *End*, 144f; 174f.

³⁹ Katie Demakopoulou et al., *Gods and Heroes of the European Bronze Age*, London, 1999, 94.

⁴⁰ The Hittites, certainly, shared also other Indo-European warrior styles: for a Hittite seal with animal warriors (the latter also known in the *Veda*) see Alföldi, *Struktur*, 1974, plate 2/1; McCone, "Hund."

⁴¹ Statuettes: Boardman, *Greek Art*, London, 1985, 31: the Karditsa statuette, ca. 700 B.C.

⁴² Photo: Archäologisches Landesmuseum, Baden-Württemberg, Stuttgart, inv. no. V 64, 9; neg. no. M 41/12273. Barry Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, Oxford, 1997, 62f; O. H. Frey, "Keltische Grossplastik," *Hoops* 16, 2000, 395-407.



FIGURE 1. Berserk warrior from Hirschlanden, sixth century B.C.

on firmer ground when looking for the spirit of their naked warriors. Celts were famous for fighting naked. In the battle at Telamon in Italy, in 225 B.C., they wore only trousers and capes, while their Gaesati spearmen in the forefront, to bluster, threw off even these.⁴³ Like the Hirschlanden warrior, the Celts at Telamon wore golden torcs to dare the enemy to come and get these neckbands.⁴⁴ The Hirschlanden statue with its torc thus portrays a warrior not in idealized nudity, but in the actual battle gear of naked warriors.

From the bronze-age images discussed, it is quite clear that the Hirschlanden warrior stands in a long Indo-European tradition going back to the second millennium B.C., and that the nakedness of the warrior wearing only a sword belt and neckband did not only “become a characteristic of the Celts in battle in the fifth century and after.”⁴⁵ The custom was both widespread and long lived. In 189 B.C. the Celts of Asia Minor fought thus when they exposed their bare, white skin, so the blood of their wounds would show to greater effect and to their greater glory.⁴⁶ The Romans who faced them knew how to deal with reckless foes and blind rage: they showered them with arrows, javelins, and slingshot and did not let it come to hand-to-hand fighting.

The iron age is the high point of naked fighting in western Europe. In southern Spain, in the Sierra Morena area where Celts of the interior met with Iberians from the south who had adopted archaic Greek art, bronze statuettes show naked warriors of the 5th–3rd centuries B.C. with a sword, a small round shield (*caetra*), a “power belt,” and sometimes a helmet—all typical berserk weapons. The Celts who came to Spain in the early iron age seem to have brought the berserk fighting style along, and it flourished there down to the Roman period.⁴⁷

⁴³ Polybius 2, 28, 7f; 29, 7; cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus 14,13; Livy 22, 46, 5; 38, 21, 9; 38, 26, 7; Diodore 5, 30, 3; see also the naked Celtic warrior of Pergamene art in Rome’s Capitoline Museum, the bronze statuette of a slinger in Berlin’s Pergamon Museum (Helmut Birkhan, *Kelten, Bilder*, Vienna, 1999, no. 723), and many other works of art; F. Fischer, “Bewaffnung der Latènezeit,” *Hoops* 2, 1976, 414; H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, Syracuse, 1988, 89; Birkhan, *Kelten*, 867; 960f.

⁴⁴ Golden wristbands worn in battle by Germanic warriors had the same role: Procopius, *Gothic Wars* 3, 24, 24; *Battle of Maldon*, 160f.

⁴⁵ Contra Cunliffe, *Celts*, 62ff. The “power belt” was true battle gear, witness Diodore 5,29,2: “with no more than a girdle.”

⁴⁶ Livy 38, 21, 9: “gloriosius se pugnare putant.” He also makes much of their rage. Cf. Vergil, *Aeneid* 11, 646: “pulchramque petunt per vulnera mortem.” Fischer, *Bewaffnung*, 414 needlessly sees here a contradiction between glory seeking and religious belief.

⁴⁷ Gerard Nicolini, *Bronces ibéricos*, Barcelona, 1977, e.g., nos. 15, 41, 44, 68. The Archaeological Museum in Madrid has a fair collection of such statuettes, which I studied in June 2001. Since most of the statuettes come from shrines, their sometimes overlong penises are not meant to be grotesque (compare Woden’s *ingens priapus* in Uppsala, Adam

While Celtic images of naked warriors show men in their battle gear, in Greek art images of naked warriors over time came to portray the warriors' ideal bodies rather than their true battle dress. Classical Greek art from the sixth century B.C. onward thus cannot serve as evidence about berserks. Nevertheless, in classical and in Hellenistic times backward areas of Greece still fielded berserk-like troops: tribesmen such as the Aetolians fought lightly armed and barefoot.⁴⁸

Thracian warriors also fought recklessly "naked": a silver coin of 335–315 B.C. shows a bare-chested, kilt-clad Thracian infantryman fighting a Paionian horseman from Macedonia. The Thracian tries to dive beneath the enemy's steed. Livy describes the spirit in which such an attack unfolded. In 171 B.C., he says, "Thracians, loudly yelling, and furious like long penned-up wild animals, ran ahead of all others up to the Italic horsemen and their lances. They cut the horses' legs or stabbed them in the belly."⁴⁹ The coin as an archaeological source attests the Thracians' nakedness, while Livy as a literary source attests their fury: together they warrant for Thracians the two defining characteristics of berserk warriors, nakedness and madness.

Fighting naked was once well known in early Rome, too. Looking back at old Italy's prowess, Vergil describes the Etruscan Herminius thus:⁵⁰

Great-souled, great-bodied, greatly armed warrior,
flowing blond hair on his helmless head,
bare-shouldered, unafraid of wounds
huge that he was, fighting uncovered.

of Bremen 4, 26f). Celtic naked fighting in Spain is confirmed also by the Celt-Iberian brooch in Cunliffe, *Celts* 93, that shows a naked warrior with "power belt," shield, sword, and helmet.

⁴⁸ Greek art: Nikolaus Himmelmann, *Ideale Nacktheit in der griechischen Kunst*, Berlin, 1990, 29ff. Naked Celts, however, influenced the Greeks: Jason in Apollonios' *Argonautica*, 3, 1280ff, fights "naked," for greater heroism, which is a reflection of Greek battles against naked Celts in the third century B.C. (Himmelmann, *ibid.*, 29ff). Aetolians: Thucydides 3, 97ff; Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 5, 18, 13ff.

⁴⁹ Livy 42, 59, 2f: "Primi omnium Thraces, haud secus quam diu claustris retentae ferae, ita concitati cum ingenti clamore in dextrum cornu, Italicos equites incurrerunt ut usu belli et ingenio impauida gens turbaretur; tre[—] is hastas petere pedites + [—] equorumque nunc succidere crura [—] is, nunc ilia suffodere." Coin: silver Tetradrachma of Patraos of Paionia, Collection of the American Numismatic Society 1040; *Antike Münzen Nordgriechenlands* III 2, 201f; H. Gaebler, "Zur Münzkunde Makedoniens, IX. Die Prägung der paionischen Könige," *Zeitschrift für Numismatik* 1927, 237–242, with several variant images.

⁵⁰ *Aeneid* 11, 641–644, cf. 11, 666f; Propertius 4, 1, 27–28. Georges Dumézil, *Mythes et dieux des Germains*, Paris, 1939, 86 reckons also Indian Gandharvas and Greek Centaurs among them.

Odd as this description may seem for Rome, ancient Italic tribes⁵¹ had in their ranks berserks or berserk-like warriors who fought naked, shouting, barefoot, flowing-haired, and often in single combat.⁵² Their get-up bespeaks a berserk-like trance of ecstatic recklessness and a thirst for fame that goaded them to awesome efforts.⁵³

Barefoot Germanic berserks appear first on Trajan's Column. Roman triumphal art often portrays half-naked northern Europeans, whose wild recklessness was meant to frighten, but whose loyal service was to show the emperor as ruler of the world who gathers, from the ends of the earth, hosts of fighters against all who stand in his way.⁵⁴ In scene 36 of Trajan's Column, bare-chested, bare-footed young men throng behind the emperor. Higher up the Column, the youths of scene 36 appear again in scene 42 (fig. 2).⁵⁵ In the scene shown in Figure 2, the emperor gives a speech to thank the men who won the battle at Adamklissi. No weapons are shown, though the soldiers hold shields. The legionnaires wear strip armor and carry standards, the auxiliaries wear cuirasses and helmets, but the berserks are barechested and barefooted. Having fought outstandingly well, the berserks loom large among those praised by the emperor: unlike others who are seen from the back, they halfway turn to the viewer. The one to the left, youthful, clean-shaven and ruggedly handsome, strikingly holds the middle of the scene. The one to the right is a towering figure, almost

⁵¹ They also shared the wolf-warrior style with Iranians, Greeks, Celts, Dacians, and Germans, Polybius 6,22,3 with F. W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius*, vol. 1, Oxford, 1957, 703; Vergil, *Aeneid* 1,275; 7, 688f: "fulvosque lupi de pelle galeros tegmen habent capiti," cf. 11,68of: Vergil had valuable sources of information as is clear from the parallel of Polybius; Propertius 4,10,20; Pliny NH 10,16; Alföldi, *Struktur*, 81. Celts: Strabo 4,4,3: θυμικὸν καὶ ταχὺ πρὸς μάχην. Birkhan, *Germanen*, 390f; K. H. Schmidt, "Keltisch-germanische Isoglossen" in Heinrich Beck (ed.), *Germanenprobleme in heutiger Sicht*, Berlin, 1999, 231–247. Dacians: Mircea Eliade, *De Zalmoxis à Gengis-Khan*, Paris, 1970, 13–30.

⁵² Rome and Italy: Vergil, *Aeneid* 7, 641ff, cf. Silius Italicus, *Punica* 8, 356ff (bears: 8,523). Flowing hair: *Aeneid* 11, 640ff. Barefoot: Vergil, *Aeneid* 7, 689f. Naked: see e.g., a sixth-century bronze statuette from Umbria: Ingrid Gersa and Rainer-Maria Weiss, *Hallstattzeit*, Mainz, 1999, plate 14. Open combat, single combat: Livy 1, 24ff; 42, 47; Polybius 13, 3; 36, 9; Demandt, *Der Idealstaat*, Berlin, 1993, 252ff. Use of clichés here: Hans Jörg Schweizer, *Vergil und Italien*, Aarau, 1967, 16f.

⁵³ Demandt, *Idealstaat*, 250ff.

⁵⁴ Ruler of the world: Karl Friedrich Strohecker, *Germanentum und Spätantike*, Zürich, 1965, 19; J. B. Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army*, Oxford, 1984, 46f; 146ff. Anywhere on earth: "remotis extractum lustris," Silius Italicus 3, 354f.

⁵⁵ Photo Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Rome, Inst. Neg. 41, 1336. C. Cichorius, *Die Reliefs der Trajanssäule* II, Berlin, 1896, 209, rightly states that the dress of the youths is the same as that of the bare-shirts in scenes 36 and 40.

a head taller than the men next to him. This is not happenstance, for his tall build marks him as a northerner and as a berserk.⁵⁶

We do not know to which Roman or allied unit these men belong. Tacitus says that German cohorts in the Roman army fought in their native style, naked,⁵⁷ hence Germanic berserks or berserk-like troops could rank as regular Roman auxilia, and the men in Figure 2 may have belonged to these cohorts or even to Trajan's guard, comparable to Ramses II's Shardana and, it seems, Tukulti-Ninurta's berserks.

Like the Gaesati spearmen in the battle at Telamon who fought



FIGURE 2. Two barefoot, shield-bearing berserks among Roman troops (middle and right foreground). Trajan's Column, Rome, scene 42.

⁵⁶ Nordic berserks huge: Hermann Güntert, *Über altisländische Berserker-Geschichten*, Heidelberg, 1912, 12. Berserk giants: Edda, *Hábarsðljód* 37–39; Güntert, *ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁷ Tacitus, *Histories*, 2, 22, 2; R. Wolters, "Kampf und Kampfweise," *Hoops* 16, 2000, 208–214, esp. 208 and 212 doubts this needlessly.

naked “for love of fame and out of daring,”⁵⁸ and to whom greater nakedness betokened greater daring, so the young men of Trajan’s warband will have rushed into battle not only barechested but also barefooted, outdoing other warriors of their own tribe in nakedness and showing off their utter fearlessness. Their barefootedness, like that of young Spartan warriors, steeled them against pain and strengthened their will to overcome it.⁵⁹ It marks them as berserks, even though the relief does not show them battle-mad. To show fearlessness, says Paul the Deacon, was also the reason why Heruls wore only loincloths in the war against the Lombards in A.D. 560: “whether for speed or out of scorn for wounds.” Both reasons could apply,⁶⁰ for speed greatly mattered to the unarmored who had to run up to the enemy before being showered with spears and arrows.⁶¹ For Heruls as for Gaesati and Trajan’s berserks, the principle is the same: the more naked the warrior, the more reckless and brave.⁶²

This was part of a broader warrior ideal, spelled out by Vergil when he called bare-shouldered Herminius “great-souled.” Others called northern warriors “great-souled” for wishing to win by manhood rather than guile. That ideal of winning in a fair fight, found already in Homer, also goes back to the second millennium B.C. and was still held by Emperor Julian in the fourth century A.D. and by the East Saxons in the battle of Maldon in A.D. 991.⁶³

Woden, the name of the Germanic war god (recalled in the English “Wednesday”), meant “fury.” To be berserk was to be like

⁵⁸ Polybius 2,28,7f: *διὰ δε τὴν φιλοδοξίαν καὶ τὸ θάρσος*.

⁵⁹ Spartans: Xenophon, *Lacedaemonians* 2, 3; Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 16, 6; Barefootedness likewise was to toughen Shaka’s Zulu warriors in 1816: Donald R. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, New York, 1965, 47, 52. Richard A. Gabriel, *No More Heroes. Madness & Psychiatry in War*, New York, 1987, 102.

⁶⁰ Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum* 1, 20 (*Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Longobardorum* 58, 33ff): “Qui sive ut expeditius bella gerent, sive ut inlatum ab hoste vulnus contemnerent, nudi pugnabant, operientes solummodo corporis verecunda.” Cf. Procopius BP 2, 25: *τριβώνιον ἄδρον* (speed), no shield, cf. Ludwig Schmidt, *Die Ostgermanen*, Munich, 1969, 563; Iordanes, *Getica* 117; Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina* 7, 236 (speed); Much, *Germania*, 139f.

⁶¹ Cf. Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum*, 1,52,3; Dio 38,49,1f.

⁶² It even worked for Romans: Germanicus took off his helmet in battle (Tacitus *Annals* 2, 21, 2) and while he did not do it to dare the enemy, at least he did it to be seen as brave by his own men.

⁶³ Vergil, *Aeneid* 11, 641. Great-souled: Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum* 2, 377; Iordanes, *Getica* 24. No trickery: Caesar, *Bellum Africanum* 73: “Contra Gallos, homines apertos minimeque insidiosos, qui per virtutem, non per dolum dimicare consuerunt”; Strabo 4, 4, 2; Tacitus, *Germania* 22: “Gens non astuta nec callida.” Homer, *Iliad* 7,247f; Julian, *Amminianus* 23, 5, 21; Battle of Maldon 86–90.

Woden,⁶⁴ whose followers, among them Franks in the fourth century A.D., thought that “a life that lacked deeds was the greatest grief, while wartime offered the highest happiness.”⁶⁵ When the Franks became Christians in A.D. 496, their traditional fighting styles did not perish all at once. In 553 their army in Italy still included bare-chested fighters, men without hauberks and helmets. Many perhaps were still Woden’s men: reporting their human sacrifices, Procopius says, “Though these barbarians have become Christians, they keep most of their old faith.” Similarly, the historian Agathias makes Frankish warriors out to be as mad and lacking in self-control as any northerners ever were.⁶⁶ To Frankish warriors, then, conversion to Christianity mainly meant the exchange of one battle helper for another.⁶⁷ Some went so far as to give Christ the qualities of Woden—witness the sixth-century terracotta plaque found at Gresin depicting Christ as an elite warrior, hair bound up, wearing a necklace and strutting naked.⁶⁸ Much later, in Nordic sagas, Christ as the Lord’s bravest fighter was “God’s berserk.”⁶⁹

Among Celtic warriors the custom of fighting naked also lived on from antiquity into the middle ages where it is known from reports about Irish fighters and from Irish legends.⁷⁰ In Eastern Europe, too, sixth-century Sklavenoi (Slav) warriors fought without shirts.⁷¹ Since

⁶⁴ Eleventh-century Adam of Bremen 4,26: *Wodan id est furor*, De Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, II, 94. Tacitus, *Germania* 9: “Deorum maxime Mercurium colunt.” “Mercurii dies” became Wednesday, hence Tacitus’ Mercurius meant Woden; Much, *Germania*, 171ff; Höfler, *Runenstein*, 199ff; De Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, 26ff; Dieter Timpe, *Romano-Germanica. Gesammelte Studien zur Germania des Tacitus*, Stuttgart, 1995, 114ff. Berserkdom’s relation to Woden is discussed by Höfler, *Geheimbünde*, 197–206; Martin Ninck, *Wodan und germanischer Schicksalsglaube*, Jena, 1935, 34–67; Höfler, *Runenstein*, 330ff; De Vries, *Religionsgeschichte* II, 94ff; Brian Branston, *The Lost Gods of England*, New York, 1974, 92ff.

⁶⁵ Libanius, *Oratio* 59, 128; cf. Tacitus, *Germania* 14: “ingrata genti quies.” J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent*, Oxford, 1971, 151: War was “a way of life as much as a means of survival or expansion.” Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York, 1954, 29: “War or the duel can in no case be explained through rationalistic motives.”

⁶⁶ Procopius, *Wars* 6,25. Agathias 2,5,3; 2,6,7. Merovingians: Jean-Pierre Bodmer, *Der Krieger der Merowingerzeit und seine Welt*, Zürich, 1957, 132; Georg Scheibelreiter, *Die barbarische Gesellschaft*, Darmstadt, 1999.

⁶⁷ Gregory of Tours 2, 30. De Vries, *Religionsgeschichte* II, 437.

⁶⁸ Now in St-Germain-en-Laye; Edouard Salin, *La civilisation mérovingienne*, vol. 4, Paris, 1959, pl. XI, facing p. 400; 573; good photograph in Howard Spodek, *The World’s History I*, Upper Sable River, 1988, 313.

⁶⁹ *Barlaam saga* 54, 20; 197, 8 after Güntert, *Geschichten*, 23.

⁷⁰ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, Harmondsworth, 1982, 101; Birkhan, *Kelten*, 96of. Legends: Güntert, *Geschichten*, 30ff.

⁷¹ Procopius, *Wars* 7,14,26. Antes and Sklavenoi: *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 3, 1991, 1910.

they must have owned shirts, they very likely threw them off to fight like berserks in the traditional Indo-European style. Iranians, too, upheld the customs of battle madness into the middle ages.⁷²

In Europe during the middle ages the need for berserks to strut naked grew less. As more and more warriors wore mail, all one had to do to signal outstanding bravery was to throw off one's knee-length hauberk and, more daringly, fling one's shield on the back.⁷³ Even the time-honored spear-and-sword dance could now be done fully dressed, as seen on the seventh-century helmet from Sutton Hoo.⁷⁴

Berserks in medieval fiction followed old customs and beliefs. Beowulf took a berserk stance when he shed his mail before the fight with Grendel. To meet the monster on its own terms, he threw off his helmet, hauberk, and sword.⁷⁵ In the handed-down Christianized version of the epic, however, Beowulf trusts in God's favor, not in strength flowing from an altered state of mind, as did Woden's men in earlier times.

Six-hundred years after Beowulf, Saxo Grammaticus in his early thirteenth-century "Gesta Danorum" says that Asmund flung his shield on his back to fight more fiercely and daringly and hence win greater fame.⁷⁶ Norway's King Hákon the Good in 935 and in 961 also trod the battlefield as an armor-scorning fighter:⁷⁷

⁷² Iranian Rustam: Franz Rolf Schröder, "Indra, Thor und Herkules," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 76, 1957, 23ff.

⁷³ Even in the first and second centuries A.D. some high-ranking Germanic warriors wore hauberks: Tacitus, *Germania* 24; Horst-Wolfgang Böhme, "Archäologische Zeugnisse zur Geschichte der Markomannenkriege," *Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz* 22, 1975, 153–217, 214; Wolfgang Adler, *Studien zur germanischen Bewaffnung*, Bonn, 1993, 105. Early middle ages: *Beowulf* (Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, Lexington, 1950, 311, S. V. Byrne); Hildebrandslied (saro, gūðhamo). Karl Hauck, "Germania-Texte im Spiegel mittelalterlicher Bildzeugnisse des Nordens," *Romanitas-Christianitas*, Festschrift Johannes Straub, ed. G. Wirth, Berlin, 1982, 175–216, 195f; vanishing nakedness: Karl Hauck, "Dioskuren," *Hoops* 5, 1984, 482–494, 485. Shirt: Saxo, p. 208, 25 (after Höfler, *Runenstein*, 93): "subarmali tantum subucula fretus inermem telis thoracem opposuit." Wolters, *Kampf*, 212 sees this trend operating already in the first century A.D., but offers no evidence.

⁷⁴ Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial*, London, 1978, 186. Hauck, "Germania-Texte," 197.

⁷⁵ "Beowulf," 671ff; see also 2506ff; 2518f.

⁷⁶ Saxo 1,26f: "Ferocitatis fama nostrae luceat—nudo pectore—absque periculi respectu reflexo in tergum clipeo complures in necem egit"; also 2, 64. Otto Höfler, "Berserker," *Hoops* 2, 1976, 298–304, 302f.

⁷⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Hákonar saga Góða* 6; 30, following in part the translation by Lee M. Hollander, *Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla*, Austin, 1964, 120; Hákonarmál 4; Höfler, *Berserker*, 300.

He threw off his armor
 thrust down his mail-coat
 the great-hearted lord,
 ere the battle began.
 He laughed with his liege-men.

Hákon's laughter showed his scorn of wounds. Such berserk-gestures by individuals, often kings and other leaders of men, abound in Nordic warrior tales.⁷⁸

Medieval berserks were often battle lords. In the tenth-century battle on the Vín Heath in Northumbria, Thorolf, the Icelandic Viking wore a helmet but no hauberk, and when the battle went badly, he "became so berserk that he swung his shield round to his back, and took his spear in both hands. He ran forward, striking or thrusting on both sides. Men sprang away in all directions, but he killed many. . . . Then Thorolf drew his sword, striking out on both sides, and his men also joined the attack."⁷⁹ Flinging one's shield to one's back as a berserk gesture is found on reliefs of the berserk-like Shardana guard of Ramses II and on archaic Greek warrior statuettes.⁸⁰

Icelandic sagas often tell of berserks as wild, howling fighters, sometimes as high-born champions of kings, sometimes as lowly drifters.⁸¹ One of the last-known berserks, however, was a woman in North America. One day in the eleventh century, the Greenlanders who under Karlsefni had come to settle in Vinland saw a huge host of Skraelings (Indians) bearing down on them. As the Skraelings flung rocks at them from slings, the Greenlanders retreated between boulders to make their stand. The woman Freydis had first stayed indoors, but then went outside to follow the men. When the Skraelings made for her, she snatched the sword of a dead Greenlander, "pulled out her breasts from under her clothes and slapped the naked sword on them, at which the Skraelings took fright, ran off to their boats and rowed away. Karlsefni's men came up to her, praising her courage."⁸² Insofar as Freydis fought bare-breasted and frightened her foes with unwonted courage, she was a berserk.

⁷⁸ E.g., Egil and Thoror in the battle on the Vín-Heath, *Egils saga* 53; Starkad in the fight against Herthjof, *Gautreks saga* (Genzmer, Edda, 1997, 335); Agner (Saxo 2, 64); Harold Wartooth at Brávalla (Höfler, *Runenstein*, 93).

⁷⁹ *Egils saga* 53 as translated by Christine Fell, *Egils Saga*, Toronto, 1975, 80.

⁸⁰ Drews, *End*, 144f.

⁸¹ *Hrólfs saga Kraka*; Güntert, *Geschichten*; Hans Kuhn, "Kämpfen und Berserker," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 2, 1968, 218–227, 222ff.

⁸² *Eiriks saga Rauða*, 6, translated by Gwyn Jones; women berserks: Hárbarðsljóð, 37.

Christianity forbade berserks,⁸³ but their spirit lived on. Among island Celts it survived longest. Pawns of the twelfth-century chess set from the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides are portrayed as warriors who bite their shields in battle madness.⁸⁴ Also, when in 1138 King David of Scotland met an Anglo-Norman army in the Battle of the Standard, his Galwegian and Highlander warriors claimed their right to attack ahead of his armored household knights. With lances and swords they ran into battle unarmored, full of fury and daring, only to be shot down by English bowmen.⁸⁵ The few who reached the English line achieved nothing against the armored, dismounted knights who led the defense. When they fled, they dragged the rest of the Scottish army into a rout, just as did the naked Celtic Gaesati at Telamon 1350 years earlier.⁸⁶

Despite this example of the waning effectiveness of berserk tactics against “modern” forces, Irish warriors in the thirteenth century still went into battle barechested and barefooted, armed only with axes.⁸⁷ In doing so they shared with ancient berserks the lack of armor that made them faster and more recklessly daring. Nor did the literary concept of the berserk warrior die: in late medieval sagas the word “berserk” still meant a brave, fearless warrior.⁸⁸

The history of Indo-European berserks shows the abidingness of their warrior style over more than two and a half thousand years, from 1300 B.C. to A.D. 1300.⁸⁹ Unlike Greek and Roman city cultures, northern Europe’s tribal culture changed little over the centuries,⁹⁰ and with it the berserk warrior style lasted as long as the culture of the tribes north of the Roman empire stayed intact, that is, to the coming of

⁸³ Icelandic Christian law against berserks: Lily Weiser, *Altgermanische Jünglingsweihen und Männerbünde*, Buhl, 1927, 44ff.

⁸⁴ Below, p. 278.

⁸⁵ Richard Howlett, *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I*, vol. 3, 1886, 190: “primo ingressu inermes amatis occurrent istos, animi virtute pro scuto utentes”; 196: “Videres ut hericium spinis, ita Galwensem sagittis undique circumseptum, nichilominus vibrare gladium, et caeca quadam amentia proruentem nunc hostem caedere, nunc inanem aerem cassis ictibus verberare.” *Ibid.*, p. 35: “Scotia—incolas barbaros habens—citis pedibus leviique armaturae confidentes, anxium amarae mortis exitum pro nihilo ducentes.” Stephen Morillo kindly drew my attention to this battle.

⁸⁶ Howlett, *Chronicles* 162, 192, 197; Jim Bradbury, “Battles in England and Normandy, 1066–1154,” in Matthew Strickland, *Anglo-Norman Warfare*, Woolbridge, 1992, 182–193, esp. 191. Gaesati: Polybios 2, 29 (above, p. 264).

⁸⁷ Maurice Keen, *Medieval Warfare*, Oxford, 1997, 84.

⁸⁸ *Laxdæla saga* 60 and 62; *Vatnsdæla saga* 33; Güntert, *Geschichten*, 23.

⁸⁹ Mallory, *Search*, 110f and 272, needlessly claims 6000 years of change when 2500 years will do.

⁹⁰ Stuart Piggot, *Ancient Europe*, Chicago, 1965, 22.

Christianity. The berserks' social underpinning lay in their role as guards and followers of kings, their religious underpinning was belief in a war god, and their main cultural feature was an extravagant code of honor and behavior—all strongly tied to the societies in which they flourished.

THE BERSERK MIND

As North American Indians had their distinct warrior societies, so Ancient Indo-Europeans had distinct warrior groups with their own customs and “willfulness.” The Sanskrit word *swadhā* (“inherent power, habitual state, custom”) is the same word etymologically as Greek and English *ethos* and the Latin *sodales* (“men of an organization”).⁹¹ Berserks would have formed such groups.

To do deeds of berserk daring, one had to be raging mad. Homeric warriors fought best in a powerful rage, and Gaulish warriors could not help falling into the grip of battle madness.⁹² Shouting and singing were ways to rouse such rage. Early Greek and Roman warriors screeched like flocks of raucous birds—a mark of manhood.⁹³ With a song of thunder and wind, the young Marut warriors of the *Rig Veda* awakened Indra's prowess.⁹⁴ Husky Thracian, Celtic, and Germanic war songs, like crashing waves, heartened warriors.⁹⁵

Dance emboldened even more. Not only Tukulti-Ninurta's berserks

⁹¹ Harry Holbert Turney-High, *Primitive War, Its Practice and Concepts*, Columbia, S.C., 1971, 211ff. Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* I, Munich, 1959, 883. Dumézil, *Destiny*, 62ff. Mallory-Adams, *Encyclopedia*, 631.

⁹² *Iliad* 6, 100f; 9, 237ff; Livy 5, 37, 4: “flagrantes ira cuius impotens est gens”; Strabo 4, 4, 2.

⁹³ *Iliad* 3, 2–6; *Aeneid* 7, 705; Julian says the same of Germanic warriors (*Misopogon* 337c). To Vergil, and hence to Tacitus, *Germania* 3 (though not, of course, to Von See, “Germane,” 42–72, 53) such singing betokened admirable manhood; Friedrich Klingner, *Virgil, Bucolica, Georgica, Aeneis*, Zürich, 1967, 515ff; Eduard Norden, *Die germanische Urgeschichte in Tacitus Germania*, Darmstadt, 1974, 115ff. Nor is silence always Roman and shouting always “barbarian,” contra v. See *ibid.*, 62f, see Caesar, *Bellum Civile* 3, 92.

⁹⁴ *Rig Veda* 1, 85, 2 and 10; they are heaven's singers (5, 57); Zimmer, *Leben* 1879, 294. Thunder, wind: Maurer, *Pinnacles*, 1986, 131; 133.

⁹⁵ Thracians: Tacitus, *Annals* 4,47. Celts: Livy 5, 37, 8 (387 B.C.): “Truci cantu, clamoribusque variis, horrendo cuncta compleverant sono.” Germans: Tacitus, *Germania* 3, 1: “carmina quorum relatu quem barditum vocant, accendunt animos”; *Histories* 2, 22; *Annals* 1, 65, 1: “laeto cantu aut truci sonore”; 4, 47; Ammianus 31, 7, 11: “vires validas erigebant”; Norden, *Urgeschichte*, 115ff; Much, *Germania*, 76ff, 308; J. B. Rives, *Tacitus Germania, Translated with Introduction and Commentary*, Oxford, 1999, 123f. Waves: Ammianus 16,12,43.

danced on the battlefield; Vedic Indians did the same.⁹⁶ Indra and his band of Marut warriors danced adorned with golden plates.⁹⁷ Greek and Iranian warriors likewise danced, and to Hector battle itself was dance.⁹⁸ Ancient Thracians danced on the battlefield, and so did naked Celtic warriors, wearing only golden neckbands and armrings.⁹⁹ In Caesar's time Romans still danced with weapons in hand, albeit no longer as soldiers but as teams of Salian priests. Dances, though done by all early warriors, mattered particularly to berserks as they fanned their fury.¹⁰⁰

Germanic warriors, too, danced on the battlefield.¹⁰¹ Tacitus describes the dance of their young, naked warriors thus:¹⁰²

They have only one kind of show and it is the same at every gathering. Naked youths whose sport this is fling themselves into a dance between threatening swords and spears. Training has produced skill, and skill, grace, but they do it not for gain or pay. However daring their abandon, their only reward is the spectators' pleasure.

Both Indo-European war dances and images of early medieval war dancers bear out Tacitus' tale of naked youths dancing with weapons

⁹⁶ *Atharva Veda* 12, 1, 41: "The earth (=battlefield) on whom mortals sing and dance with various noises, on whom they fight, on whom the drum 'speaks,' may that earth rout my rivals, rid me of my foes"; for help with this I thank Walter Maurer, my teacher. A Hitite bear-skin dancer: Mallory-Adams, *Encyclopedia*, 56.

⁹⁷ Stig Wikander, *Der arische Männerbund*, Lund, 1938, 67ff; Widengren, *Feudalismus*, 1969, 20; Georges Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, Chicago, 1970, 211; Birkhan, *Germanen*, 549ff. On the Maruts see also McCone, "Hund," 120f.

⁹⁸ Andrew Alföldi, "Comuti, A Teutonic Contingent in the Service of Constantine the Great and its Decisive Role in the Battle at the Milvian Bridge," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 13, 1959, 169–183, 177; Beck, *Stanzen*, 245ff; Widengren, *Feudalismus*, 20f, 56ff. Hector: *Iliad* 7, 241. Drums frenzied Iranian warriors: Franz Altheim, *Niedergang der Alten Welt. Eine Untersuchung der Ursachen*, 2 vols., Frankfurt, 1952, 46f. War dances of American Indians: McCone, "Hund," 126.

⁹⁹ Thracians: Tacitus, *Annals* 4, 47: "more gentis cum carminibus et tripudiis persultabant." Celts: Polybius 2, 97, 7; κίνησις is movements, hence dance, not just gestures as translated by W. R. Paton, *Polybius*, vol. I, Cambridge, Mass., 1967, 315. Appian, *Celtica* 8; Livy 38, 17, 4: "Gallorum ineuntium proelium ululatus et tripudia"; Tacitus, *Agricola* 33.

¹⁰⁰ Seneca, *Dialogues*, 9, 17, 4: "Ut antiqui illi viri solebant inter lusum ac festa tempora virilem in modum tripudiare." Sali: Livy 1, 20, 4; R. Bloch, "Sur les danses armées des Saliens," *Annales* 13, 1958, 706–715; Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, 211; McCone, "Hund," 133. Fury: Tacitus, *Germania*, 3, 1; Valerius Maximus 2, 62.

¹⁰¹ Plutarch, *Marius* 19; Much, *Germania*, 84; shouting the tribal name was done still in the middle ages: Karl Hauck, "Lebensnormen und Kultmythen in germanischen Stammes- und Herrschergenealogien," *Saeculum* 6, 1955, 186–223, 210f.

¹⁰² Tacitus, *Germania* 24; *Histories* 5, 17, 3; Plutarch, *Marius* 19, 4; Höfler, *Geheimbünde*, 157; Hauck, *Germania-Texte*, 189ff.

in hand. Naked, the youths were berserks. Assyrian berserks, Celtic Gaesati, even Aztec wild warriors all danced naked.¹⁰³ Indeed, being barefooted and barechested as the best getup for strenuous dancing may, in itself, have been a reason for fighting naked. Woden, as god of the berserks, led the dance. A Danish bracteate gold amulet shows him dancing, wearing but a helmet, a neckband, and a hitherto overlooked belt—like the warriors from Grevenswænge, Hirschlanden, and else-



FIGURE 3. Woden, the shape-shifting, all-round warrior (National Museum of Denmark).

¹⁰³ Gaesati: Polybius 2, 29, 6; Aztecs: below.

where.¹⁰⁴ Overarmed, like a hero, he twirls shield, ax, spear, and club, all bent to show that he shakes them as he dances (Fig. 3).¹⁰⁵

Rhythmic song and dance bonded the warriors together, entranced them, and aroused their fighting madness.¹⁰⁶ War dances, like war songs, however, also re-enacted mythical battles and thereby changed warriors into mythic heroes.¹⁰⁷ As Mircea Eliade has put it, "The frenzied *berserkir* ferocious warriors realized precisely the state of the sacred fury (*wut, menos, furor*) of the primordial world."¹⁰⁸

Woden's wolf tail, recognizable on the Danish medallion by its bent-up tip, makes him also a wolf-warrior and shape-shifter.¹⁰⁹ Changing into animal shapes, as it were, had much in common with being overcome by battle madness; this may be how bear- and wolf-warriors, too, came to be seen as wild and woundproof, in a word, *berserk*.¹¹⁰

Whether all ancient naked or half-naked warriors thought themselves woundproof, as did their medieval counterparts, is an open question. The psychological and physiological state of fighting frenzy with its rise of adrenaline levels could foster such a belief, for adrenaline "dilates the airways to improve breathing and narrows blood vessels in the skin and intestine so that an increased flow of blood reaches the muscles, allowing them to cope with the demands of the exercise. . . . During surgery, it is injected into tissues to reduce bleeding."¹¹¹

Buoyed by this "adrenaline rush," frenzied fighters may well have thought themselves stronger and less vulnerable than others. Vergil

¹⁰⁴ See Woden on the famous Finglesham belt buckle: S. Chadwick-Hawkes, "The Finglesham Man," *Antiquity* 40, 1965, 17–32.

¹⁰⁵ Photo: Dansk Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, inv. no 14/14. Museum photograph by Jesper Weng. Karl Hauck, *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit I–III*, Munich, 1985, I, 3, 1985, no. 7; see also III, 2, p. 129 and I, 1, p. 135f. "Vibrare," to shake, is the Latin word for throwing a spear: Tacitus, *Germania* 6,1; Seneca, *Epistulae*, 36, 7: "Si in Germania (natus esset) protinus puer tenerum hastile vibraret." Overarmed: Cū Chulainn in Old Irish Tales; Birkhan, *Kelten*, 967.

¹⁰⁶ William H. McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History*, Cambridge, Mass., 1995, 8; 17; 102ff.

¹⁰⁷ Songs: Tacitus, *Germania* 3, 1; Ammianus 31, 7, 11. Dance: Eliade, *Return*, 28f.

¹⁰⁸ Eliade, *ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰⁹ It has been taken for a horse tail, but its upturned end rather points to a wolf tail; witness, for example, the curled tail of the wolf on Frank's Casket; contra: Karl Hauck, "Völkerwanderungszeitliche Bildzeugnisse eines Allgottes. . . ." *Pietas, Festschrift Kötting* (ed. E. Dassmann), Münster, 1980, 566–583, 569.

¹¹⁰ Wound-proof bear warrior: *Hrólfs saga Kraka* (Gwyn Jones, *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, Oxford, 1961, 313f). De Vries, *Religionsgeschichte* II, 94ff; Wilhelm Grönbech, *Kultur und Religion der Germanen*, 12th ed., Darmstadt, 1997, 274.

¹¹¹ Charles B. Clayman (ed.), *The American Medical Association Encyclopedia of Medicine*, New York, 1998, 414.

says of the Latin Messapus that neither fire nor steel hurt him.¹¹² Of some Italic wolf-warriors such as the Hirpi Sorani, it was said that they too were not hurt by fire.¹¹³ These are but scattered and vague hints for antiquity. We are on firmer ground in the Nordic middle ages. In the latter period, berserks, as followers of Woden, thought themselves safe from wounds by iron and fire, vulnerable only to wooden clubs.¹¹⁴ Half-way around the world, the Malabar *amoks*, discussed below, “stopped neither at fire nor sword.”

Whether all half-naked warriors of antiquity roused themselves to fighting madness is unknown. It is likely, though, for Strabo says that all Celts and Germans were battle-mad, and if regular warriors were prone to battle madness, elite warriors in the first line would have raged even more. Battlefield madness was certainly a telling trait of many Indo-European warriors,¹¹⁵ for they craved the fame and “unwilling glory” praised in the *Iliad* and in the *Rig Veda* alike.¹¹⁶

To linguists, words and concepts shared by Indo-Europeans suggest that fighting madly was a very old custom that originated perhaps in the fourth millennium B.C. The word for “mad attack,” *eis-*, shared by Vedic, Iranian, and Germanic warriors, makes it likely that the berserk fighting style comes from the time before the dispersal of the Indo-Europeans.¹¹⁷ Dumézil put it thus:¹¹⁸

Aēšma [to Zoroastrians] is one of the worst evils, and later, in the eyes of the Mazdaeans, the most frightful demon, who bodies forth the destructive fury of society. Yet it only personifies as something bad a quality that gives the *Rig Veda*, from the same root, an adjective of praise for the Maruts, the followers of Indra, and for their father, the dreadful Rudra: *iṣmīn* “impetuous” and no doubt “furious.” These

¹¹² *Aeneid* 7,692: “quem neque fas igni cuiquam nec sternere ferro.”

¹¹³ Pliny, *Natural History* 2, 93, 207–208. Alföldi, *Struktur*, 77f; 125; 187.

¹¹⁴ Edda, *Hávamál*, 156; *Vatnsdoela saga* 46; Güntert, *Geschichten*, 12ff; Höfler, *Runenstein*, 93. Some also believed that wearing magical animal skins would guard them (like the reindeer coats of Thorir Hundr and his eleven in A.D. 1030). *Óláfs saga Helga* 193 and 228. Furs, of course, offer also some natural protection against blades: Pausanias 4, 11, 3.

¹¹⁵ Strabo 4, 4, 2. De Vries, *Religionsgeschichte* II, 94ff; Widengren, *Feudalismus*, 45f; Dumézil, *Religion*, 208–212.

¹¹⁶ Fame: *Rig Veda* I, 85, 8; Rüdiger Schmitt, *Dichtung und Dichtersprache in indogermanischer Zeit*, Wiesbaden, 1967, 61ff; Schmitt, *Altertumskunde*, 399.

¹¹⁷ Wikander, *Männerbund*, 59f; Altheim, *Niedergang* I, 117; Pokorny, *Wörterbuch*, 299ff; Widengren, *Feudalismus*, 19; Dumézil, *Religion*, 211; H. Neumann, S. Novak, and K. Düwel, *Schmuck und Waffen mit Inschriften aus dem ersten Jahrtausend*, Göttingen, 1995, no. 46: *aislilgalz*. The unknown nomen agentis from this root might be the Indo-European word for berserk, unless it is Μέντωρ (note 119).

¹¹⁸ Dumézil, *Mythes*, 215 (= *Idées romaines*, 1969).

words come from the root of Greek *ὄστρος*, Latin *ira*, and, it seems, from the Old Norse verb *eiskra* that describes the rage of the wild berserk warriors; hence we meet here a technical term of the Indo-European “warrior bands.”

The mind of berserk warriors in the second millennium B.C. was much the same, it seems, as that of medieval warriors two thousand years later. In English, the word “mind,” related to “mania,” comes from the same root as the Sanskrit *manas* and Greek *menos*, both meaning “spirit” as well as “fury.” For Homeric warriors *menos* meant “a temporary urge of one, many, or all bodily or mental organs to do something specific, an urge one can see but not influence.” *Menos* came from above; heroes owed their great deeds to it, and Indo-European heroic poetry sings its praise.¹¹⁹ From it arose sundry forms of abandoning oneself to new identities such as those of wolf-warriors and berserks.¹²⁰

In Old Norse the word berserk at first meant a bear-shirt warrior. But when *bera* (bear) became *björn*, the word berserk was no longer understood as bear-warrior and instead came to mean “bare-shirt.” Since those who fought without shirt and armor were reckless madmen, the word berserk took on its modern meaning of mad fighter.¹²¹ The old bear-warrior meaning is still seen, however, in the berserk custom of “biting” one’s shield. The custom is known from Snorri Sturluson’s *Ynglinga saga*, quoted above, but also from the famous twelfth-century chess set found on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. Some of the warrior pawns in that set “bite” their shields. Biting rapidly on a shield makes a sound like that of bears clacking their teeth just before they attack.¹²² Shield-biting that sounded like threatening bears further deepened the warrior’s shape-shifting trance.

Berserks thus embody an abiding spirit in unbroken tradition from Vedic and Homeric times to those of the Icelandic sagas. The history of berserk warriors offers rich religious, cultural, and military detail from about 1300 B.C. to A.D. 1300 and links the bronze, iron, and middle ages, three thousand years of history seldom understood as belonging together.

¹¹⁹ Rüdiger Schmitt, *Dichtung*, 104. Pokorny, *Wörterbuch*, 726f, cf. *Μέντωρ*.

¹²⁰ Heinrich Beck, *Einige venedelzeitliche Bildenkmäler und die literarische Überlieferung*, Munich, 1964, 12.

¹²¹ Speidel, *Wild Warriors*, forthcoming, 138.

¹²² Sturluson: above, p. 253. Bears clacking their teeth: H. Grzimek, *Encyclopedia of Mammals*, vol. 3, New York, 1990, 400.

GREECE AND ROME IN NEED OF BERSERKS: A PATTERN

Once armies became disciplined and regular, as in Mesopotamia, Egypt, classical Greece and imperial Rome, they had to hire reckless attack troops from outside—and had to watch over them.¹²³ True, Tukulti-Ninurta's epic mentions no Assyrian warriors other than the king's berserks, yet the king must have had with him regular Assyrian soldiers as well, for wherever we meet berserks, we also find regular troops to keep them in check, especially when berserks serve as guards. Thus, as seen on the Abu Symbel relief, Ramses II matched his foreign Shardana guard with a native Egyptian guard.¹²⁴ Trajan had with him barefoot berserks as well as regulars (fig. 2), and so did King Harald Fairhair of Norway in A.D. 872.¹²⁵

Greeks and Romans thought of themselves as civilized and of others as “barbarians.” The telling characteristic of “barbarism” was wantonness, whether in bragging or whining, over-eating and over-drinking, fighting rashly, or fleeing cravenly.¹²⁶ To Plato and Aristotle, gorging on food and drink, an ideal of Indo-European warriors,¹²⁷ meant lack of self-control and reasonableness, while the courage of “barbarians” was little more than mindless bragging. Besides, they had little to live for and so they rushed to their death, a view also taken of American Indians by Western anthropologists.¹²⁸ Mindlessness, in their view, was also the root of “barbarian” warrior tactics, while Greeks and Romans perfected the art of disciplined fighting.¹²⁹

It was not always thus. Greeks abandoned their inherited Indo-European ways but slowly. In the *Iliad* we see the first step on this path:

¹²³ E.g., Procopius, *Gothic Wars* 4, 33, 2 (Longobards).

¹²⁴ Drews, *End*, 154.

¹²⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, Haralds saga Hárfagra* 9. *Egils saga* 9. Compare Constantine's two guards, the Schola Scutariorum and the Schola Gentilium, *Notitia Dignitatum*, *Oriens* 11; Dietrich Hoffmann, *Das spätromische Bewegungsheer und die Notitia Dignitatum*, Düsseldorf, 1969, 279ff.

¹²⁶ Plato, *Nomoi* 637,d,8 (Celts); Plutarch, *Marius* 19,3 (Germans).

¹²⁷ Schröder, Indra; also the warrior Vrkodarah, “Wolf-belly,” *Bhagavadgita* 1,15; Plutarch, *Camillus* 5,44,6 (Gauls); Tacitus, *Histories* 2,21,1f; 4,29,1 (Germans); Historia Augusta, *Maximinus* 4,1 (a Thracian). Rhiannon Ash, *Ordering Anarchy. Armies and Leaders in Tacitus' Histories*, Ann Arbor, 1999, 42f.

¹²⁸ Courage: Aristotle, *Euthydemian Ethics* 1229b, 22f; *Nicomachian Ethics* 1115b, 24ff; *Politics* 1327b, 25. Little to live for: Ammianus 21, 13, 13, “Feritate speque postrema ad perniciosam audentiam prompti.” Losers: Strabo 4, 4, 5. Indians: Turney-High, *War*, 141ff.

¹²⁹ Polybius 2, 35, 2–3; Strabo 4, 4, 2; Seneca, *De ira* 1, 11, 3–4; Dio 38, 45, 4–5; Herodian 6, 3, 7; Dexippos, fragment 26, 5 (Felix Jacobi, FGH II A 100); Ammianus 15, 4, 11; Historia Augusta, *Maximinus* 3,1.

Greek battle groups kept quiet, listening for orders, while the Trojans yelled and shouted.¹³⁰ During the archaic period most Greeks laid aside their weapons to live peacefully in cities and donned simple dress instead of the gold-gleaming garb of Indo-European warriors.¹³¹ The well-ordered hoplite array of the classical period stood unshaken until the Athenians faced the backward Aetolians who, fighting barefoot, sent the hoplites reeling.¹³² When Athenians later needed attack troops, they hired Aetolian or Thracian tribesmen, whose speed, fierceness, and lack of armor mark them as berserklike warriors.¹³³

Early Romans, too, still shared Indo-European warrior styles. Italic tribes, kindred to Celts and Germans, brought those styles to the Italian peninsula around 1000 B.C.¹³⁴ Over time, Romans lost those ways of fighting, recast their army into an Etruscan-type phalanx, and, as they conquered the world, their warriors became uniformed soldiers. The sundry wolf, minotaur, horse, and boar standards of the legions gave way to the eagle. Dress and weapons became simplified and uniform; soldiers had their hair cut. When attacked, they stood still and kept quiet until given the signal to fight.¹³⁵ Their field commanders' worst faults were speed and daring.¹³⁶ "Rome," as Dumézil put it, "lost even the memory of those bands of warriors who sought to be more than human, on whom magico-military initiation was supposed to confer supernatural powers, and whose likeness was presented, very much later, by Scandinavia with its Berserkers and by Ireland with its Fianna."¹³⁷

In their early centuries Greek and Romans had shared not only in the mad Indo-European berserk style but also in the mythical wolf-

¹³⁰ *Iliad* 4, 427–431.

¹³¹ Thucydides 1, 6; Ammianus 23, 6, 75 (on Iranians as against Greeks).

¹³² Thucydides 3, 97ff; Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 5, 18, 13ff.

¹³³ Thucydides 7, 30; Peter Connolly, *Greece and Rome at War*, London, 1981, 49; Wulf Raeck, *Zum Barbarenbild in der Kunst Athens im 6. und 5. Jahrhundert vor Christus*, Bonn, 1981.

¹³⁴ Celts and Germans kindred to each other and much alike: Strabo 4, 4, 2; Dio 38, 46, 2; Birkhan, *Germanen*. Italic and Germanic tribes were also closely related to each other—the history of their languages shows that the two were still neighbors near the end of the second millennium B.C.: H. Fromm, "Germanisch-finnische Lehnsforschung und germanische Sprachgeschichte" in Beck, *Germanenprobleme* 1999, 213–230, 216f; Schmidt, *Isoglossen*, 234f.

¹³⁵ Miller, *Mythology*. Stand still: Caesar, *Bellum Civile* 3, 92; Maurice, *Strategicon* 3, 5, 3; 12, B 14; compare Sun Tsu, fragment 6, in Roger T. Ames, *Sun Tsu, The Art of Warfare*, New York, 1993, 247.

¹³⁶ Suetonius, *Augustus* 25, 4: "Nihil autem minus perfecto duci quam festinationem temeritatemque convenire arbitrabatur" (i.e., haste and recklessness).

¹³⁷ Dumézil, *Religion*, 210.

warrior style.¹³⁸ Indeed, Rome is famous for having been founded by a wolf warrior with a wolf ancestor, a myth common to much of Europe and Asia, including Southeast Asia, and the Americas.¹³⁹ Later, in their classical periods, Greece and Rome replaced these warrior styles with others, based on discipline, which allowed them stunning conquests, in part because marching in step gave soldiers the same bonding of oneness and energy that dancing gave to wild warriors.¹⁴⁰ Yet it would be wrong to claim that western Europe shut itself off from the old styles, for Celts and Germans upheld them.¹⁴¹

Greeks and Romans gaped at Celtic and Germanic warriors' madness (*vesania*, *iracundia*, *furor*), their fits of reckless rage, and their mindless rush into battle.¹⁴² They themselves trusted to reason, will, and order.¹⁴³ That, at least, was the theory. In practice, though, Romans too had to fight with madness: steadiness alone was not enough.¹⁴⁴ Even classical historians felt that the keenest fighting spirit, found in the troops of Alexander and Caesar, came from fighting "like

¹³⁸ Greek barefoot fighters: Aetolians, above, p. 265; Latin barefoot fighters: Vergil, *Aeneid* 7,689f. Greek wolf warriors: Homer, *Iliad* 9, 237–239; 459; 16,156–164; McCone, "Hund," 122.

¹³⁹ Vergil, *Aeneid* 7, 688f. Wilhelm Koppers, "Der Hund in der Mythologie der zirkumpazifischen Völker," *Wiener Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte und Linguistik* 1, 1930, 359–399; George Dumézil, *Horace et les Curiaces*, Paris. 1942, 126ff; Eliade, *Shamanism*, 355ff; 466f.

¹⁴⁰ McNeill, *Keeping*.

¹⁴¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (translated by John and Doreen Weightman), New York, 1977, 281ff.

¹⁴² Celts: Strabo, *Geography* 4, 195 (=4,4,2); Livy 5, 37, 4 (387 B.C.); McCone, "Hund," 113; Birkhan, *Kelten*, 968. Germans: Vitruvius 6,1,3–10; Josephus, *Bellum Iudaeicum* 2, 377; Tacitus, *Historiae* 4, 29: "inconsulta ira"; Appian 4, 1, 3; Dio 77, 20, 2; Paneg. Lat. 12, 23, 4: "tam prodigos sui." Ammianus 16,12,30: "rabies et immodicus furor"; 16, 12, 36; 25, 5, 33; 26, 7, 11; 31, 6, 3: "petulantia"; 31, 5, 12: "vesania." Iordanes, *Getica* 24: "beluina saevitia." Cassiodorus, *Var.* 1, 24, 1: "gaudium comprobari," cf. *Beowulf* 1539 *gebolgen*. Per Gustav Hamberg, "Zur Bewaffnung und Kampfesart der Germanen," *Acta Archaeologica* 7, 1936, 21–49, 39f; Dieter Timpe, "Furor Teutonicus," *Hoops* 10, 1998, 254–258, 254f. For ecstatic warriors see also De Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, 94ff. Cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 4,47 on Cohors Sugambra "prompta ad pericula."

¹⁴³ Josephus, *Bellum Iudaeicum* 4,45; *Antiquitates* 19, 1, 15 (122); Appian 4, 1, 3; Dio 38, 45, 4f. This cliché, found already in Aristotle *Politics* 1327, B 25, gets even more overworked during the third-century wars, especially in Dexippus: Bruno Bleckmann, *Die Reichskrise des III. Jahrhunderts in der spätantiken und byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibung*, Munich, 1992, 208f. *Panegyrici Latini* 12, 24, 2: "Romanum vero militem quem qualemque ordinat disciplina et sacramenti religio confirmat."

¹⁴⁴ Vergil, *Aeneid* 12,499: "irarumque omnis effundit habenas"; Silius Italicus, *Punica* 5, 158: "rabies"; *ibid.*, 172: "furentem"; Lucanus, *Pharsalia* 7, 551; 10, 72; Tacitus, *Historiae* 1, 63: "furore et rabie"; Josephus approves of frenzied attacks—if done by Romans (*Bellum Iudaeicum* 3, 485: προθυμία δαιμόνιος). Ammianus 16, 12, 37: "iretque in barbaros fremens." Claudian 7, 73, claims for Honorius, "quae tibi tum Martis rabies!" *Aeneid* 8, 700–703; Dumézil, *Religion*, 209; 390.

beasts.”¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, taken as a whole, Dumézil’s assessment is right: Rome lost the ancient warrior styles.

In middle and northern Europe, on the other hand, ancient warrior styles and fighting spirit lived on among Sarmatians, Germans, and free island Celts, as Strabo observed with keen insight.¹⁴⁶ With the Cimbri and Teutons in 120 B.C., and again with Ariovistus in 60 B.C., the old styles began to make headway against the somewhat Romanized Celts in Gaul.¹⁴⁷ When Ariovistus and his warriors faced Caesar and his troops, Cassius Dio, for the occasion, puts into Caesar’s mouth a speech that repeats many of the Greek and Roman clichés about northern warriors; but Dio’s description is not only stereotype, it is also true: these men were indeed tall, naked, reckless, loud, unruly, and rash.¹⁴⁸

Northern warriors held their own against Rome at the peak of her power, which prompted Tacitus’ quip that German freedom was deadlier for Rome than Persian despotism.¹⁴⁹ After moving the Roman frontier to the Rhine, Caesar began to recruit northern warriors. Later emperors enrolled more and more of them. Many bare-chested tribal warriors served in Roman armies in the first century A.D., among them the Germanic auxiliaries whose victory at Mons Graupius in A.D. 83 established Roman rule in Scotland.¹⁵⁰

Trajan’s berserks thus stood in an established tradition, and as fleet-footed attack troops such warriors were of great use to Roman armies.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ Appian, *Bellum Civile* 2, 151: ἐξ μάχας θηριώδεσιν εἰκόκοτα.

¹⁴⁶ Sarmatians (“Scythians”): Lucan 7, 432ff; Germans: Strabo 4, 4, 2; Seneca, *Dialogi* 4, 15, 1; Tacitus, *Historiae* 4, 16, 1: “Germani laeta bello gens.” Ammianus 16, 12, 46: “Alamanni bella alacriter ineuntes.” Hans Haas, “Die Germanen im Spiegel der römischen Dichtung vor und zur Zeit des Tacitus,” *Gymnasium* 54/55, 1943/44, 73–114, 111; George Vernadsky, “Der sarmatische Hintergrund der germanischen Völkerwanderung,” *Saeculum* 2, 1951, 340–392; Insular Celts: Birkhan, *Germanen* 1970, 391; 439; Stephen S. Evans, *The Lords of Battle, Image and Reality of the Comitatus in Dark-Age Britain*, Woodbridge, 1997.

¹⁴⁷ Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 1, 48; 7, 65; 8, 13; 4, 12–15.

¹⁴⁸ Dio 38, 45, 4–5, going far beyond Caesar, *Bellum Civile* 1, 40.

¹⁴⁹ Tacitus, *Germania* 37, 3, “Quippe pro regno Arsacis acrior est Germanorum libertas.” *Annals* 2, 88 [Arminius]: “florentissimum imperium lacessierit.” James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, Oxford, 1994, 118 calls Germanic culture at the time “the most authentic Indo-European,” though Sarmatians, Alans, Slavs, and Balts might equal them if we knew more about them.

¹⁵⁰ Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 7, 13, 1; Aurelius Victor, *Caesares*, 3, 14f; Michael P. Speidel, *Riding for Caesar. The Roman Emperors’ Horse Guard*, London, 1994, 12ff. By the early fourth century Rome even felt a need to stand up to the northerners culturally and forbade the wearing of long hair or furs in the city: *Codex Theodosianus* 14, 10, 4: “Maiores crines, indumenta pellium etiam in servis intra urbem sacratissimam praecipimus inhiberi” (A.D. 416). Scotland: Tacitus, *Agricola* 36.

¹⁵¹ Tacitus, *Historiae* 2, 22 (with 2, 17); see also *Historiae* 2, 28; 2, 32; 2, 35; 3, 21; *Annals* 4, 73.

Under him, bare-chested berserks are seen among the emperor's escort for the first time. Thereafter, the role of unprotected, berserk-like warriors in the Roman guard grew steadily. In A.D. 296 the would-be emperor Allectus joined his Frankish guards for battle dressed as they were in shirt or coat only, and without armor.¹⁵² During the conquest of Italy in A.D. 311, Constantine's victorious horseguards wore, in true berserk fashion, no armor, only helmets, while Maxentius' losing guardsmen were burdened with knee-length hauberks.¹⁵³ Wearing a helmet but no armor was, as we have seen, a berserk custom from the bronze age to the time of the Icelandic sagas.¹⁵⁴ Constantine's foreign guardsmen paralleled Tukulti-Ninurta's berserks also in that both troops fought with the ruler in their midst.

Emperor Julian, like Allectus before him, wore no cuirass when he charged into the enemy during the ill-fated retreat from Ktesiphon in A.D. 363. Ammianus says that Julian "did not think of his cuirass" (*oblitus loricae*), which has often been understood to mean that Julian forgot his cuirass in haste or in a fit of absentmindedness. The word *oblitus*, however, can also mean that Julian purposely put the cuirass out of his mind. Certainly, Julian plunged recklessly into the fray to rouse his followers to fighting madness (*iras sequentium excitans*).¹⁵⁵ It was a berserk feat by an emperor who, from first to last, relied on wild northern warriors.¹⁵⁶

Toward the end of the empire, when most Roman elite troops were Germans, Gratian (375–383) allowed his men to shed first their cuirasses, then their helmets.¹⁵⁷ By this time the berserk fighting spirit

¹⁵² *Panegyrici Latini* 8, 16, 5.

¹⁵³ Constantine's arch in Rome, battle at the Milvian Bridge: Speidel, *Riding*, 1994, 161, plate 20; likewise Galerius' winning guard as shown on his arch: Hugo Meyer, "Die Frieszyklen am sogenannten Triumphbogen des Galerius in Thessaloniki," *Jahrbuch des deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 95, 1980, 394. Constantine's troops, Germanic: Libanius Or. 30, 6; Zosimus 2, 15, 1; Michael P. Speidel, "Raising New Units for the Late Roman Army: Auxilia Palatina," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50, 1996, 163–170, 170.

¹⁵⁴ Helmets, but no armor; figs. 1, 3; *Egils saga* 53.

¹⁵⁵ Ammianus 25, 3, 3 (to be understood like the "cavendi immemor" 25, 3, 6). See *Oxford Latin Dictionary* s.v. "obliviscor." Discussion: Bleckmann, *Reichskrise*, 384. Ammianus 25, 3, 6: "iras sequentium excitans audenter effunderet semet in pugnam." Ammianus' report excludes the suicide hypothesis of Gerhard Wirth, "Julian's Perserkrieg. Kriterien einer Katastrophe," in Richard Klein (ed.), *Julian Apostata*, Darmstadt, 1978, 455–509, esp. 490.

¹⁵⁶ Julian, *Letter to the Athenians* 285 B.C.; Ammianus 25, 4, 10: "augebat fiduciam militis dimicans inter primos."

¹⁵⁷ Vegetius 1, 20: "itaque ab imperatore postulant primo catafractas, dein cassides deponere"; Erich Sander, "Die Germanisierung des römischen Heeres," *Historische Zeitschrift* 160, 1939, 1–34, 30f; Michael P. Speidel, "Who Fought in Front?" *Gedenkschrift Eric Birley*, ed. B. Dobson and W. Eck, Cologne, 1999.

of mad attack had pervaded the Roman army and changed its tactics. Thus, in A.D. 354 Constantius II won a battle against the Alamanni when three of his officers, Arintheus, Seniauchus, and Bappo, rushed the enemy in disorderly, wild lunges: “non iusto proelio sed discursionibus.”¹⁵⁸ Northern freedom, daring, and yearning to outdo other warriors, had replaced Roman order and drill; heroic single combat had replaced disciplined movement of units. The berserk spirit held the field.¹⁵⁹

In the battle at Adrianople in A.D. 378 this undisciplined spirit of attack sealed the fate of Emperor Valens and the Western empire. Rome lost the battle because its army was no longer Roman but consisted mainly of tribal warriors imbued with the spirit of reckless attack rather than Roman discipline. At Adrianople, these warriors charged, against orders and at the wrong time, thereby upsetting the emperor’s battle plan. When they fell back—also a Germanic custom, befitting more lightly armed tribal troops—they brought on the great rout, a fact historians have overlooked, but nevertheless the proximate cause for the fall of the Roman empire.¹⁶⁰ Berserks may have helped Assyria a great deal, for after Tukulti-Ninurta Assyria rose meteorlike in the wars of the time. Berserks likewise proved useful to Rome for a long time, as they did under Trajan. However, though berserks fought fearlessly, one needed to control their stormy unruliness. Tukulti-Ninurta and Trajan had their berserks well in hand, and Julian in A.D. 363 still had the power to hold back teeth-gnashing warriors until the right moment. Valens did not, and so he failed.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Ammianus 15, 4, 11. Compare Emperor Julian’s tactics criticized by Gregor Nazianzenus Or. 5, 13 as ἀτάκτοις ἐκδρομαίς.

¹⁵⁹ Bodmer, *Krieger*, 120 (on Merovingians): “Nicht die Disziplin und die reibungslos funktionierende Organisation waren hier ausschlaggebend, sondern der kriegerische Schwung.”

¹⁶⁰ Ammianus 31, 12, 16. Roman tactics was never to give ground, Germanic tactics included fleeing and then returning to the attack: Caesar, *Bellum Civile* 1, 44; Tacitus, *Germania* 6, 4; *Annals* 1, 56; 2, 11: “fugam simulantes,” cf. 2, 14; Fronto, *Strategemata* 2, 3, 23. Maurice, *Strategicon* 11, 3 offers a strange contradiction (a manuscript error?), followed by M. Springer, “Kriegswesen” in J. Hoops, *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* 17, 2001, 341. More lightly armed troops: R. S. Smail, *Crusading Warfare*, Cambridge 1956, 78; cf. Maurice, *Strategicon* 3, 10, 15. Overlooked: Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe AD 350–425*, Oxford, 1996, 266; see Speidel review thereof, *American Historical Review*, 1997, 1139.

¹⁶¹ Julian: Ammianus 16, 12, 12: *Stridore dentium infrendentes*. Valens: Ammianus 31, 12, 16: *immature proruperant*.

MAD WARRIORS WORLDWIDE

Having outlined the history of Indo-European berserks, we may now look for mad warriors elsewhere in world history. Fighting madness, individual and in groups, is in the nature of mankind and has often been harnessed for military purposes; witness, for example, the Aztec *quachic* warriors as described by Manuel Lucena Salmoral:¹⁶²

The [Aztec] army was centered around those veterans or professional soldiers called the *quachic*, who had vowed never to retreat in battle and always took up the most dangerous positions in combat. They were considered mad and likely to live short lives, though they enjoyed certain privileges, such as being allowed to dance with the courtesans at night in the *cuicalli* or house of song. Sahagún wrote: "They were called *quaquachictin*, which is the name for deranged albeit valiant men in war. . . also *otomi otlaotzonxintin* which means 'otomis shorn and reckless.'" . . . They were great slaughterers but held to be incapable of taking command.

As stalwarts marked by their unusual hairstyle, the *quachic* neatly match longhaired Indo-European warriors as well as the shorn Malabar *amoks*, to whom we will turn below. The *quachics'* madness very likely refers to their fighting in a trance-like state, which would explain why they did not reach positions of command. Their dances at night in the "House of Song" may have been not so much sexual privilege as a form of "keeping together in time," a military exercise that brings about an intense feeling of oneness and energy as well as a trance that could easily lead to fighting madness.¹⁶³ Aztecs danced before battle, as a Spanish eyewitness reports:

That night more than a thousand knights got together in the temple, with great loud sounds of drums, shrill trumpets, cornets and notched bones. . . . They danced nude . . . in a circle, holding their hands, in rows and keeping time to the tune of the musicians and singers.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Manuel Lucena Salmoral, *America 1492, Portrait of a Continent 500 Years Ago*, New York, 1990, 202. Nature of mankind: John C. Spores, *Running Amok: A Historical Inquiry*, Athens/Ohio, 1988, 7. Yamamoto Tsunemoto, *Hagakure* (1710), (translated by William Scott, New York, 1979, 30): "A real man does not think of victory or defeat. He plunges recklessly towards an irrational death."

¹⁶³ McNeill, *Keeping*, 8; 103ff.

¹⁶⁴ Antonio Herrera, quoted by McNeill, *Keeping*, 104. See also Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, 125: "En acabando las fiestas y bailes y sacrificios . . . luego le habían de venir a dar guerra."

Dancing “naked” may have strengthened their frenzy, but they did not scorn the quilted cotton armor that most Aztec elite warriors wore.¹⁶⁵ Nor do we know whether they blustered and bragged, or provoked their enemies by other shows of daring. Nevertheless, in their dancing frenzy and fighting madness, as well as in their decisive role in battle and resulting high status, the *quachics* closely resemble Indo-European berserks.

The similarities between quachics and berserks could be due to shared historical origins—there was contact between Eurasia and America across the Bering Sea, and Aztec wolf warriors look much like Indo-European wolf warriors. If not stemming from contact, such similarities must be due to human traits common to the structure and functioning of all warrior societies.¹⁶⁶ The more willing a warrior is to attack recklessly, the more useful he may be in battle; hence warrior societies often fostered and rewarded such behavior, granting high rank to the reckless. To be reckless, a warrior had to be mad in some way, whether by drug, oath, belief, dance, or magic. And to strike fear into the heart of the enemy, he had to flaunt his recklessness by insignia, helmet, hairstyle, and dress, or lack thereof. Such structures and functions no doubt underpinned Indo-European berserkdom as well: without them it would not have abided so long and spread so far.

Luckily we know much about such warriors from the no-retreat societies of the North American Plains Indians. Among the Arapaho, for example, the leader and his four associates in the Dog Dance pledged never to retreat. “They went into battle with scarves trailing which at the beginning of the action they staked to the ground so that they could not flee. Even worse was the plight of the Oglala Dakota Brave Hearts, whose no-flight men went into battle with such a vow but armed only with rattles or deer dew-claws tipped with iron. With these inadequate weapons they rushed the enemy and tried to stab them before they could draw the bow.”¹⁶⁷ Tying themselves to these handicaps, they were as recklessly brave as berserks. They also fought nearly naked and thus differ from berserks only in that perhaps they bragged less during the fight.

¹⁶⁵ Ron Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, Oklahoma, 1988, 88 and p. 38, fig. 2.

¹⁶⁶ Contact: Eliade, *Shamanism*, 333ff; Lévi-Strauss, *Tropiques*, 281ff. Speidel, *Wild Warriors*, forthcoming. McNeill, *Keeping*, shows military dancing frenzy to be a worldwide phenomenon.

¹⁶⁷ Turney-High, *War*, 1971, 211f.

The worldwide character of these warrior societies and their role in battle makes it hard to determine whether the reckless fighting style in India is of Indo-European origin or arose independently. In 1662, Johan Nieuhof, serving in the Dutch East India Company, described the *amoks* he observed on the Malabar coast as an elite troop among the Nayro warrior caste:¹⁶⁸

Tho' the *Nayros* in general are very good soldiers, yet there is a certain kind among them called *Amokos*, who are esteemed above all the rest, being a company of stout, bold, and desperate bravadoes. They oblige themselves by most direful imprecations against themselves and their families, calling heaven to witness, that they will revenge certain injuries done to their friends or patrons, which they certainly pursue with so much intrepidity, that they stop neither at fire nor sword to take vengeance of the death of their master, but like mad men run upon the point of their enemies swords, which makes them be generally dreaded by all and makes them to be in great esteem with their kings, who are accounted more potent, the greater the number they entertain of those *Amokos*. . . . Persons of the chiefest rank, if they will be admitted in the number of the *Nayros*, must have the king's peculiar leave for it, and are afterwards distinguish'd by a gold ring they wear on the right arm.

If one judges by their Sanskrit name, related to Greek *aner*, “man,” and Roman Nero,¹⁶⁹ the *nairs* (“heroes”) were warriors of Indo-European tradition.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, they share many customs with Indo-European elite warriors, such as calling down “dire imprecations” upon themselves and their families if they are not faithful to the death,¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Johan Nieuhof, *Voyages and Travels to the East Indies 1653–1670* (1704 translation), ed. A. Reid, Oxford, 1988, 263; Spores, *Amok*, 16f.

¹⁶⁹ Pokorny, *Wörterbuch*, 765; M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1889, 529, 567; Georges Dumézil, *Les dieux souverains des Indo-Européens*, Paris, 1986, 214. That “nair” still meant “hero” is reported by Johan Albrecht von Mandelslo, *Morgenländische Reysebeschreibung*, Schleswig, 1658, 142.

¹⁷⁰ Dumézil, *Religion*, 207; 210ff; Widengren, *Feudalismus*, 36; 42ff. They are described as an exclusive warrior caste by Camões around 1550, *Lusiadas* 7, 36–39: “Os Naires sós são dados ao perigo das armas; sós defendem da contrária banda o seu Rei.”

¹⁷¹ A custom known from Indo-European military oaths among Hittites, Batavi, Emperor Julian's Frankish troops, and, notably, Vedic Indian warriors. Hittites: Norbert Oettinger, *Die militärischen Eide der Hethiter*, Wiesbaden, 1976; Tacitus, *Histories* 4, 15: “paternis execrationibus universos adigit,” explained by Ammianus 21, 5, 9f: “pro eo.” Julian's Franks: Ammianus 21, 5, 10. Hoops 6, 1986, 537–542; Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda* II, Oxford, 1999, 324; Vedic: Heinrich Lüders, *Varuna* II, Göttingen, 1959, 655ff.

wearing golden armbands,¹⁷² and determining, by their number, their leader's prestige.¹⁷³ The *amoks* also shared with Indo-European berserk-like troops revenge for their leader as a cause for their reckless attacks: at the murder of Caligula in A.D. 41, the German bodyguard went berserk to avenge the murder of their prince.¹⁷⁴ In defeat, Germanic troops often stayed on the battlefield to avenge their fallen; indeed, to avenge a fallen leader or fellow warrior was one of the main duties of Anglo-Saxon warbands.¹⁷⁵

More specifically berserk is the *amoks'* mad run at the blades of the enemy, heedless of fire or sword.¹⁷⁶ Another berserk trait is flaunting their madness by their haircut (on the eve of attack they shaved head, face, and eyebrows),¹⁷⁷ and always holding their weapons drawn in their hands—like “loaded guns,” says Álvaro Velho who in 1498 came with Vasco da Gama to Calecut.¹⁷⁸ Like Vedic warriors, *nairs* (and hence *amoks*) furthermore shared with Nordic berserks the custom of helping themselves to other men's women and goods: neither ruler nor community kept them from doing so since they needed such men for war, much as found in Plato's *Republic* that would grant sexual privileges to the best fighters, or like late-Roman emperors who granted such rights to their Germanic guards.¹⁷⁹

All of this, however, is not enough to prove that the fighting styles of the Malabar *amoks* and the Indo-European berserks share a common origin. While *amok* warriors were every bit as brave and madly reckless as berserks, they seem not to have thrown off armor or garments in

¹⁷² Georges Dumézil, *Mythes et Dieux des Indo-Européens*, Paris, 1992, 178f: at the time of the Mahabharata, elite warriors wore golden arm rings, as did Indra and his warband, the dancing Maruts. The golden arm rings worn by *nair* leaders are reported by other travelers as well: Mandelslo, *Reysebeschreibung* 141. Arm rings as a custom of elite Indo-European warriors: Strabo 4, 4, 2; Höfler, *Runenstein*, 191f; Much, *Germania*, 388; Widengren, *Feudalismus*, 57f, 62; Heiko Steuer, “Interpretationsmöglichkeiten archäologischer Quellen zum Gefolgschaftsproblem,” in G. Neumann and H. Seemann, *Beiträge zum Verständnis der Germania des Tacitus* II, Göttingen, 1992, 203–257.

¹⁷³ Polybius 2, 17, 12; Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 6, 15, 1–2 (Celts); Tacitus, *Germania*, 13, 2 (Germans).

¹⁷⁴ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* 19, 1, 15 (122); Suetonius, *Caligula* 58; Speidel, *Riding*, 23f, 67.

¹⁷⁵ Maurice, *Strategicon* 11, 3; *Beowulf* 590–597; Fight at Finnsburg; Battle of Maldon 207ff; Stephen S. Evans, *Lords of Battle*, Woodbridge, 1997, 70f.

¹⁷⁶ Above, p. 277.

¹⁷⁷ Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, London, 1903, 18–23.

¹⁷⁸ Álvaro Velho, *Roteiro da primeira viagem de Vasco da Gama*, ed. Neves Águas, Lisbon, 1988, 78: “São homenes carregados, porque trazem aquelas armas nuas nas manos.”

¹⁷⁹ Vedic warriors: Dumézil, *Destiny*, 70f. *Nairs*: Mandelslo, *Reysebeschreibung*, 141f. Berserks: Güntert, *Geschichten*, 9ff. Plato, *Republic* 468 b–c. Late-Roman emperors: Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 38, 5–7; Zosimus 2, 42, 1.

sight of the enemy, for they strutted about barechested as a matter of course.¹⁸⁰ This robs us of an essential criterion for whether the *amoks* stand in the berserk tradition. Wild bands of Indo-European Vedic warriors are known,¹⁸¹ but to claim a direct historical relation between them and the Malabar *amoks*, one would have to find post-Vedic reckless Indian warbands between 500 B.C. and A.D. 1500. This seems possible, for the history of warfare in ancient and medieval India has been little studied, and is still largely unknown. Until it is better known, the origin of the Malabar and Malay *amoks* remains obscure and a promising subject for research.

The title “amok” is of little help in tracing the origin of these Malabar warriors. It may come from the Sanskrit *amogha* (unfailing), as in the warrior name Amogha-Vikrama (unfailing valor) and may have meant “unfailing avenger.”¹⁸² But since among Malays *amok* troops were famous, the Malabar *amoks* may have drawn their title from them, that is, from the Austronesian word *amok* or *hamok* for “fierce attacker.”¹⁸³ If so, the word, and perhaps parts of the custom itself, were brought to the Malabar coast during early Malabar-Malay contact or by the Portuguese from Malacca.

Since warrior customs endured for thousands of years, one may even ponder a Paleo-Eurasian-American historical relationship that would include North American no-retreat societies as well as Malay *amok* warriors of Southeast Asia, whose Austronesian forebears came to Indonesia from China by way of Taiwan and the Philippines. Of all this we cannot be certain, but whether or not these traditions arose independently of each other, they lend themselves well to comparative studies that widen our understanding of mad warriors and their societies worldwide.

CONCLUSION

Literary and archaeological sources allow us to trace Indo-European berserks from the second millennium B.C. to the second millennium A.D., from bronze age epics to Icelandic sagas, and from West Asia to

¹⁸⁰ Álvaro Velho, *Roteiro*, 76, says that on the Malabar coast men of standing went barechested: “E andam nus da cinta para cima . . . os mais honrados”; likewise Mandelslo, *Reysebeschreibung*, 141.

¹⁸¹ Above, notes 94, 96.

¹⁸² Monier-Williams, *Dictionary*, 83. Other etymological suggestions: Yule-Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 18ff.

¹⁸³ B. Blust, *Austronesian Comparative Dictionary*, in preparation at the Department of Linguistics, University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

North America. We can follow their peculiar customs such as frenzied dancing and naked fighting, and probe into their ideals of reckless bravery.

Indo-European history from the iron age to the middle ages thus gains new details and perspectives. The rich evidence for berserks points to an origin—or a presence—of this warrior style in Proto-Indo-European times. However, reckless warriors like Aztec *quachics* and Malabar *amoks* occur in many other cultures as well, which holds great promise for a worldwide comparative and historical study, here only sketched and yet to be undertaken.

The berserks' role in battle greatly changed over the centuries. In the haphazard hand-to-hand fighting at the end of the bronze age, mad attackers achieved much, but later they fared badly against disciplined troops, above all those with archers in their ranks, such as the Romans¹⁸⁴ or the Norman English. Berserk fighting survived longest in small-troop or single combat roles such as those described in medieval Scandinavian sources. Against modern weaponry, berserk attacks stand no chance. In World War II, for example, gallant Japanese *banzai* charges gained nothing.¹⁸⁵

Nevertheless, the thought of a berserk attack still arouses in us feelings of empathy. That helps us understand the history of this warrior style and the mindset that gave rise to it. It is not altogether true that, as men, ancient warriors elude us¹⁸⁶—in understanding berserks we can bridge the gap. As Northrop Frye said: “Genuine joy is in those rare moments when you feel that although we know in part, we are also part of what we know.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Livy 38, 21, 8ff; Herodian 6, 7, 8 (A.D. 235).

¹⁸⁵ It remains to be seen whether drug-induced fearlessness (the “chemical soldier”) may have a future, but socially acquired fearlessness, bragging, and whirlwind tactics do not: Gabriel, *Heroes*.

¹⁸⁶ Thus Piggott, *Europe*, 260.

¹⁸⁷ *The Educated Imagination*, Bloomington, 1964, 33.