

Understanding Embodiment Through Lived Religion: A Look at Vernacular Physiologies in an Old Norse Milieu

Frog

University of Helsinki

<i>Ero vǫlor allar</i>	<i>frá Viðólfri,</i>
<i>vitcar allir</i>	<i>frá Vilmeiði,</i>
<i>enn seiðberendr</i>	<i>frá Svarthǫfða,</i>
<i>iotnar allir</i>	<i>frá Ymi komnir.¹</i>

All <i>vǫlvas</i> are	from Viðólfri,
all sorcerers	from Vilmeiðr,
yet <i>seiðr</i> -workers	from Svarthǫfði,
all giants	from Ýmir come.

The materiality of lived religion manifests itself in countless ways. These include fundamental understandings of embodied experience. Understandings of bodies are socially constructed and result in what is called a *body image* – i.e. a symbolic and iconic model of what our body is (and is not).² The resulting body image can be thought of as an imaginal understanding of the body’s physiology. In Western cultures today, medical science is fundamental to people’s understandings of the body and how it works. The internalization of the body image occurs in the dynamic dialectic between our empirical experiences and imaginal perceptions on the one hand and, on the other, a full spectrum of circulating discourses³ about health, fitness, illnesses, pains, nutrition, muscles, organs, joints, emotions, souls, death, ghosts, psychics, and so on and so forth. As we negotiate these discourses, encounters with

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medical specialists, with their dazzling technologies, scientific descriptions, diagnoses, remedies and models of health, provide authoritative frames of reference for developing our understanding. The outcome might vary from person to person, but at a social level it results in a biologically defined *hegemonic body image*, or an image that is the predominantly-shared frame of reference of people in society. In pre-modern cultures, body images were also internalized through the dialectic between perceived experiences and authoritative specialists, but the specialists had very different technologies. We tend to think about technologies in terms of mechanical and electronic devices. However, technologies are basically tools, techniques and strategies for accomplishing tasks. It is thus reasonable to talk about *ritual technologies* and associated specialists in those technologies. The development of understandings of the materiality of the body and vernacular physiologies can be considered in relation to those technologies and the specialists who use them. On the other hand, there seem to have been multiple technologies associated with different specialists in the Old Norse world. It is not clear that all of these specialists shared a single body image. Consequently, it is reasonable to consider that lived religion may have resulted in different body images for people aligned with different practices and specialists.

The present chapter considers whether there may have been multiple body images co-existing in an Old Norse milieu. This is explored by interrogating the relationship between ritual specialists, the technologies of their practices, and the body image with which the technologies interface. The institutions taken as examples for comparison are *berserker*, *völur* and what will be described as deep-trance specialists. This chapter does not seek to offer a full account of each institution and its sources, which is not possible in a short article. The aim here is to open the question of whether these practices may have been interfaced with different body images. This possibility is not unlike the technology of classic Chinese acupuncture existing alongside Western medicine although the former is interfaced with an incompatible body image based on the movement of life energy along bodily meridians.⁴ However, the Chinese and Western body images are today engaged as alternatives for our biologically defined hegemonic

understanding of all ‘humans’. In the epigraph above, *vǫlur* and other types of specialists are each defined in terms of a common origin alongside *jǫtnar* ‘giants’. When ‘human’ is not defined biologically on the basis of the empirical materiality of the body, it pulls the rug out from under our basic ontologies of social identities and our fundamental modern distinction between ‘real’ and ‘not real’. In its place, we find an ethnocentric construct of ‘people like us’ from which ‘others’ can be fractionally differentiated – i.e. by potentially subtle increments of individual features – both physically and at an imaginal level. As a consequence, sameness or difference that we would class as supernatural may be equally or more important than empirically observable bodily features.⁵ Our own ontologies incline us to interpret the origin of all *vǫlur* from Viðólfir in terms of an origin of characteristic practices that are taught and learned and thereby of the social role of a *vǫlva*. However, when this origin is presented as comparable to the origin of *jǫtnar* from Ýmir, it becomes necessary to question whether *vǫlur* are being distinguished as somehow physiologically different from the hegemonic norm of ‘people like us’, and, if so, how such differentiation relates to the ritual technologies on which this social identity relies.

Background

There has been a great deal of discussion surrounding conceptions of ‘souls’ and ‘spirits’ connected with vernacular religion, magic and ritual in an Old Norse milieu.⁶ The conclusions of these studies vary in relation both to the material foregrounded and to the scholar’s focus and methodology. Scholars tend to focus on the term and concept of *seiðr*, which gets connected to the *vǫlva*, deep-trance specialists, as well as being linked to a variety of other magic and ritual practices. The orientation of these studies is customarily to reconstruct and generalize a more or less hegemonic model of the supernatural for the Old Norse world, a model often compared and contrasted with neighbouring and historically related cultures. *Berserkir* are sometimes addressed in these discussions⁷ but they are not usually seen as performers of *seiðr* and have generally been at the centre of a separate debate.⁸

The present discussion differs from earlier research on the following key points: *a)* the focus is on relationships between embodied experience and ritual technologies; *b)* ritual practices are approached in terms of technologies that are not assumed to be the same or even necessarily compatible for all varieties of ritual specialist; *c)* ritual technologies are considered to interface with body images and understandings of the unseen world, *d)* which are reciprocally accessed and internalized through practices and behaviours and the discourse surrounding them; and *e)* individuals are considered to relate to specific practices in different ways and to different degrees according to, for example, social role, age, status, occupation, interest and their relationships and interactions with authoritative individuals.

The ethnocentric image of ‘people like us’ can be assumed to include a hegemonic body image. In his massive comparative study, Clive Tolley argues with a linguistic and philological emphasis that there is a lack of evidence for a Norse conception that ‘people like us’ had a free-soul. In other words, Tolley argues that an individual’s consciousness or ‘soul’ was not generally conceived as able to leave the body and travel independently of it; he attributes cases that would appear to represent shamanic soul-journeys to Sámi contacts and narrative strategies of ‘othering’.⁹ A body image based on a penetrable body boundary without a free-soul appears to have entered North Finnic cultures with an incantation-based ritual technology during the Iron Age.¹⁰ This body image allowed an individual to affect things at a distance through will, intention and perception, but consciousness could not be active independent of the body.¹¹ As I have sought to show elsewhere, the relevant technology was strategically contrasted with, and gradually displaced, inherited forms of shamanism,¹² and also shamanism among Sámi populations that eventually were linguistically assimilated.¹³ Later Scandinavian and Finno-Karelian legend traditions similarly seem to identify the separable soul with the Sámi as ‘other’.¹⁴ In contrast, supernatural journeys by non-Sámi appear to be conceived of in terms of transformations of the physical body.¹⁵ Norse emotions and illness seem to have been similarly conceived of in terms of forces and influences (including via perception or awareness as a form of interaction)

that penetrate the boundary of the body image; that boundary became more open in relation to fear and passivity, or more resilient in relation to strength of will and aggression.¹⁶ The penetrable body will be tentatively taken as a hegemonic body image of ‘people like us’ in relation to which a body image with a free-soul was considered ‘other’. Importantly, both Scandinavian and Finno-Karelian traditions nevertheless reveal an awareness of multiple body images.

Source Materials and Approach

Medieval Scandinavian written sources present a rich variety of apparently relevant information ranging from simple vocabulary to elaborate descriptions of magical and ritual practices. The practices are represented from non-specialist perspectives, and they were in all likelihood seen as historically, religiously and culturally ‘other’ (i.e. belonging to a pre-Christian cultural milieu). Such sources are here inferred to draw on *a*) contemporary circulating discourse, and potentially also on *b*) other written texts that developed in an evolving dialogue with that discourse. The sources thus reflect the individual and social imagination of the past. The authors are Christians – at least in their own eyes.¹⁷ They were writing for Christian audiences in a form of heritage construction, representing the past as relevant to the present and its social order.¹⁸ An implicit principle *What we say about them, we say about ourselves*, can be assumed. The representations of magic and ritual in historically remote contexts can be contrasted with their absence from the so-called contemporary sagas, which should equally be viewed as self-representation. The sources discussed here are Icelandic, where it is doubtful that the *völva* institution became rooted in the emergence of the insular culture,¹⁹ where *berserkir* became emblems of paganism in conversion discourse,²⁰ and where, in contrast, what appears to be a deep-trance ritual is described as deciding the legal conversion of Iceland.²¹

Culture is here viewed as “localized in concrete, [socially] accessible signs, the most important of which are actually occurring instances of discourse.”²² Mythology is approached in the broad sense of systems of symbols and structures that are emotionally

invested (if potentially contested) models for interpreting experience and understanding seen and unseen worlds with which people interact in the present, past and/or future. From this perspective, the model of a supernaturally empowered agent such as a *vqlva* or a *berserkr* is viewed as a symbol of mythology. Body images are equally viewed as symbolic models for understanding one's own or others' bodies. Such symbols are analysed and interpreted in terms of *mythic discourse*. Mythic discourse refers to mythology as it is engaged, used, manipulated and communicated by individuals in societies.²³ It is characterized by the ongoing negotiation of these symbols, their interpretations and significance, which vary like a "kaleidoscope, in perpetual motion" as they are used from different perspectives, in different contexts, and in different combinations.²⁴ Although interpretations, valuations and uses may vary, they must remain recognizable in order to function. For example, FIRE DOES NOT BURN BERSERKR (small capitals indicate a symbolic unit) appears to be a motif historically connected with *berserkir*.²⁵ This motif was also taken up in conversion narratives, where it was used in a narrative pattern that asserts the superior power of Christianity: FIRE DOES NOT BURN BERSERKR is affirmed as valid for normal fires, but not for fires consecrated by Christians.²⁶ The motif maintains formal continuity as a symbolic, meaning-bearing unit of narration, while the action and the *berserkr* performing it are interpreted and evaluated from a Christian perspective with a variation that shows the *berserkr*'s inferiority to the power of Christianity.

Methodologically, the present study identifies traditional units of narration related to practices and outcomes of practices that are attached to each type of specialist. Mythic symbols are distinguished according to formal types that are used in structural combinations: an *image* is a static unit equivalent to the grammatical category of a noun (e.g. VQLVA, FREE-SOUL, etc.); a *motif* is a minimal unit that entails the equivalent to the grammatical category of a verb and in which one or more images participate (e.g. VQLVA PERFORMS RITUAL); a *narrative pattern* is a complex conventional sequence of images and motifs that forms a recognizable unit of narration.²⁷ Symbolic units are considered to be distinguishable from the language that mediates them, so the word *vqlva* may in some cases be used as a general word for 'witch' whereas the

image *vǫlva* may be recognizable through description or in relation to a motif or narrative pattern without the term *vǫlva*. Units of narration are compared and analysed in order to extract information with which they are encoded about practices and practitioners. For example, the motif FIRE DOES NOT BURN BERSERKR indicates that *berserkir* were thought to remain unburned by fire; the narrative pattern discussed below includes information on a performance situation considered emblematic of a *vǫlva*. The relevance of this information for historical perspectives is conditional on the units of narration having continuity from the corresponding social institution. The features discussed below do not seem to be adapted from foreign literature and Christian discourse, and they are considered more likely to be rooted in historical phenomena than to be spontaneous inventions without models.

The examples of traditional units of narration discussed below have the characteristics of *legends*, which conditions them as sources of information. A legend can be described as a short story about a specific encounter that is developed on a traditional plot or motif and engages contestable beliefs about history or the supernatural. Legends are built around concrete elements in an event and/or its outcomes as they would appear to an observer. Scandinavian and Finno-Karelian legends of Sámi shamanism are instructive: their core is simply ‘the man lay there as if he were dead and when he woke up he possessed/knew something that was impossible to explain except by magic’; and this core is situated in a framing situation (which may itself be established in the tradition).²⁸ The shaman’s performance activity tends to remain unmentioned except insofar as it is directly relevant to the plot. Information about performance was (to varying degrees) in circulation, but it was not essential to telling these stories. Instead, it provided a resource for prolongation, for the creation of verisimilitude and for other rhetorical effects (e.g. underscoring “otherness”). In the legends, a shaman’s practices are not only reduced to a single, emblematic activity: traditionalization generally excludes the ethnographic information that would be of interest here. Performances by the types of specialists brought into focus below exhibit the same sort of reduction to minimal elements of what an onlooker might observe.

Berserkir and Berserksgangr

A *berserkr* is represented as a supernaturally empowered warrior. *Berserkir* appear in Old Norse sources as a king's elite guard, the soldiers leading a battle charge, as valorised ancestors of Icelanders, and as exceptionally dangerous vikings.²⁹ They often appear as adversaries against whom heroes prove themselves. Presumably by extension, they also appear in conversion narratives as supernatural agents in local communities whose power can be overcome by Christianity. Corresponding ritual and magical performances are not attributed to *berserkir*, but they are distinguished by *berserksgangr* 'the going of a *berserkr*' – wild behaviour characterized by howling and biting on a shield.³⁰ The activity state of *berserksgangr* seems to have manifested a supernatural empowerment linked to the motifs of imperviousness to iron and fire.³¹ The conception of burning has not been investigated in terms of vernacular physiology, although it clearly relates to the ability of fire to affect the body. The motif IRON DOES NOT CUT was linked to a broad range of battle magic, including protective objects³² and incantations.³³ Sources may account for this imperviousness with the motif GAZE BLUNTS IRON, relating it to will and magical agency (not specific to *berserkir*). However, imperviousness to iron may also simply appear as a "fact" that the protagonist must circumvent, suggesting an inherent quality of the *berserkr* or *berserksgangr*.³⁴ The body image is emphasized by reference to *berserkir* as *hamrammr*. *Hamr* means 'embodied form' and *rammr* means '(supernaturally) powerful'. *Berserkir* are also described as *eigi einhamr* 'not single-formed', although written sources do not characterize *berserkir* as shapeshifters *per se*.³⁵ The motif IRON DOES NOT CUT "leads to many a *berserkr* being clubbed to death,"³⁶ which underscores that *berserkir* are not impervious to injury *per se* but rather to penetration of the body's boundary.

If the *berserkr* is accepted as a historical type of supernaturally empowered warrior who performed *berserksgangr*, it can be inferred that *berserksgangr* did not occur randomly in society and could be initiated by *berserkir* when the situation required (e.g. for a duel). It was thus a trained behaviour of heightened (but

directionally controlled) aggression that could be strategically incited by the *berserkr*, even if it might also be incited through situational stimuli. Performance practices can then be inferred for both training the behaviour and self-incitement. The emblematic howling and shield-biting can be interpreted as a performance of posturing to build confidence and intimidate adversaries.³⁷ These behaviours are also directly comparable to the performance of Finno-Karelian ritual specialists who, through such behaviour, manifest a hyperactive trance that they conceived in terms of “raised” supernatural power which secured the body’s boundary.³⁸ The heightened aggressive behaviour appears directly linked to supernatural empowerment³⁹ that correlates with the motif IRON DOES NOT CUT. Viewed in relation to the hegemonic body image postulated above, this state of raised aggression can thus be viewed as an extension of that physiological model to seal the body’s boundary also against weapons, which is directly paralleled in Finno-Karelian battle magic.⁴⁰ Reference to *berserkir* as *hamrammr* and *eigi einhamr* has been interpreted as a change in the body’s form e.g. into that of a bear or wolf. The approach outlined here suggests that these terms centrally referred to a conception of *berserksgangr* as a supernatural change in *hamr* that made the body impenetrable without necessarily affecting its outward appearance.⁴¹ This model is accepted here for the sake of argument.

Vǫlur

The term *vǫlva* is commonly associated with supernaturally empowered women who have the power to prophesy, although the term and corresponding image do not invariably co-occur.⁴² Nevertheless, the term *vǫlva* is particularly associated with a distinct performance situation. Such performances will here be considered as emblematic of the specialist and as central to maintaining the distinct image VǪLVA.⁴³ The performance situation is encoded as the central scene in the complex narrative pattern that John McKinnell identifies as *The hostile young man: a vǫlva* is hosted by a patriarch at a feast where she publicly performs prophecies; the young hero disapproves of the event; he does not want to hear his own fortune after others have been told;

the seeress makes her prophesy anyway and the hero is resentful or aggressively hostile.⁴⁴ The social performance situation is interfaced with the narrative pattern and cannot be significantly altered without changing the narrative pattern itself. This interface would stabilize the social transmission of the performance situation in cultural memory.⁴⁵ When used in the narrative pattern, no additional information about performance is normally included except that the *vǫlva*'s activity was an itinerant practice: she moved from feast to feast in her role. When the performance situation is presented in other contexts, more information appears. In *Eiríks saga rauða* 4, the elaboration of detail yields a deceptive verisimilitude that raises a flag of caution about taking it at face value.⁴⁶ In *Hrólfs saga kraka* 3, minimal additional details are mentioned but do not seem of interest as such to the author.⁴⁷ Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* VII.1.5 also gives a description of this episode in *Hrólfs saga*, but the description is problematic because it seems to conflate the *vǫlva*'s performance with a ritual performed by *galdramenn* 'incantation men' according to *Hrólfs saga* 1.⁴⁸ The basic performance situation also seems to be the setting of the *vǫlva*'s speech in *Vǫluspá*, presented before the patriarch Óðinn and a broader audience.⁴⁹ However, in dialogues with *vǫlur* in the mythology, the *vǫlur* seem to be raised from the dead and compelled to speak; they should thus not be assumed to accurately reflect the practices of *vǫlur* in society.

These accounts suggest that a *vǫlva* performed prophecies and perhaps imparted other knowledge⁵⁰ at social events where she was hosted. The performance appears structured and may have been elaborate, including supporting roles.⁵¹ The specific performance activities of a *vǫlva* are uncertain.⁵² However, the *vǫlva* is represented as responding to questions in verse,⁵³ which suggests that *a*) she was conscious, *b*) she mediated knowledge in direct interaction with others present, and *c*) she formulated responses in a form of aesthetically distinct verbal art. (N.B. – the Eddic form of the *vǫlva*'s responses may be a convention of the representation of verbal art in epic/saga genres rather than being historically accurate to a *vǫlva*'s mode of ritual speech.) Verse responses are introduced with the formulaic expression *varð henni þá ljóð á munni* 'then a song came into her mouth', which is linked to

women's spontaneous verse speech.⁵⁴ This formula situates agency and the source of information spoken outside of the woman, which could relate to the *vǫlva* switching between first and third person in verses of *Vǫluspá* and *Ǫrvar-Odds saga*.⁵⁵ The *vǫlva* nevertheless appears able to orchestrate inspired speech in a controlled way within the interactive framework of the ritual event. The mythic image *vǫlva* would thus be characterized by a body image that is opened to external power or knowledge in contrast to the supernaturally closed body image of a *berserkr*. The wider use of the *verðr e-m ljóð á munni* formula suggests an extension of the hegemonic body model that may be related to conceptions of gendered difference in open/closed, weak/strong or soft/hard bodies (as in Finno-Karelian tradition⁵⁶). However, rather than the body image of a *vǫlva* being a hegemonic body image at an extreme of openness, it was presumably supernaturally opened in a controlled and strategic way. The distinction of a *berserkr* from other people in terms of his *hamr* presents the possibility that the *vǫlva*'s body image was also considered fractionally differentiated from the hegemonic norm. Such differentiation could account for *vǫlur* being categorically distinguished according to descent from a primal origin alongside *jǫtnar* as if *vǫlur* were a type of supernatural being. This interpretation remains conjectural, but it is not inherently improbable; it will be accepted here for the sake of argument.

Deep-Trance Specialists

There are a number of accounts of individuals who conceal their bodies under a covering or in a closed space during which an animal appears and acts on the performer's behalf or following which the performer possesses knowledge from remote locations.⁵⁷ The performers are not identified with any single noun. Clive Tolley observes that the motif of covering the face or body in shamanic rituals exhibits an isogloss including Norse, Sámi and, to the east across the White Sea, Nenets,⁵⁸ not to mention Irish to the west.⁵⁹ This isogloss appears indicative of cross-cultural contacts. The Norse sources do not seem to distinguish between performances by *Finnar*⁶⁰ and those by Norsemen. Treating practices as

categorically equivalent across an otherwise socially significant Norse-*Finnr* ethnic divide suggests that they were completely “other” from the hegemonic perspective of the sources. Analysis is further complicated by the possibility that circulating discourse has homogenized diverse practices of both Norsemen and *Finnar*. As a result, traditionalization has subordinated practices that were historically distinct. Nevertheless, the model of practice in circulating discourse is fairly well represented and offers at least some perspective on formal aspects of a ritual practice.

The ritual separated the performer(s) physically or symbolically from others: the performer covered their body or head, or one or more performers enclosed themselves in a space so that the performance is completely concealed. As in later legends of Sámi shamanic rituals, there is no indication of performative activity *per se*. Nor is there any indication that it was orchestrated before an audience. The activity is distinct from murmuring into a cloak or skin and gaining access to knowledge while in a conscious state.⁶¹ The performer is closed off from communication for the duration of the event, which is emphasized by a prohibition against speaking the performer’s name until the performance is concluded. If an animal or monster appears and acts on the behalf of the performer, the length of the performance seems to correlate with the period during which the animal is active; when the performance concerns the acquisition of knowledge, it may last one or more days.

The description is consistent with a shamanic ritual involving a deep-trance state⁶² and journey of a free-soul and/or spirit helpers. Descriptions of animal agents acting on behalf of the performing individuals in sagas strikingly suggests that images of helping spirits or free-souls had advanced in circulating discourse from legends of encounters and conflicts in the supernatural world to interaction with heroes and their adversaries as agents physically present. In later legends, naming can disrupt magical transformations,⁶³ which could potentially be linked to the naming prohibition. The *Finnar* maintained shamanic practices, as is evident from the exceptional account in the *Historia Norwegiae*.⁶⁴ The trans-ethnic homogenization of representations in circulating discourse suggests that the ritual behaviour was not ethnically

marked as it appears to be in later legends, with several implications: *a*) certain Norse practices were considered to be equivalent to the shamanic rituals of *Finnar*; *b*) the Norse practices may have been more prominent in shaping the representation in Norse circulating discourse than their counterpart(s) among *Finnar*; *c*) some sources may identify such practices with *Finnar* in narration as a strategy of “othering” rather than representing knowledge of the ethnicity of the specialists concerned;⁶⁵ *d*) some sources may disregard supernatural aspects in order to minimize the “othering” of the performer.⁶⁶

The homogenization of practices makes it possible that several different technologies may have been conformed to this model of representation. It is not clear whether this practice was *útisetja* ‘sitting out’⁶⁷ or if *útisetja* may have been a term for a range of practices subordinated to this convention of representation. The descriptions could equally reflect the *völva*’s technology orchestrated in private practice activity (and such practice by *völur* is not improbable). They could also reflect a vigil-like practice for summoning supernatural agents to mediate knowledge.⁶⁸ Rituals for strategic and structured “dreaming” are also quite possible⁶⁹ and would conform to dreams as an established venue in Norse culture for direct communication with supernatural agents,⁷⁰ whose visitation could follow from being called on.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the trans-ethnic homogenization with *Finnar* rituals indicates that, not only did the performances exhibit some formal parallels, but that at least some of the practices were marked as at an extreme of “otherness”: they were not viewed as belonging to the society of “people like us”. Moreover, the prohibition against naming the performer seems most likely to relate somehow to the performer’s consciousness – some form of free-soul – being active as a goal-oriented agent while their body remained in one place.⁷² Vernacular ritual technologies dependent on a free-soul would thus depend on a body image very different from the Norse hegemonic model but consistent with that of *Finnar*. Whatever the rituals might have been, a physiological equivalence in “otherness” could account for the trans-ethnic homogenization of what were most likely ethnically distinct practices.

Perspectives

Traditional motifs and narrative patterns in circulating discourse remain encoded with information about different types of specialist ritual performers and emblematic features of their abilities, of their practices, and of the outcomes of their practices. This information can be triangulated to hypothetically model understandings of the body image associated with these practitioners. The body image of the particular type of practitioner can then be viewed in relation to a probable Norse hegemonic norm of “people like us”. In the case of *berserker*, tentatively, performance appears to have sealed the body’s boundary through aggression; this involved a process that was considered to exceed the capacities of a hegemonic body image and thus qualified as a change in *hamr*. In contrast, *völur* seem more likely to have strategically opened their bodies in performance in a controlled way that would allow them to mediate inspired speech from supernatural sources outside of themselves (however this may have been imagined). This opening of the body should not be misconstrued as passivity: *völur* are presented as respected supernaturally empowered agents. They are represented as being able to control what was or was not predicted, able to shape their predictions and even to construct fates through their performance. The body images of *berserker* and *völur* appear most likely to reflect gendered difference in body images carried to supernaturally empowered extremes or ideals that simultaneously set them apart from other members of society. The deep-trance specialist is in some respects more ambiguous to approach. The conventional representation of this practice in circulating discourse suggests its central referent was a practice involving activity of a free-soul, and that this was perceived as wholly “other”. This view reciprocally supports the theory that the hegemonic body image excluded the free-soul (as in Finno-Karelian cultures), or at least excluded a free-soul that could operate independently of the empirically perceivable body through the individual’s conscious agency. Each of these three categories of practitioner appears to be characterized by a body image distinguished from the hegemonic norm.

The verses of the epigraph to this chapter seem to suggest that different types of ritual performers were categorically distinguished by common origins like varieties of supernatural beings. The sources do not foreground this. *Eiríks saga* mentions that Þórbjörg *lítivqlva*'s nine sisters had all been *spákonur* 'prophecy-women'.⁷³ The term *hálf-berserkr* 'half-berserkr'⁷⁴ treats *ber-serkr* as an ethnic category,⁷⁵ and *Skalla-Grímr* seems to inherit a changeable *hamr* from his father, although he is not called a *ber-serkr*,⁷⁶ while his son Egill exhibits a corresponding personality profile.⁷⁷ At least in some sources, it appears that the "otherness" of these categorical identities was seen as inheritable, of which it seems body image was a likely part.

Each of the three cases above appears to be a practice-based institution. Although their ritual technologies are beyond reconstruction, it is clear that these practices depended on competence and could be strategically initiated with predictable outcomes. Each can thus be assumed to have relied on a ritual technology which could be used to situationally initiate the supernaturally empowered state. That technology would have been linked to social perceptions of competence and specialization, but it would also have been fundamental to training the presumably ecstatic behaviour as a response to performance and as essential to structuring and controlling the performer's experience.⁷⁸ In each case, the ritual technology can be assumed to be interfaced with the corresponding body image with which it engages. At the same time, the hegemonic body image can be assumed to have been interfaced with ritual technologies for healing, sex appeal and potency, protection from forces and agents in the environment, and so forth. In other words, "people like us" who were not specialized in ritual technologies would have internalized their body images in large part through practices related to their own bodies and the authorities who engaged those body image models in ritual and discourse. Such ritual practices might be described as "mainstream" technologies. The Finno-Karelian traditions suggest by analogy that *berserkir* could have or did employ (some of) the same "mainstream" technologies in *berserksgangr*. This is much less certain with *vqlur*, whose emblematic performance practices differed in complex ways. They appear to have used

distinct genres of verbal art also in dialogic situational interaction. Attested Eddic poetry does not exhibit the flexibility and formulaic infrastructure conducive to appropriate situational improvisation.⁷⁹ This women's poetry may have been in a separate poetic system equipped for this type of use.⁸⁰ In this case, the mythology interfaced with the poetic system may have differed in significant ways from the mythology known through the *Eddas* and skaldic verse.⁸¹ Their ritual practices may equally have operated through technologies markedly different from “mainstream” technologies, and the minimal variation from a hegemonic body image suggested here could be grossly oversimplified. Leaving aside the potential variety of practices that may be concealed behind representations of deep-trance specialists, central (though not necessarily all) technologies employed in these practices seem to have been interfaced with a body image marked as “other”. They are likely to have not only been different from those of other specialists addressed here; they were potentially no less inconsistent with the technology of *berserkir* than Chinese acupuncture is with modern Western medicine (which does not prevent one person from using both). When considering the potential diversity of body images in an Old Norse milieu, it should be born in mind that these body images are not arbitrarily identified with different types of people; they are internalized and understood through practices, the ritual technologies on which these practices rely, and the broader range of circulating discourse. Identifying marked difference in body image between types of specialists thus becomes a crucial symptom of difference in the technologies on which their respective practices rely.

Notes

1. *Völuspá inn skamma* (*Hyndluljóð* 33).
2. See e.g. Stark 2006:146–162 and works there cited.
3. On circulating discourse, see Urban 1991:1–28 *et passim*; see also Urban 1996:249–253. I use discourses in the plural because discourse is linked to social situations and to the groups and networks participating in those situations. As a consequence, not all discourse is

uniformly accessible to everyone in a society and the different groups and networks can maintain multiple discourses in parallel.

4. In her research on mainly eighteenth-century Swedish vernacular religion, Van Gent (2009:12) refers to this type of phenomenon as a “plurality of discourses of the self”.

5. See also Lévi-Strauss 1952:11–16; de Castro 1998:474–477; in Old Norse, see also Lindow 1995:*passim*.

6. These discussions are often integrated into broader treatments of magic, ritual and religious practices, e.g. Strömbäck 2000 (1935):150–190 but see also 220–236; Price 2002:224–227 *et passim*; Dillmann 2006:238–308; Heide 2006:*passim*; for extensive chapters devoted to the topic, see Tolley 2009 I:167–271.

7. Price 2002:366–388; Dillmann 2006:261–268; Tolley 2009 I:563–579.

8. Recent monographs devoted to the topic of *bersirkir* are Samson 2011 and Dale 2014.

9. Tolley 2009 I:463–517 and see also 176–199, esp. 193, 199, and 589.

10. For discussion and references see Frog 2013, esp. 59–68.

11. See Stark 2006:146–162, 254–356, 451–458.

12. The term ‘shamanism’ has a problematic history of use (for an extreme view, see Rydving 2011). It is here used in the narrow sense of Central and Northern Eurasian traditions or ‘classic shamanism’ (Siikala 1978:14–15), which are characterized by a system of features that take culture-specific forms within local religious and mythological frameworks. Problems in applying classic shamanism to Proto-Sámi (on which see Frog 2017:61) do not extend to features relevant to the present discussion.

13. Frog 2013:59–68, 73–74, 80–84, 87–91.

14. Christiansen 1958: type 3080; Jauhiainen 1998: types D1031–1040; af Klintberg 2010: types M151–160.

15. E.g. af Klintberg 2010:Q11–20. A notable exception is a migratory legend-type and its variations in which the image of a free-soul

is structurally interfaced with the plot (Q1–3). Already Lauri Honko (1960) observed that these models vary by genre: motifs of ‘soul loss’ could appear in Finno-Karelian genres that do not seek full verisimilitude with social life, such as folktales and epic, while remaining absent from illness diagnostics and healing practices. Note that the distinction foregrounded here has often been overlooked or not considered significant: the Cartesian model of the mind/spirit as separate from the body seems to have led the interpretation of the vernacular traditions, and also earlier led me to view such stories through the lens of ‘soul journeys’. Emphasis here is also on models circulating in narrative traditions and ritual practices and does not exclude the idea that individual accounts referring to separation of mind/soul and body might be found, for example, in court records (cf. Van Gent 2009:79–85), where this remains unclear.

16. Kanerva 2015:93–94, 135–144. Van Gent (2009, esp. Ch. 3) discusses the penetrable body interfaced with Swedish vernacular magic and ritual but her focus is the “semantics” of the magical body as reflecting social tensions without exploring how the dynamics of penetrability or forces affecting it were conceived.

17. Lotman 1990:130.

18. See also Tulinius 2002, esp. 65–68.

19. The emblematic ritual context of a *vǫlva*’s performance is described as an itinerant practice in which the *vǫlva* would move from location to location as a guest of honour at feasts that were presumably costly to each in the series of hosts. If any *vǫlur* immigrated to Iceland, there is no reason to assume that the practice would be embraced locally or regionally, or even that it persisted on a single farm across generations.

20. E.g. *Kristni saga* 2, 9; *Grágás* 7; Dale 2014:140–141, 314–319; in contrast, translation literature from Norway includes Christian *berserkir* and historical records show *berserkr* as an epithet of Christians as late as the 14th century (Samson 2011:225–226; Dale 2014:180–183; 200–202).

21. On this ritual, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1978:esp. Ch.13.

22. Urban 1991:1; I edit Urban’s “publicly” to “socially” to accommodate cultural elements transmitted in contexts closed to some

members or perhaps the majority of a society and that may thus be socially but not publicly accessible.

23. The approach to mythic discourse used here is introduced more fully in Frog 2015.

24. Siikala 2012:19.

25. Samson 2011:238–240 and Dale 2014:139–142.

26. E.g. *Kristni saga* 2, 9.

27. See further Frog 2015:38–41.

28. Christiansen 1958:3080; Jauhiainen 1998:D1031–1040; af Klintberg 2010:M151–160.

29. See Samson 2011:151–156, 198–225; Dale 2014:111–114.

30. Samson 2011:227–232; Dale 2014:71–98, 147–162; *Gesta Danorum* VII.2.7:185 correlates sorcery directly with this performance behaviour.

31. Samson 2011:236–240; Dale 2014:139–145.

32. E.g. *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar* 16, 20.

33. Cf. *Hávamál* 148.

34. Dale 2014:142–146.

35. Dale 2014:120–127; for a view linking this vocabulary to transformation, see Samson 2011:244–260; see also Bourns 2017:215–225.

36. Dale 2014:142.

37. Dale 2014:162–163.

38. On the specialist's trance techniques, see Siikala 2002:242–250; on increased 'hardness' of the body in this state, see Stark 2006:310–314.

39. See also Price 2002, Ch. 6.

40. The incantation tradition is generally informed by the semiotics of Iron Age warfare and so ritual defences against physical and supernatural harm converge, noting that with modernization such rituals also provided protection against bullets (see e.g. Siikala 2002:281–294; Stark 2006:279–281).

41. Bourns similarly stresses that the verb *hamask*, related to *hamr*, can mean either to change appearance or, as he puts it, “to change temperament and enter a wild frenzy, like a *berserkr*” (2017:219; cf. Cleasby & Vigfusson 1896, *s.v.* *hamask*; *ONP*, *s.v.* *hama*).

42. See McKinnell 2003:118–119.

43. Cf. Sámi being identified as supernaturally empowered agents in a variety of legend-types (e.g. af Klintberg 2010:M32, 43, 61–65, 107, 135) but remaining the only agents in legends of deep trance rituals.

44. McKinnell 2003:122–125. This narrative pattern appears with a full performance context in *Qrvar-Odds saga* 2, *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar* 5, *Vatnsdæla saga* 10, and with the role of the *völva* filled by the mother of the king (not called a *völva*) in *Flateyjarbók’s Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 50; cf. also *Flateyjarbók’s Óláfs saga helga* 25. The production of written accounts of the performance context in these and other sources no doubt played a part in its evolution in circulating discourse, but the body of sources suggests a vital position in ultimately oral discourse rather than a literary invention.

45. See also Frog 2014, esp. 128.

46. Tolley 2009 I:487–498; see also Egeler 2015:88.

47. See also Egeler 2015:87–88.

48. Saxo’s *völva* tries to acquire objects from a remote location (children!), falls unconscious, and, whereas she interrupts her visionary performance in *Hrólfs saga* 3 when a physically present person throws gold into her lap, the people in the physically remote location threw gold into her lap according to Saxo.

49. *Völuspá* 1.

50. *Hrólfs saga* 3 (paralleled in *Gesta Danorum*; cf. also *Völuspá*) may suggest that a *völva* could also find lost and stolen objects, but this might simply be the result of subordinating the ritual to the saga’s plot.

51. *Eiríks saga* links the event to the saga through a supportive singer in the ritual. Within the narrative, the *völva*’s prophesy for this individual equates to a reward for assistance, which makes it seem more

likely to reflect circulating discourse of supporting singing than an authorial invention to motivate the reward. Saxo also mentions the *vǫlva*'s assistants where these are structurally relevant to narration. If the *vǫlva* was an itinerant specialist hosted at a feast of any magnitude, a correspondingly elaborate performance can be expected.

52. *Eiríks saga* and *Hrólfs saga* mention that performance is on a *seiðhjallr* 'scaffold for performing magic (*seiðr*)'. However, in narrative discourse, a *seiðhjallr* was a characteristic location for a formalized pagan ritual performance (see also Sundqvist 2012:281–283). The writers or redactors of these two sagas (or their informants) may have independently added this detail as an elaboration with a commonplace from the discourse on pagan practices without a historical link to a *vǫlva*'s performance *per se*. In *Lokasenna* 24, Loki insults Óðinn for 'tapping on a *vétt* like a *vǫlva*' (*draptu á vétt sem vǫlor*), but alliteration between *vétt* and *vǫlva* presents the possibility that either word could be a poetic alternative for another noun and thus may not refer to the activity of a *vǫlva* as a type of specialist.

53. *Qrvar-Odds saga* 2; *Orms þáttr* 5; *Hrólfs saga* 3; Saxo also stresses her *carmina* 'songs; oracular responses', but his account is problematic.

54. For a survey and discussion of this formula, see Quinn 1998.

55. *Hrólfs saga* mentions that the *vǫlva* yawns a great deal before her first prophetic speech. This has been interpreted as taking spirits into her body (Tolley 1995:58; Price 2002:209), but motifs of yawning and becoming drowsy are generally associated with supernatural contact (Strömbäck 2000 (1935):152–159; *Njáls saga* 13:37 n.7; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1978:109–121. This motif could have been linked to the *vǫlva*'s performance as an elaboration with no connection to historical practices.

56. See Stark 2006:264–265.

57. E.g. Strömbäck 2000 (1935):160–206; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1978:113–123; Price 2002:361–362.

58. Tolley 2009 I:260.

59. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1978:116–117.

60. Most likely speakers of Southwest Proto-Sámi.
61. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1978:110–113; cf. *Njáls saga* 13:37 n. 9.
62. My thanks to Jens Peter Schjødt for pointing out that “unconscious trance” is a problematic overgeneralization. On different depths of trance in relation to types of performance, see Siikala 1978:338–339.
63. E.g. af Klintberg 2010:Q42–43, 45–46.
64. On this account, see Tolley 2009 I:258–268.
65. Cf. the *völva* as a *Finna* in *Vatnsdæla saga* 10; for discussions of how magic is used and manipulated in discourse, see e.g. Stark 2006; Van Gent 2009; Meylan 2014.
66. E.g. Þorgeirr Þorkelsson’s performance.
67. E.g. Strömbäck 2000 (1935):126–129; Dillmann 2006:42–44; Tolley 2009 II:133–134.
68. Cf. Jón Árnason 1862:436–438.
69. Ef. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1978:116–117.
70. See e.g. Kelchner 1935:66–72.
71. E.g. *Þorláks saga biskups* 28, 65–67, 69, 81.
72. Cf. also Siikala 1978:339 on deep trance and interaction with non-performers.
73. *Eiríks saga* 4.
74. *Svarfdæla saga* 7.
75. With the exception of *hálf-troll* ‘half-troll’, it is characteristic of such ‘half-breed’ terms that they appear as *hapax legomena* – e.g. *hálf-bergrisi* ‘half-mountain-giant’, *hálf-risi* ‘half-giant’, *hálf-Finnr* ‘half-Finnr’, *hálf-Karell* ‘half-Karelian’.
76. *Eigils saga* 40.
77. See also Samson 2011:151–156.
78. See also Siikala 1978, esp. 49–52 and 339 on shamans’ performances.
79. Frog 2011:19–28 and works there cited.

80. This has been suggested by Eila Stepanova for women's lament poetry (2011:140; cf. also Mundal 2013:368–379).

81. Cf. the differences between the mythology of Karelian lament poetry and the Kalevalaic epic and incantation poetry with which it co-existed for centuries, discussed in Stepanova 2012:265–281.

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Response

Margaret Clunies Ross

University of Sydney

The Approach

In this chapter Frog looks for Old Norse-Icelandic textual evidence for the relationship between embodied experience and the ritual technologies assumed to have been practised in “the Old Norse world”. The time period covered by his enquiry is not precisely defined, but the source material he uses dates mostly from the medieval period and is mostly Icelandic, at least in the form we have received it. He also looks to identify different types of ritual specialist evidenced in Old Norse sources, as well as evidence for the interface between ritual technologies, body images and understandings of the unseen world. He frequently backs up his findings by comparisons with Finno-Karelian legendary traditions. Some of his remarks suggest that concepts of the penetrable body and the free-soul may have entered the Scandinavian tradition from North Finnic cultures, but his position on this does not emerge clearly. What he does credibly argue is that the three case studies he analyses in this chapter establish the body images of the various practitioners based on an ethnocentric norm of “people like us” which includes a hegemonic body image of a penetrable body as a frame of reference.

Methodology

Although Frog recognises that most of the surviving texts at our disposal were written by Christians “writing for Christian audiences in a form of heritage construction”, his approach to the sources assembled to support his description of three different types of ritual practitioner (*berserkr*, *völva*, deep-trance specialist) does not discriminate clearly between these sources in terms of their likely source value to a mythographer and the likely intellectual background to their articulation. This leads to a picture of

a type of ritual practitioner in which more or less equal weight is given to the different kinds of evidence assembled, and this may be misleading in the context of research into the underlying conceptual world of early Scandinavians.

The Berserkr

The methodological difficulty mentioned above is particularly apparent in Frog's treatment of the category of *berserkr* (if indeed berserks were *ritual specialists*, something for which there is little evidence). The *berserkr* is presented as "a supernaturally empowered warrior", and yet there is no unquestionable evidence in the sources to support this view. If berserks were supernaturally empowered, what force empowered them? Where berserks first appear in Old Norse texts, in the late ninth- or early tenth-century poem *Haraldskvæði* by Þorbjörn hornklofi (stanzas 8 and 21), they are not attributed with supernatural powers but rather with ferocious physical strength; they are called "wolf-skins", they howl and brandish iron spears; they are Haraldr Fine-hair's crack troops. Their name has suggested to many that they wore animal skins over their armour (or, on an alternative etymology, that they wore no body armour). Some saga texts of later date, where berserks appear as highly conventionalised, often pagan, trouble-makers, associate berserks with being impervious to iron weapons, a motif not exclusive to them alone, however. There are also some places where they are reported as claiming to be able to resist fire, but in most cases of the latter type, the fire motif should likely be understood as influenced by, and possibly generated by, Christian concepts of the ordeal as a test of a person's merit, whether physical or spiritual or both. It is also notable that in the examples of berserks claiming imperviousness to fire (*Kristni saga* and related texts), they are represented as doing so in the context of trials of strength with Christian authorities, and they fail the fire test miserably, thus demonstrating the superiority of their Christian opponents.

Whether the association with imperviousness to fire points to a once active pre-Christian belief in supernatural powers possessed

by such warriors is a matter for speculation. This possibility is, however, enhanced by the fact that the Christian Laws section of *Grágás*¹ lists falling into a berserk frenzy among the magical practices that attract a penalty of lesser outlawry. The fact that the *berserksgangr* ‘berserk frenzy’ (literally ‘berserk’s rush’) is mentioned in the context of magical practices that people ought to control or discontinue suggests that in medieval times it was considered to be a learned human behaviour, and in that respect, I agree with Frog that it must have been “a trained behaviour of heightened (but directionally controlled) aggression”. Whether this also implied a closed body image, as he maintains, is a little more dubious: the associations of the *berserkr* with invulnerability to iron and fire are very general motifs, and may not have been unique to the berserk’s image, whereas the *berserksgangr*, which implies an outward flow or passage (*gangr*) of aggression, seems to require the body to allow its powers to surge forth beyond its confines.

Oddly enough, Frog does not adduce the one piece of textual evidence that might support his case for the berserk as supernaturally empowered, and possibly being associated with a cult of Óðinn. This is the passage in *Ynglinga saga* Chapter 6² that is also one of the main sources of our information about the *berserksgangr*. In this source berserks are warriors firmly associated with the euhemerised Óðinn as his men who went without armour, crazed as dogs or wolves, biting their shields, killing men and being affected by neither fire nor iron while in the berserk state. In the following chapter,³ Óðinn is revealed as a shape-changer par excellence (*Óðinn skipti hǫmum*) and a master of out-of-body experiences, taking the form of a bird, animal, fish or snake, while his body lies as if asleep or dead (*lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr*). As John Lindow has observed,⁴ Óðinn is here presented, not as a deity, but as a human shaman, imbued with the powers that Snorri knew Saami sorcerers possessed, and, in the euhemerised context of *Ynglinga saga*, as teaching this technology to the native Scandinavians, who came to regard him as a god. This context suggests that berserk behaviour was also something the pre-Christian Scandinavians thought came from the euhemerised Óðinn.

The *Völva* and the Deep-Trance Specialist

The remaining two categories of ritual practitioner identified in Frog's chapter, the *völva* and the deep-trance specialist, are more readily acceptable as such than the *berserkr*. In general, Frog's descriptions of these practitioner types seem valid, though there are a good number of questions arising, as he admits, because of our lack of evidence. Many of the inferences he draws from the available sources are speculative and cannot be verified, even with his frequent recourse to Finno-Karelian traditions of post-medieval date and provenance. In the case of the *völva*, a body image gendered female, what is the connection between the *völur* depicted in saga literature, itinerant soothsayers performing their rites for a fee before audiences of farm communities, and the *völur* of mythological poetry raised involuntarily from a death-like state by Óðinn to inform him of the fates of the gods, the cosmos and his own dead son, which, perhaps, he already knows? And what of the gods' killing of Gullveig or Heiðr in *Völuspá* 21–22 (the latter a name commonly applied to the *völur* of saga literature)? It seems that there may be a bridge between the human and the divine in this case, though Frog does not mention this enigmatic passage.

He is certainly right that, whereas the *völva* requires an audience, whether of one or many, the deep-trance specialist is separated from society by virtue of the nature of the ritual he performs. What is interesting but perhaps controversial in Frog's presentation here is not so much his identification of this ritual type as shamanic, involving an unconscious trance-like state and journey of a free-soul and/or spirit helpers, as in *Ynglinga saga*'s description of the euhemerised Óðinn, but his contention that there is “trans-ethnic homogenization of representations in circulating discourse suggest[ing] that the ritual behaviour was not ethnically marked as it appears in later legends”. In other words, such practices associated with ethnic Scandinavians are not differentiated in Old Norse-Icelandic sources in terms of their presentation of the ritual itself or its performer from those associated with ‘*Finnar*’ ‘Saami’, except where the practitioners are identified as Saami in order to mark the behaviour as ‘other’. Unfortunately,

Frog does not give any examples to support this contention, except for an allusion to the episode recorded by Ari Þorgilsson in *Íslendingabók* in which the then law-speaker Þorgeirr Þorkelsson lay down under his cloak for a day and a night, in order to decide whether Iceland should adopt Christianity or not. Although this episode has been interpreted as shamanic,⁵ not everyone accepts this understanding of Þorgeirr's behaviour, for which Ari himself gives no explanation.

Notes

1. K 7; 'Grágás' I a:23; Dennis *et al.* 1980:39.
2. *Íslenzk Fornrit* XXVI:17.
3. *Íslenzk Fornrit* XXVI:18.
4. Lindow 2003:97–106.
5. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999:103–123.

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