

# The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature<sup>1</sup>

*Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, University of Iceland*

People throughout the world have long been fascinated by the idea of shape-shifting. In all corners of the world there are stories about people who have the ability to transform themselves into animals. The ability is generally viewed negatively, and those with such powers are often sorcerers or witches. While the environment may determine the species into which human beings are transformed, the results are most often large predatory animals, for example, leopards, lions, hyenas, jaguars, tigers, and—not least—wolves and bears.<sup>2</sup> Traditions about shape-shifting have been studied from various perspectives: literary, folkloric, historical, anthropological, and even etymological.<sup>3</sup> The following article will focus on stories about werewolves in a wolf-free country, Iceland.

In northern regions much prominence is given to two kinds of shape-shifting: the ability to change into either a bear or a wolf, although the latter seems to have been more popular.<sup>4</sup> In Icelandic narrative tradition,

1. This article is based on a chapter in my edition of *Úlfhams saga* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 2001). I am grateful to Dr. Philip Roughton, who did most of the English translation, as well as Dr. Margaret Cormack, who also made several useful comments. I also wish to thank Valgerður Brynjólfsdóttir, who read an earlier draft of the article.

2. About hyena people, lion people, and similar creatures, see Robert Eisler, *Man into Wolf* (London: Spring books, 1951), pp. 152–53.

3. See, e.g., Gerard Breen, “‘the Wolf Is at the Door’ Outlaws, Assassins, and Avengers Who Cry ‘Wolf!’,” in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 114 (1999), 31–43; Ella Odstedt, *Varulven i Svensk folktradition*, *Skrifter utgivna genom Landsmåls- och Folkemnesarkivet i Uppsala*, ser. B:1 (Uppsala, 1943); Montague Summers, *The Werewolf* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1934); Mary Roche Gerstein, “Warg: the Outlaw as Werewolf in Germanic Myth, Law, and Medicine,” PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1972; Sir Frederick Madden, “Note on the Word ‘Werewolf’,” in Walter W. Skeat, *The Romance of William of Palerne* (London: N. Trübner, 1867), pp. xxv–xxix.

4. For werewolves in later Scandinavian folk belief, see Odstedt, *Varulven i svensk folktradition*; Knut Hermundstad, *Truer om villdyr, fangst og fiske*, *Norsk Folkeminnelags Skrifter*, 99 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1967). Concerning belief in werewolves among Norwegians, Ronald Grambo writes: “troen på varulv og mannbjørn er vel forsvunnet i dag, men så sent som i forrige århundre var den en realitet blant folk” (belief in werewolves and werebears is nearly gone today, but even as late as last century it was a reality amongst people; “Fortrollet vilt. Varulv og mannbjørn,” *Årbog for Norsk Skogbruks museum* [1954–57], pp. 75–81). Danish legends are printed in Evald Tang Kristensen, *Danske sagn*, II (Århus: Jacob Zeuners bogtrykkeri, 1893), pp. 227–51. Various articles of a broad nature mention and refer to stories of the same type among the Lapps; see, e.g., Dag Strömbäck, “Om varulven,” *Folklore och Filologi* (Uppsala: AB Lundequistska boghandeln, 1970), p. 259, and Asbjørn Nesheim, “Samisk trolldom,” in *Kul-*

accounts of such events have a special character, and it is interesting to compare these sources with the stories in other European nations. In what follows, an account will be given of the stories composed, preserved, or read in Iceland that deal in one way or another with shape-changing by men who took on the appearance of wolves and lived in the forest.

In Iceland the werewolf motif is found in fourteen indigenous sources, i.e., *Gylfaginning*, *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*, *Völsunga saga*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (*Völsungakviða*), *Gibbons saga*, *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands*, the *Skjöldunga saga* of *Arngrímur* “the learned,” *Ála flekks saga*, *Úlfhams saga*, *Tíódels saga*, *Jóns saga leikara*, *Sagan af Þorsteini glott*, and *Hvað þýðir “sár”*?<sup>5</sup> In addition, the motif is found in two Norwegian texts that were both known and read in Iceland: a short episode in *Konungs skuggsjá* and the translation of the *Lai de Bisclavret* (*Bisclaretz ljóð*) in *Strengleikar*.

The closely related motif of the man-bear is found in *Landnámabók* (twelfth century), *Hrólfs saga kraka* (fourteenth century), *Svarfdæla saga* (fourteenth century), *Tíódels saga* (see subsequent discussion), and the tales *Ævintýrið um Bjarndreng*, *Sagan af Hermóði og Háðvöru*, *Hvað þýðir “sár”*? and *Björn á börn*, which were collected in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

turhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingetid til reformationen (Reykjavík: Bókaverzlun Ísafoldar, 1970), XV, 7–14. See also Nils Lid, “til varulvens historie,” in *Trolldom. Festskrift til sekstiársdagen 16. januar 1950* (Oslo: Cammermeyers boghandel, 1950), pp. 82–108.

5. The sources cited here make direct mention of shape-shifting, in which a man changes into a wolf; in this context, one should also mention two *Íslendingasögur*. First, in *Egils saga*, the shape-shifter *Úlfr Bjálfason* (*Kveld-Úlfr*) is said to have become ill-tempered as evening approached. He had a tendency to sleep in the evening (*kvöldsvæfur*), which has been seen as suggesting that his soul left his body when he slept and entered a wolf’s shape. See *Egils saga*, *Íslenzk fornrit*, II (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1933), ch. 1, p. 4 (subsequent references are to this edition); and also Anne Holtmark, “On the Werewolf Motif in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*,” in *Scientia Islandica—Science in Iceland*, I (1968), pp. 7–9. As there is no direct mention of *Kveld-Úlfr*’s shape-shifting, the existence of a werewolf motif in *Egils saga* must depend on interpretation, but it should be borne in mind that his name strongly indicates that he had shape-shifting ability. Second, in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Gísli* dreams of a man with a wolf’s head. *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Íslenzk fornrit*, VI (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1943), ch. 33, p. 105.

6. *Landnámabók*, *Íslenzk fornrit*, I (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968), pp. 355–56 (S 350, H 309); *Saga Hrólfs konungs kraka*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, I–III, ed. C. C. Rafn (Copenhagen, 1929–1930), I, ch. 25 and 50, pp. 50 and 103; *Svarfdæla saga*, *Íslenzk fornrit*, IX (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1956), ch. 19, pp. 181–82; *Tíódels saga*, for instance in AM 578g 4to (see below). The late tale *Ævintýrið um Bjarndreng* in *Jón Árnason*, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*, I–VI, ed. Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Þjóðsaga, 1961), IV, pp. 650–53, includes a similar man-bear motif as *Hrólfs saga kraka*; *Sagan af Hermóði og Háðvöru* in *Ólafur Davíðsson*, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur* (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Þjóðsaga, 1980), IV, 10–23; *Hvað þýðir “sár”*?; *Björn á börn* in *Jón Árnason*, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*, I, 606. See also *Þátr Þorsteins uxafóts*, in *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and C. R. Unger (Christiania, 1860), I, ch. 209, p. 257, and *Saga af Parmes Loðinbirni* (Reykjavík: Prentuð á kostnað Jóns Sighvatsonar, 1884), ch. 2, pp. 4–5.

the man-bear motif will not be discussed in this article, although some of these stories may be referred to.<sup>7</sup>

The werewolf motif in Icelandic literature was briefly discussed by Einar Ól. Sveinsson in reference to five of the above mentioned sagas: *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Völsunga saga*, *Ála flekks saga*, *Úlfhams saga*, and *Jóns saga leikara*.<sup>8</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson considered it likely that the motif, as it exists in Icelandic sagas, can be divided into two categories/variants. He believed that the older variant is characterized by the innate ability to shape-shift, which is usually associated with war and warlike activities. He points out that traces of this ancient belief are still found in stories about berserks that were most likely brought to Iceland with the original settlers. The German scholar Wolfgang Golther had previously made a similar argument in *Handbuch der germanischen Mythologie* in 1895.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Einar Ól. Sveinsson believed that the more recent variant came to Iceland with French romances in the thirteenth century and that it probably had a Celtic origin; in this variant the wolf nature is in most cases a result of a spell. In the various discussions of werewolves and shape-changing, the following sagas have not previously been considered: *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*, *Skjöldunga saga*, *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands*, *Sagan af Þorsteini glott*, and *Hvað þýðir “sár”*?<sup>10</sup> These sources will be examined for the evidence they can provide concerning the werewolf motif in light of Einar Ól. Sveinsson’s theory. They reveal how the two variants were developed and combined, each influencing the other.

## VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS

In the medieval Icelandic sources, one finds references to men and gods changing their form by putting on the *hamr* of a certain animal, but the word *hamr* can mean both a pelt/skin and a shape. The goddess Freyja has a feather *hamr* and the swan maidens in *Völundarkviða* take upon themselves the *hamr* of swans.<sup>11</sup> This kind of feather *hamr* that functions like a

7. For the man-bear motif in Scandinavia, see, e.g., Roland Grambo, “Fortrollet vilt.”

8. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, “Keltnesk áhrif á íslenzkar ýkjusögur,” *Skírnir*, 106 (1932), 118–19.

9. Wolfgang Golther, *Handbuch der germanischen Mythologie* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1895), pp. 102–103.

10. Similarly, the man-bear motif in the folktales *Ævintýrið um Bjarndreng*, *Sagan af Hermóði og Háðvöru*, *Hvað þýðir “sár”*? and *Björn á börn* has not been mentioned or considered previously in discussions of shape-shifting stories.

11. “*Prymskviða*,” st. 3–5, in *Eddadigte*, ed. Jón Helgason, *Nordisk filologi* (Oslo: Dreyers forlag, 1971), III, 58, and “*Völundarkviða*,” foreword and st. 1, in *Eddadigte*, III, 1–2.

vestment is quite common,<sup>12</sup> as is the wolf’s *hamr*, which is found, e.g., in *Völsunga saga*. The key term in this context is *hamr*. One finds references to men changing into wolves by taking upon themselves a *vargshamr* (a wolf’s shape) and becoming *vargar* (wolves).<sup>13</sup>

The Icelandic terms for wolf are *vargr* and *úlfr*—terms that are also used for what we now call *varúlfur* (werewolf).<sup>14</sup> Other related terms connected to werewolves or shape-shifting beings are *vargstakkr* (wolf coat), *úlframr* (wolf skin), *úlfhéðinn* (wolf skin/pelt) and *berserkr* (bear coat).

In a narrower sense, however, *úlfhéðnar* and *berserkir* are two kinds of animal-warriors, first mentioned in *Haraldskvæði* (*Hrafnsmál*), in which they constantly accompany King Haraldr. The poem is thought to have been composed by Þorbjörn hornklofi, who lived around the year 900. As we can see from the stanza below, their respective cries are distinct:

greniðu berserkir, guðr var þeim á sinnum, emiðu úlfhéðnar ok ísörn dúðu.	the berserks were roaring For this was their battle, the wolf-coated warriors howling, And the irons clattering. <sup>15</sup>
--	---

12. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, ed., *Úlfhams saga*, pp. ccvii–ccviii.

13. See, for example, *Ála flekks saga*, ed. Áke Lagerholm, in *Drei lygisögur* (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1927), p. 99: “legg ek þat á pik, at þú verðir at vargi” (this I cast upon you—you will become a wolf). The sagas generally do not describe how people put on the wolf’s *hamr*; the terms used are to “turn into” (*verða að*) or “take on” (*bregða á sig*) a particular form. It is also common for the *hamr* to come upon them, or for them (their bodies) to sleep while their soul takes on the likeness (*líki*) or *hamr* of the animal. In some sources, which are mentioned later in this section, spells are cast on people, stating that they are to “resemble wolves” (*líkjast vörgum*). Women change into she-wolves; see *Völsunga saga*, in *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda*, I, ch. 5, p. 126, and *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, ed. Agnete Loth, *Editiones Arnarnagæanæ*, B, 24 (Copenhagen, 1965), V, ch. 11, p. 83. The wording in other sources is less clear: people take on *vargshamr* or *vargslíki* or simply don wolf pelts (*vargsbelgr/úlfahamr*). In many stories of shape-shifting, the *hamr* is described as a sort of costume, e.g., in one fairy tale, a boy frees his siblings from a spell in which they are caught in the shapes (*hamir*) of a bear, a dog, and a falcon. In return, they give him these shapes, which he can use whenever he wants; see Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*, IV, 617.

14. The word *varúlfur* has parallels in most all Indo-European languages, for instance, “varulv” in Danish, “vaira-ulf” in Gothic, “werewolf” in Saxon, “Werwolf” in German, “war- wolf” in Scottish, “wargus” in old Norman, “vlkodlak” in Slovakian, “wawkalak” in Russian, “varcolaci” in Romanian, “loup-garou” in French, and “lupo manaro” in Italian. It is interesting to note that Icelandic stories (at least prior to the seventeenth century) represent an exception here, the terms used being the simple elements *úlfr* and *vargr*; the compound *varúlfur* does not seem to have become established in use. For more about the word *varúlfur*, see Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, ed., *Úlfhams saga*, pp. clxxxiii–clxxxv.

15. “Haraldskvæði,” st. 8, in *Skjaldevers*, ed. Jón Helgason, *Nordisk filologi*, 12 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1968), p. 17 (also *Haralds saga hárfagra*, *Íslenzk fornrit*, XXVI [Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1941], ch. 18). The translation is that in Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla* or *The Lives of the Norse Kings*, ed. Erling Monsen (Cambridge: Heffer and Sons, 1932), p. 56. An older translation by Thomas Percy has perhaps a more accurate rendering of the second line: “they had war in their hearts”; see Margaret Clunies Ross, ed., *The Old Norse*

Scholars have disagreed about the meaning of the word *berserkr*,<sup>16</sup> but since the poem names *berserkir* and *úlfhéðnar* as parallel figures who fight side by side, it must be considered likely that the word “berserkr” is derived from bear skin, just as “úlfhéðinn” is derived from wolf skin. Stanzas 20–21 explain that *úlfhéðnar* were berserks who had distinguished themselves in battle, i.e., warriors.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the word “berserkir” is the name of a category, and “úlfhéðnar” a subcategory.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most recognizable attributes of the berserks is that they fall into a “berserk frenzy.” They run wild in battle, become crazed, and roar or howl. No weapons can harm them and they tolerate wounds better than other men. The berserk frenzy is actually closely related to shape-shifting, for in both cases men acquire the attributes of animals. The main difference resides, perhaps, in the fact that with shape-shifting it is assumed that either the soul is transported to another body, that is, into an animal’s body (and thus people are described as *eigi einhamir*, “not restricted to

Poetic Translations of Thomas Percy (Turnhout: Brepols 2001), p. 242. The poem is generally thought to have been composed by Þorbjörn, but the stanzas about the battle at Hafrsfjörður (among them stanza 8) have also been ascribed to Þjóðólfr from Hvin. On evidence for dating the poem, see, for example, Vésteinn Ólason, “Dróttkvæði,” in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning 1992), I, 203 and 364, and Jón Helgason, “Haraldskvæði,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 2 (1946), especially p. 142.

16. Scholars disagree as to whether the prefix *ber-* indicates “bear” (cf. the feminine form *bera*) or “bare” (cf. *ber*). Berserks have therefore been variously defined as warriors in bear pelts or warriors without armor. See especially Hermann Güntert, *Über altisländische Berserker- Geschichten* (Heidelberg: Universitäts-buchdruckerei J. Hörning, 1912); Fredrik Grøn, *Berserks- gangens vesen og årsaksforhold*, *Det Kgl. Norske Videnskabers Selskabs Skrifter*, 4 (trondheim, 1929); Erik Noreen, “Ordet bærærk,” in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 48 (1932), 242–54; Hans Kuhn, “Kappar og berserkir,” in *Skírnir*, 123 (1949), 98–113; Klaus von See, “Studien zum Haraldskvæði,” in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 76 (1961), 96–111; Otto Höfler, “Berserker,” in *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1976 [2nd. ed.]); Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, *Úlfhams saga*, pp. ccxi–ccxv.

17. Klaus von See considers stanzas 20–21 to be of a more recent date than stanza 8; see “Studien zum Haraldskvæði.”

18. Other sources show that there were warriors who identified themselves with wolves by donning wolf coats, for example, in *Trójumanna saga*, where a wolf-skin coat is used as a military uniform in battle (*Trójumanna saga hin forna*, prentuð eftir útgáfu Jóns Sigurðssonar forseta í dönskum annálum 1848 [Reykjavík: Prentsmiðja D. Östlunds, 1913], ch. 13). In *Vatnsdæla saga*, we read: “ok þeir berserkir, er Úlfheðnar vǫru kallaðir; þeir höfdu vargstakka fyrir brynjur ok vǫrdu framstafn á konungs skipinu” (and those berserks known as “Wolf-skins”—they used wolf-skin cloaks for corselets and defended the bow of the king’s ship); *Íslensk fornrit*, VIII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939), ch. 9, pp. 24–25, and *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), IV, ch. 9. Cf. *Egils saga*, ch. 9, pp. 22–23; *Óláfs saga helga*, *Íslensk fornrit*, XXVII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1927), ch. 193 and 228, pp. 345 and 384, in which reindeer skins are made stronger by magic for Þórir hundr and his men. According to another version of the saga, these were wolf-skin coats; see Gerard Breen, “Personal Names and the Re-creation of berserkir and Úlfheðnar,” *Studia Anthroponymica Scandinavica*, *Tidskrift för nordisk personnamnsforskning*, 15 (Uppsala, 1997), p. 19; *Blómstrvallasaga*, ed. Theodor Möbius (Leipzig: Wilh. Engelmannum, 1855), ch. 10, p. 17; “Hyndluljóð,” st. 24, in *Eddadigte*, II, 84.

one form”), or that the body undergoes a transformation, whereas in the berserk frenzy men acquire the attributes of wild animals; one could thus say that the berserk is a wild animal in the shape of a man. The condition is therefore psychological in the case of the berserk, but physical in the case of werewolves and other shape-shifters.

As might be expected, the distinction between the psychological and physical condition is not always clear-cut and sometimes depends on interpretation. In the literature, we have cases where individuals actually undergo transformation, or where their souls depart from their bodies and take on the form of an animal. The latter possibility, perhaps a form of shamanism, is illustrated, for example, by Böðvar bjarki in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, whose body lies quiescent in his tent while a bear fights on the battlefield.<sup>19</sup>

People who had power over their souls by being able to shape-shift were called *hamrammir* or *eigi einhamir*. Finnur Jónsson, writing about *seiðr*, argued that most sorcerers and shamans had the ability to change themselves into the shape of any living creature.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear that the animal into which a person is transformed has a symbolic value. This can be seen in shape-shifting stories from around the world, including those from Iceland, e.g., in tales in which beautiful maidens turn into attractive birds such as swans or cranes. Wolves were beasts of battle, with strongly negative associations. In fact, the Germanic peoples used the term *vargr* for outlaws, those who had forfeited their rights to participate in human society.<sup>21</sup> The Old-Icelandic law code *Grágás*, which is preserved in a thirteenth-century manuscript, states: “mord vargr sa er menn hefir myrda”<sup>22</sup> (“murder *vargr* the one who has murdered

19. *Saga Hrólfis konungs kraka*, ch. 25 and 50, pp. 50 and 103, and *Hrólfs saga kraka og Bjarkarímur*, VIII 7, ed. Finnur Jónsson, STUAGNL, XXXII (Copenhagen: S. L. Møller, 1904), p. 161. Similar types of shape-shifting are also described in Snorri Sturluson’s *Ynglinga saga*, which states that Óðinn takes on the forms of various animals while his body lies as if asleep or dead (*Ynglinga saga*, Íslenzk fornrit, XXVI [Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1941], ch. 7, p. 18).

20. Finnur Jónsson, “Um galdra, seið, seiðmenn og völur,” in *Þrjár ritgjörðir*, Finnur Jónsson, Valtyr Guðmundsson, and Bogi Th. Melsted (Copenhagen, 1892), p. 21. Cf. Golther, *Handbuch der germanischen Mythologie*, pp. 100–1. For a discussion of *hamrammir* in medieval Icelandic literature, see also Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “Um berserki, berserksganginn og amanita muscaria,” in *Skírnir*, 175 (2001), 317–53.

21. The notion of the outlaw as a wolf (werewolf) was widespread among the Germanic and related peoples and can be traced back to the mythology of antiquity, well beyond the bounds of the Germanic cultural field, even as far back as in Hittite law of the thirteenth century BC. See Gerstein, “Warg: the Outlaw as Werewolf,” p. 163.

22. *Grágás* efter det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr 334 fol. *Staðarhólsbók*, Kommissionen for det Arnamagnæanske Legat (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske boghandel, 1879), p. 348. See Gerstein, “Warg: the Outlaw as Werewolf,” and Michael Jacobi, *wargus, vargr, ‘Verbrecher’, ‘Wolf’* (Uppsala: Studia Germanistica Upsaliensia, 1974), ch. 2, I and II.

men”). The mythical-heroic *Völsunga saga*, also written in the thirteenth century, relates that Sigi, a son of the god Óðinn and ancestor of the *Völsungs*, was called a “wolf in the sanctuary” (*vargr í véum*) and was forced to abandon his patrimony after having murdered one of his neighbor’s servants.<sup>23</sup> Such men are also called “*skóggangsmenn*,” which refers to their expulsion from society, since they were driven to the forest as if they were wolves. *Vargr* is used in this way for outlaws in other Icelandic sources, both in the sagas and the Eddic poems.<sup>24</sup> In older Icelandic, the connection between *vargr* and criminal (outlaw) can also be seen in the words *morðvargr* (murderer), *vargtré* (wolftree, that is, gallows), *vargrækr* (expelled like a wolf), and *vargdropi/vargdragi* (wolf cub, that is, son of an outlaw, a legal term),<sup>25</sup> and even in the modern language in the words *brennuvargur* (arsonist, pyromaniac), *skemmdarvargur* (vandal), and *vargöld* (times of war and cruelty).

As has already been noted, the term *vargr* seems to be more common in sagas of shape-shifting, in which it is the term for an outlaw,<sup>26</sup> while *úlfr* more often refers to the animal itself. Still, this is not clear-cut, and the two terms have a similar function, as we shall see.

#### THE WEREWOLF MOTIF IN ICELANDIC LITERATURE: THE OLDER VARIANT

Scholars who have studied the werewolf motif believe that the shape-shifting ability was originally innate and that shape-shifting as a result of a spell or enchantment is a later phenomenon.<sup>27</sup> In Iceland, the story of *Böðvarr bjarki* in *Hrólfs saga kraka* preserves the motif in its original form and is in many ways characteristic of the ancient beliefs of the Norse peoples. *Böðvarr bjarki*, in the form of a bear (a polar bear, according to *Bjarkarímur*),

23. *Völsunga saga*, ch. 1.

24. In the Eddic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, the term *vargr* refers to an outlaw, and possible expulsion to the woods is seen as a punishment for a slaying. “*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*,” st. 33, in *Eddadigte*, III, 38.

25. The son of an outlaw is always disinherited. See *Grágás*, p. 68, and “*Sigrdrífumál*,” st. 35, in *Eddadigte*, III, 77. “*Vargdragi*” is a variant of “*vargdropi*”; see *Lexicon Islandicum. Orðabók Guðmundar Andréssonar*, ed. Gunnlaugur Ingólfsson and Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík: Orðabók Háskólans, 1999), p. 167.

26. See notes in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 152.

27. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, “Keltnesk áhrif á íslenskar ýkjusögur,” pp. 118–19. Cf. G. L. Kittredge, “Arthur and Gorlagon,” *Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* (Boston: Ginn, 1903), VIII, 170, n. 3; 262, and 265.

battles with his opponents while his body sleeps. His shape-shifting ability is innate and emerges in battle.<sup>28</sup>

For a werewolf, rather than a man-bear, we turn to *Völsunga saga*, a legendary saga from the thirteenth century. This saga stands apart from other Icelandic sources in that the werewolf motif occurs throughout the narrative, such as in the origin and descent of the *Völsungs* (also called *Ylfingar*—“Wolflings”),<sup>29</sup> their brotherhood, kinship, and identification with wolves, and various actions and traditions. The motif appears in the very first chapter of the saga in the person of the aforementioned Sigi who figuratively becomes a wolf (*vargr*). The fifth chapter includes the story of the mother of King Siggeirr, who changes herself into a wolf and eats the nine sons of King *Völsungr*. The incident bears a strong resemblance to similar ones in stories of testing in that it is only Sigmundr, the tenth son, who survives.

The most famous instance of the motif occurs, however, in the story of the father and son Sigmundr and Sinfjötli. Sinfjötli is the third son, whom Signý sends to Sigmundr for fosterage, and the only one who survives the ordeal. The father and son find wolf pelts in a hut in the forest; they belong to two enchanted king’s sons. They are magic pelts, which can be removed only every tenth day. Sigmundr and Sinfjötli put on the pelts and live as wolves in the forest for ten days. They agree to howl to each other if they should be involved in fights with more than seven men at a time, but Sinfjötli proves to be the more valiant, killing eleven men at one time without letting his father know. Sigmundr is angered at his son’s arrogance and inflicts a deadly wound on him, but a raven, the bird and messenger of Óðinn, brings a leaf that heals Sinfjötli’s wounds. Sigmundr and Sinfjötli are relieved when they are finally able to remove their pelts and burn them.

It is obvious that Sigmundr takes Sinfjötli out to the woods on purpose, to accustom him to hardship and that as a fully trained warrior (*Völsungr*) Sinfjötli must come to know his animal nature, the wild animal within him: “ok í þeim úsköpum unnu þeir mörg frægðarverk í ríki Siggeirs konungs. Ok er Sinfjötli er frumvaxti, þá þikkist Sigmundr hafa reynt hann mjök” (Under that magic spell they had performed many feats in King Siggeirr’s kingdom. When Sinfjötli was fully grown Sigmund thought he had tested

28. *Saga Hrólfs konungs kraka*, chs. 25, 50, pp. 50, 103, and *Hrólfs saga kraka og Bjarkarímur*, VIII, 7, p. 161. We may note, however, that Björn, Böðvarr’s father, was placed under a spell by queen Hvít, and Böðvarr was therefore actually the son of a man-bear, an enchanted being. Thus, the motif is spell related.

29. “*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*,” in *Eddadigte*, III, 30. Beowulf refers to the same people as “*Wylfingas*”; see *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Fr. Klaeber (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1950), p. 18, ll. 461, and 471.

him fully).<sup>30</sup> The emphasis in this episode is on Sinfjötli's development, which seems in most respects to reflect the consecratory rites of archaic peoples—and therefore the incident in which the she-wolf eats his parents' brothers is relevant in the same way, for in both cases only one of the young men is destined to survive.

The story raises some questions regarding the relationship between the Völsungs and wolves. Is their approximation to wolves and their wolf nature perhaps a way to bring themselves closer to and identify themselves with Óðinn, their ancestor? The wolf is Óðinn's animal and as a scavenger—along with his ravens—the appropriate symbol and agent of the god of war. In this sense, the wolf could also be understood as symbolic of the power that brings victory, according to ancient Norse and Germanic belief.<sup>31</sup> In this light, the Völsungs can be seen as a sort of wolf clan or as *úlphéðnar*, i.e., a family or warrior clan that performs its deeds in the name of the wolf, the wolf then functioning as a sort of totem of the clan. Identification with the wild animal inspires them to great deeds, and the nature of the “pack” gives them great strength, like wolves who join together in packs and urge each other to attack. Could it be claimed that the wolf, as the chosen animal of Óðinn, is a sort of model for Sigmundr and Sinfjötli as valiant warriors and warriors of Óðinn?<sup>32</sup> And that their existence as wolves is therefore a sort of consecratory rite, in which the father leads the son through the most extreme trial?

Later in *Völsunga saga*, Sigurðr, another son of king Sigmundr, kills the dragon Fáfnir. Before dying, Fáfnir asks Sigurðr his name, to which he replies: “ek heiti göfugt dýr” (“I am called the noble beast”).<sup>33</sup> It can quite possibly be assumed that Sigurðr likens himself to a wolf,<sup>34</sup> as the

30. *Völsunga saga*, ch. 8, p. 132, and *The Saga of the Volsungs*, intro. and trans. Jesse L. Byock (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), p. 45. For the Völsungs as a wolf pack, see Adam Douglas, *The Beast Within: Man, Myths and Werewolves* (London: Orion, 1993), p. 67 and also p. 25; Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, “Shape-Changing in the Old Norse Sagas,” in *A Lycanthropy Reader*, ed. Charlotte F. Otten (New York: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 151–53; also Gerstein, “Warg: the Outlaw as Werewolf,” p. 81.

31. J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, 3d ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), p. 194.

32. Concerning Sigmundur and Sinfjötli as warriors of Óðinn, see Otto Höfler, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Moritz Diesterweg, 1934), I, 197. It has been pointed out that the name Sinfjötli could possibly mean “wolf”; see Heiko Uecker, *Germanische Heldensage* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1972), p. 24. If this is so, then the name contains an unequivocal reference to the totem animal of the clan, as was a traditional practice; see Breen, “Personal Names and the Re-Creation of Berserkir and Úlfhednar,” pp. 11–12.

33. *Völsunga saga*, ch. 18, p. 160, and *The Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 63. A comparable reply can be found in the Eddic poem “Fáfnismál,” st. 2, in *Eddadigte*, III, 62.

34. “[A]s he is of a noble theriophoric wolf tribe, the Ylfingar” (Breen, “the Wolf Is at the Door,” p. 35). Admittedly, the “nobility” of wolves is disputable, but it might be pointed out that in werewolf stories, the Icelandic ones at least, it is most commonly noble (or even

Völsungs seem to do. At least we should note that in another scene—in the Eddic poem *Reginismál*, Reginn, Fáfnir’s brother, calls him *frekan úlf* (an aggressive wolf).<sup>35</sup>

The wolf imagery continues throughout the saga, the parallel between man and wolf apparently having mainly negative connotations or referring to the qualities of a warrior and the rigors and dangers of such a life. This seems also to be the case when Sigurðr meets Brynhildr Budladóttir for the first time; she gives him wise counsel and among other things advises him to beware of the sons and brothers of the ones he slays, because “opt er úlfr í úngum syni” (often a wolf lies in a young son).<sup>36</sup> This proverb foreshadows forthcoming events, such as when Brynhildr calls Sigurðr’s son an *úlfrhvelp* (wolf cub). This presumably reflects his innate inheritance, along with the fact that if he is not to be killed along with his father, he will later become his revenger. It is also noteworthy that when Guttormr Gjúkason is persuaded to slay Sigurðr and his son (the “wolf cub”), he is given boiled wolf meat, which makes him so vehement and ferocious that he agrees to commit the evil deed.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, the wolf symbolism appears again late in the saga when the brothers Gunnarr and Högni decide to visit their brother-in-law Atli, Guðrún’s treacherous husband. Their sister Guðrún and their wives try to warn them against going; Guðrún sends them a token, a gold ring, with a wolf’s hair around it, and Gunnarr’s wife tells her husband that she dreamed of his death among howling wolves.<sup>38</sup>

That the Völsung connection with wolves is traditional can be seen not only from the saga but also from the fact that the saga is based on Eddic

royal) persons who are transformed into wolves. If Sigurðr is comparing himself to a wolf, then this would contain a reference to the Ylfingar, i.e., the Völsungs; thus, Sigurðr is giving Fáfnir a hint of his ancestry. “Göfugt dýr” has also been interpreted as meaning “aurochs” (úruxi), the first three lines of “Fáfnismál” then being interpreted as containing a hidden form of the name Sigurðr: “Göfugt dýr ek heiti, / en ek gengit hefki / inn móðurlausi mögr” (“Pre-eminent beast” I’m called, / and I go about / as a motherless boy; *The Poetic Edda*, transl. Caroline Larrington [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996]), p. 158). See Ólafur M. Ólafsson, “Sigurður duldi nafns síns,” *Andvari*, 12 (1970), especially pp. 184–87, and “Fáfnismál,” st. 2, in *Eddadigte*, III, 62.

35. “Reginismál,” st. 13, in *Eddadigte*, III, 56.

36. *Völsunga saga*, ch. 21, and *The Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 71; see also the Eddic poem “Sigdrífumál,” st. 35, in *Eddadigte*, III, 77–78.

37. An older variant of the same episode is found in the Eddic poem “brot af Sigurdarkviðu,” st. 4, in *Sæmundar Edda hins fróða*, ed. Sophus Bugge, *Norræn fornkvæði* (Christiania, 1867), p. 238. A comparable motif also occurs in *Bjarkarímur* (IV, 63–66 and V, 4), where Böðvarr encourages Hjalti to drink the blood from a she-wolf, at which his strength and power grew so greatly that he became equal to Böðvarr in physical prowess. See *Hrólfs saga kraka og Bjarkarímur*, pp. 140–41.

38. *Völsunga saga*, ch. 33 and 35, pp. 210 and 213, and *The Saga of the Volsungs*, pp. 96 and 99. The former is comparable to the Eddic poem “Atlakvida,” st. 8, in *Sæmundar Edda hins fróða*, pp. 283–84.

poems, some of which have already been cited. The Eddic poems constitute one of the two categories of poetry practiced by Norsemen since before the Viking Age. They are now preserved in manuscripts from the thirteenth century and later, the oldest one dating from circa 1270. In the thirty-fourth stanza of the poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, Sinfjötli is called *Ylfingr* (a “wolfling”) and shortly after, his opponent Guðmundr reminds him of his werewolf nature and his association with wolves. He says:

Pú hefir etnar	thou hast made thy meal
úlfa krásir	of the meat of wolves,
ok brædr þínom	and been the bane
at bana orðit,	of thy brothers twain;
opt sár sogin	with thy cold snout hast
með svolum munni,	oft sucked men’s wounds,
hefr í hreysi	and hateful to all
hvarleiðr skriðit!	hast hid in the waste. <sup>39</sup>

He also says:

Stiúpr vartu Siggeirs,	As Siggeir’s stepson
látt und stoðom heima,	’neath stones didst dwell
vargljóðom vanr	in woody wasted,
á viðom úti.	with the wolves howling. <sup>40</sup>

these two stanzas can be compared to *Völsunga saga*, chapter 9, in which Guðmundr is called Granmarr. The epic poem indicates that the werewolf motif as used in *Völsunga saga* is old, as does the fact that the motif appears to be quite deeply rooted in the saga structure. Therefore, it can be maintained that behind the fairytale-like episode of Sigmundr and Sinfjötli lies the ancient werewolf motif, which is closely connected with Sinfjötli’s background and growth to manhood. Although we can say that this episode is closely connected to ancient initiation practices,<sup>41</sup> it is not clear at what

39. “*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*” (“*Völsungakviða*,”) st. 36, in Eddadigte, III, 15, and Lee M. Hollander, *The Poetic Edda* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1962), p. 186. The translation of the second line does not give the correct meaning of the Old Norse text, because Sinfjötli has eaten the food (lit. delicacies) of wolves (as he was one himself), not their meat! Other translations are not quite accurate either; e.g., Caroline Larrington translates: “you have eaten the leavings of wolves”; see *The Poetic Edda*, p. 119

40. “*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*” (“*Völsungakviða*”), st. 41, in Eddadigte, III, 16, and Hollander, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 187. The word “vargljóðum” has been taken by interpreters of the Eddic poems to mean “varghljóð” (wolf-sounds, howls), but the meaning “vargljóðar” as “vargmenn” (wolf-men) should not be ruled out, as it suits the context well (accustomed to being a werewolf out in the woods). The word is, however, not attested elsewhere, and there are no examples of the word “ljóðar” being used for “men” anywhere else in the Eddic poems.

41. Cf., for example, Lily Weiser, *Altgermanische Jünglingsweißen und Männerbünde, bausteine zur Volkskunde und Religionswissenschaft*, 1 (bühl [baden]: Konkordia A.-G., 1927), pp.

stage the symbolic rituals became reinterpreted as actual transformation, in which the father and son take upon themselves the shape of wolves. The pelts, which belong to enchanted king's sons, could suggest that the original motif shows later Celtic influence. But despite the very likely possibility that the ancient werewolf motif in *Völsunga saga* underwent some changes over time, its symbolic meaning can be considered unchanged.

Examples of the negative connotation of wolves are also found in other Eddic material. In *Gylfaginning* in *Snorra Edda*, Snorri Sturluson († 1241) tells how the Æsir changed Váli into the shape of a wolf, and that in this form he tore apart his brother Narfi (cf. the Eddic poem *Lokasenna*).<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Snorri mentions certain giants who are born as wolves, among them Sköll and Hati Hroðvitnisson, who run ahead of and behind the sun, and Mánagarmr (dog of the moon), who swallows the moon at *Ragnarök*. The same mythological material is preserved in an older, less-detailed form in the Eddic poem *Völuspá*.<sup>43</sup> The motif also appears in *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*, or “Forspjallsljóð,” which was printed along with other Eddic poems in Sophus Bugge’s edition from 1867. The poem is only preserved in late paper manuscripts, and in the introduction to his edition, Bugge suggests that it should be excluded from later editions, as it is of a more recent date than other Eddic poems and is written in a different style. He believes that it was written in the seventeenth century, but Jónas Kristjánsson is of the opinion that it is old, but very corrupt. In the eighth stanza of this poem, the goddess Iðunn is given a wolf’s pelt, so that she can change shape:

Síá sigtívar syrgia naunno Viggjar at veom, vargsbelg seldo; let í færæz, lyndi breytti, lek at lævísi, litom skipti.	The divinities see Nauma grieving in the wolf's home given a wolf-skin, she clad herself therein, changed disposition, delighted in guile, shifted her shape. <sup>44</sup>
--	--

70–71; and Jens Peter Schjødt, *Initiation, liminalitet og tilegnelse af numinøs viden* (Århus: Det teologiske Fakultet, Aarhus Universitet, 2003), pp. 315–18.

42. See “*Gylfaginning*,” in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, p. 49. According to “*Gylfaginning*,” the Æsir took Narfi’s intestines and used them to bind his father, Loki. The Eddic poem *Lokasenna* relates the same incidents, but in a different way. It states that the Æsir bound Loki with the intestines of his son Nari, adding: “En Narfi sonr hans vard at vargi” (“but his son Narfi became a wolf”). See *Eddadigte*, II, the prose at the end of the poem, p. 57, and Hollander, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 103. This terse passage is ambiguous; Narfi either took on the shape of a wolf or he simply became an outlaw (see the discussion of the ambivalence of the term *vargr* earlier in this article).

43. “*Gylfaginning*,” p. 49, and “*Völuspá*,” st. 40 and 41, in *Eddadigte*, I.

44. “*Hrafnagaldur Óðins*,” st. 8, in *Sæmundar Edda hins fróða*, p. 372. English translation by Eysteinn Björnsson and William P. Reaves, published at <http://www.hi.is/~eybjorn/ugm/hrg/hrg.html>. “Nauma” in l. 2 of the translation is a variant of “naunno” in some of the

Iðunn's wolf-power comes from a pelt she dons. The wolf's shape changes her personality: she not only looks like a wolf but acts like one as well; she becomes guileful.

In addition to the above-mentioned episode in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Völsunga saga*, and the Eddic material—and the related stories of berserks that Einar Ól. Sveinsson mentioned as remnants of the ancient belief—the werewolf is depicted negatively in several late medieval romances. In *Gibbons saga*, an Icelandic romance from the fourteenth century, preserved in the manuscript AM 335 4to from circa 1400, the dwarf Asper turns himself into a huge wolf, black as coal and evil-looking as the devil. In his lupine shape, Asper fights the ogress *Obscura*, and for his valor he is rewarded with four castles and an earldom.<sup>45</sup> *Sigrards saga frækna*, another Icelandic romance (probably from the fourteenth century) and preserved in AM 556 a 4to from the late fifteenth century, features the witch *Hlégerdr*, who can change herself into various animals and transforms herself into a she-wolf to attack a man called *Knútr* in his sleep. After a fight, during which the she-wolf tears the flesh from *Knútr*'s bones, he and his two companions break her spine and tear out her entrails. Then *Hlégerdr* reappears and when *Knútr* strikes at her, she turns into a crow and flies up into the air.<sup>46</sup> An episode similar to the one in *Gibbons saga* occurs in *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands*, an Icelandic romance from the fourteenth century, preserved in Holm perg 10 II 8vo from the sixteenth century. The story mentions a certain *Gustr*, who turns himself into a black wolf, just like Asper, and attacks with his “*storum klóm, og laungum tønnum*” (big claws and long teeth) the villain *Valbrandr*, who has already turned himself into a dragon.<sup>47</sup>

In his *Skjöldunga saga*, *Arngrímur Jónsson* “the learned” (1568–1648) mentions *Heiðrekr Úlfhamr*, who was supposed to be able to transform himself into a wolf:

*Heidricus cognomento Ulfhamur, eo quod se in lupum transformare noverit, vel est tropicè dictum pro sævo.*<sup>48</sup>

manuscripts. Line 3 contains the variant ‘at Yggjar veum’ = at Óðinn’s home; see *Sæmundar Edda hins fróða*, fn., p. 372. See also Jónas Kristjánsson, “Frá Fremsta-Felli til Hrafnagaldurs Óðins,” in *Skjöldur*, 8 (1995), 8, and “Hrafnagaldur Óðins—Forspjallsljóð: fornkvæði reist úr ösku,” in *Morgunblaðið*, *Lesbók*, April 27 (2002), 4–6. Gunnar Pálsson argued that the correct title of the poem is “*Hrævagaldur*” and that it constitutes an introduction to “*Vegtamskviða*”; see *Bréf Gunnars Pálssonar*, ed. Gunnar Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1984), I, 378.

45. *Gibbons saga*, ed. R. I. Page, *Editiones Arnarnagænanæ*, B, 2 (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1960), ch. 17, pp. 87–88.

46. *Sigrards saga frækna*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, V, ch. 11, p. 83.

47. *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, V, ch. 22, p. 181.

48. *Arngrímur Jónsson*, “*Rerum Danicarum Fragmenta*,” in *Arngrimi Jonae Opera Latine Conscripta*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, *Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana*, IX (Copenhagen: Ejnar

(Heidricus was called Úlfhamr because he was able to transform himself into a wolf, as is said, metaphorically, of a cruel person.)

This Heiðrekr Úlfhamr (alternatively the son of Úlfhamr) is also mentioned in the mythical-heroic sagas *Hervarar saga* (thirteenth century), *Sörla þáttur* (probably from the thirteenth century), and *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns* (fourteenth century), where he is said to be a son of the legendary chieftain Goðmundr from Glæsisvellir and grandson of Úlfhédinn trausti, who was also called Goðmundr. These sources, however, do not mention Heiðrekr's shape-shifting abilities, and the reference could have been added by Arngrímur, since it is a natural conclusion to be drawn from the name Úlfhamr. This may perhaps be a late sixteenth-century rationalization.

In three of the four above-mentioned sources, Asper, Hlégerðr, and Gustr change into wolves during a fight/battle, and therefore these variants resemble the original motif in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, though admittedly with the difference that they do not leave their own bodies.

## WEREWOLVES OUTSIDE ICELAND

Werewolves were also found in the ancient narratives of Greek, Roman, and Celtic society and developed in varying ways.<sup>49</sup> In the song “Alphesiboëus” from 39 BC, the Roman poet Virgil writes about Moëris, who is transformed into a wolf and hides in the woods.<sup>50</sup> A slightly more recent source, but still the oldest most fully developed European werewolf story, is found in the *Satyricon* of the Roman writer Petronius, who lived in the first century AD.<sup>51</sup> Despite being quite ancient, these two works seem not to have the oldest attestations of the werewolf motif in Europe, since the historian Herodotus (484?–425? BC) recorded that certain sorcerers

Munksgaard, 1950), p. 353. See also *Hervarar saga og Heiðreks konungs*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, I, ch. 20, p. 509; *Sörla þáttur*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, I, 399; and *Saga af Þorsteini bæjarmagni*, in *Fornmannasögur*, III (Copenhagen: Hið norræna fornfræða félag, 1827), ch. 5 and 12, pp. 183 and 197.

49. For the origin of the motif, see Fredrik Grøn, *Berserksgangens vesen og årsaksforhold*, p. 43 ff., and John Granlund, “Varulv” in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon*, XIX, 559. See also Wilhem Hertz, *Der Werwolf* (Stuttgart: A. Kröner, 1862); Summers, *The Werewolf*; Douglas, *The Beast Within*, pp. 41–63; Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Book of Werewolves*; and Strömbäck, “Om varulven.” Numerous citations in Stith Thompson's register, *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, 1–6 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1955–58) give a good idea of the geographical dispersion of the motif (see D 113.1, D 113.1.1).

50. Virgil, *Eclogues; Georgics; Aeneid I–IV* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 81–83.

51. Petronius, *Satyricon*, ed. and transl. by R. Bracht Branham and Daniel Kinney (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1996), pp. 56–57.

among the Scythians changed into the form of a wolf for a few days each year.<sup>52</sup> Another historian, Pliny, who lived in the first century AD, states that stories about werewolves had been circulating for centuries before his time. Pliny quotes the Greek historian Evantes, who wrote about a certain Arcadian tribe: every nine years, these Arcadians had to choose one member who would be transformed into a wolf. After this time, he would change back.<sup>53</sup> Arcadia also features in the Greek myth of Lykaon, king of the Arcadians, who was transformed into a wolf after offending Zeus by sacrificing a boy to him.<sup>54</sup>

The story of the Arcadian wolves as related by Evantes closely resembles an episode found in the Norwegian *Konungs skuggsjá* from the thirteenth century (preserved in Norwegian as well as numerous Icelandic manuscripts). In a story about St. Patrick, presumably derived from an Irish source,<sup>55</sup> a certain Irish tribe rejected the apostle's mission and, in order to mock him, started to howl like wolves against the word of God.<sup>56</sup> St. Patrick became angry and asked God to punish them for their disobedience. From then on the tribe lived under a curse, in that every member would for a period of seven years become a wolf, live out in the forest, and eat the food of wolves. These people were considered to be even worse than real wolves, since they possessed human understanding and therefore did harm to both humans and other animals through their rapacity and greed. In this story, the transformation of men into wolves is a punishment from God, just as in the Greek myth where Zeus punishes Lykaon by turning him into a wolf.

The distribution of the werewolf motif shows that it was widely known and attested, and it may safely be assumed that written sources represent only a fraction of the tradition that once lay behind them. Naturally, individual stories and variants of this widespread motif are of varying significance when it comes to the origin of the motif and its occurrence in Norse literature. The relationship between the Icelandic stories and Germanic customs, which appear to form their background, has already been pointed

52. Baring-Gould, *The Book of Werewolves*, p. 9.

53. Plinius Secundus, *The History of the World* (London: Centaur Press, 1962), p. 95.

54. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1960), I, 138.

55. *Konungs skuggsjá*, ed. Ludvig Holm-Olsen (Oslo: Kjeldekriftdonet, 1945), p. 25. Cf. John Carey, "Werewolves in Medieval Ireland," *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 44 (Winter 2002), esp. p. 48ff. Carey discusses *Konungs skuggsjá*, as well as three older, closely related Irish stories in *Topographia Hiberniae* (twelfth century), *De Mirabilibus Hibernie* (eleventh century), and the Middle Irish text *De Ingantaib Éren* ("On the Wonders of Ireland").

56. There is a parallel to *Karlamagnús saga* (thirteenth century), where the heathen men "drógu sik þá á bak ok ýldu svá sem vargar" (then retreated and howled like wolves); *Karlamagnús saga ok kappa hans*, ed. C. R. Unger (Christiania: H. J. Jensen, 1860), p. 352. Heathens were also commonly described as barking dogs; see Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, "Á hvað trúá hundar?" in *Þorlákstídir* (Reykjavík), pp. 7–10.

out, but in addition it may be informative to examine their relationship to medieval Irish sources. The Irish sources, which refer to events dating from between the seventh and the thirteenth centuries, contain some variants of the motif that are comparable to the Icelandic variants discussed above. Among other things, they include: (1) the symbolic association of hounds and wolves with warriors (comparable to *úlfhéðnar*), (2) a soul that takes on the form of a wolf while the body sleeps (comparable to *Hrólfs saga kraka*), (3) a saint who punishes people by turning them into wolves (comparable to *Konungs skuggsjá*), and finally (4) aggressive female were-wolves (comparable to *Hlégerðr* in *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*). These motifs are discussed by John Carey, who believes that the werewolf legend in Ireland is native. He claims that direct evidence for werewolves in Scandinavian sources is scarcely earlier than the thirteenth-century *Völsunga saga*, and therefore that the Irish material probably influenced the Scandinavian. But the werewolf motif is already found in older Eddic material, and it is possible that Norse Vikings influenced the Celtic tradition, especially since the richest werewolf tradition in Ireland lies around Ossory, whose rulers had close contacts with the Vikings.<sup>57</sup>

Although it is difficult to say anything definite about these influences, we are on firmer ground when it comes to a particular form of the werewolf legend in which the characteristic element is a deceitful wife who changes her husband into an animal, the transformation thus being the result of a magic spell. Stories of this type appear to have been popular in the British Isles and Brittany in the twelfth century, from where they spread to northern Europe through the medium of the *lais*, narrative poems that were strongly influenced by courtly culture. This medieval European narrative tradition contains fully formed romantic notions concerning werewolves, even though the basic elements are in most cases similar to the ancient motif as found in the Greek and Roman tales. These stories, characterized by chivalric ideals and a fantastic setting or atmosphere, contain various similar motifs.

The “breton” origin of the narratives has been disputed, but most probably they reflect an Oriental story type, including the spell.<sup>58</sup> The essential elements are preserved in four medieval romances: *Guillaume de Palerne*

57. Carey, “Werewolves in Medieval Ireland,” p. 71. For werewolves in Ireland, see also Kittredge, “Arthur and Gorlagon,” pp. 257–60, and John R. Reinhard and Vernam E. Hull, “bran and Sceolang,” *Speculum*, 11 (1936), 42–58. For belief in werewolves in England and Ireland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Summers, *The Werewolf*, pp. 185–86, and 206–7. For the frequency and distribution of the motif in Irish literature, see Tom Peete Cross, *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature*, *Folklore Series*, 7 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Publications, 1952), D 113.1 and D 113.1.1.

58. Carey, “Werewolves in Medieval Ireland,” p. 43. Cf. Kittredge, “Arthur and Gorlagon,” esp. pp. 170, n. 3; 262, 265. See also Douglas, *The Beast Within*, pp. 41–63, esp. pp. 42, 45.

(from the latter part of the twelfth century, but also preserved in an English translation of the fourteenth century, William of Palerne),<sup>59</sup> the *Lai de Bisclavret* (composed in the late twelfth century and translated into Old Norse, along with other lais, in the thirteenth century), the *Lai de Melion* (composed in the mid-thirteenth century), and *Arthur and Gorlagon* (found in manuscripts from the fourteenth century). The stories under discussion come from the relatively geographically restricted Celtic cultural region, which includes Ireland, England, Wales, Brittany, and France.<sup>60</sup>

The “courtly” werewolves of these stories are highly interesting with regard to the development of the werewolf motif in Iceland and are therefore worth examining briefly.

Guillaume de Palerne tells of an evil stepmother who changes a king’s son into a wolf by using a magic ointment. After numerous attempts, the queen alleviates the spell to some degree by using a formula she finds in a magician’s book. The werewolf is Christian and behaves well and is in no way connected with the darker forces of nature. The story is conceivably influenced by *Bisclavret*. The *Lai de Melion* contains the motif of the deceitful wife. Her husband is changed into a werewolf by means of a magic ring, and after various hardships King Arthur takes the wolf under his protection. The wolf attacks his wife’s lover and is in the end set free. The motif reflects that found in both *Bisclavret* and *Guillaume de Palerne*. The hero of *Arthur and Gorlagon* has power over his werewolf nature and is able to transform himself. A deceitful wife discovers his secret, transforms her husband, and runs off with her lover. The werewolf flees to the forest and raises a family with a she-wolf. He kills the king’s livestock and is pursued by the king’s men, but he ends up as the king’s pet. The king helps the werewolf find his deceitful wife and forces her to change him back into his previous form.

Of greater interest, because it appears to have influenced Icelandic literature, is *Bisclaretz ljóð*, a thirteenth-century Norse translation of the aforementioned *Lai de Bisclavret*.<sup>61</sup> The protagonist, *Bisclaret*, is born with the horrible nature of a werewolf and is transformed regularly into a wolf for three days each week. Before the transformation can take place, he has to disrobe. The antagonist in the story is *Bisclaret*’s unfaithful wife who

59. The prose version of the story was printed in France in 1552 and circulated widely. The story was translated into Irish in the sixteenth century, based on a printed version of an English translation from the first part of the sixteenth century. The author claims to have derived his material from Latin sources. See Summers, *The Werewolf*, pp. 220–22.

60. See H. G. Leach, *Angevin Britain and Scandinavia* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1921), pp. 210–11; Kittredge, “*Arthur and Gorlagon*,” pp. 257–60; and Carey, “*Werewolves in Medieval Ireland*,” pp. 40–43.

61. See “*Bisclaretz ljóð*,” in Strengleikar, ed. Robert Cook and Mattias Tveitane, *Norrøne tekster*, 3 (Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-Institutt, 1979), pp. 85–99.

hides his clothes, so that he cannot change back into his human form. While he is in his werewolf shape one day, Bisclaret is bagged by the king's men, but he manages to gain the king's sympathy and ends up as his pet. Later, he reveals his deceitful wife and her lover, who are then punished accordingly.

The story is preserved in a Norwegian manuscript together with other translations of *lais*; the collection is known as *Strengleikar*. Although the *lai* is not preserved in an Icelandic manuscript, there is evidence that the story was known in Iceland in the late Middle Ages, since much of its material reappears in an Icelandic romance, *Tíóðels saga*, as will be discussed in more detail below. An interesting addition to *Bisclaretz ljóð* is provided by the Norse translator, who affirms the narrative's credibility on the grounds that he personally knew a werewolf!

mart gærdezt kynlegt i fyrnskonne. þat er ængi hœyrir nu gætet. En sa er þessa bok norrœnade hann sa i bærnsko sinni æinn rikan bonda er hamskiftisk stundum var hann maðr stundum i vargs ham. ok talde allt þat er vargar at hofðuzt mæðan.

([M]any strange things happened in olden times that no one hears mentioned now. He who translated this book into Norse saw in his childhood a wealthy farmer who shifted his shape, and he told everything that wolves did in the meantime.)<sup>62</sup>

As we can see from these examples, the most distinctive feature of the “romantic” werewolves is that they are sympathetic, since they are most commonly the victims of an evil villain. Other common motifs are that the men either transform themselves after disrobing (already in *Petronius* and *Evantes*) or are victims of spells or enchantment; usually, their transformation is temporary (this already occurs in the story by *Evantes*). In some of these stories, the werewolves are the victims of deceitful women and most of them therefore reflect a misogynistic attitude. Several of these werewolves are pursued in their wolf's shape and some of them manage to enjoy the mercy of chieftains, which leads to their redemption and the vindication of their honor.

#### THE MORE RECENT VARIANT IN ICELAND: CELTIC-INFLUENCED STORIES

the Celtic *lais* are commonly characterized by the use of various formulae, as has been noted. The werewolves in the following Icelandic stories resemble those in Celtic narratives in many ways. The werewolf motif in

62. “*Bisclaretz ljóð*,” in *Strengleikar*, pp. 98–99.

Ála flekks saga, a fourteenth-century indigenous romance, preserved in AM 589 e 4to from circa 1450–1500, is considered old and it has been suggested that its origin lies in a lost Irish tale.<sup>63</sup> The existence of Irish motifs in Ála flekks saga, however, may perhaps also be explained in terms of oral tradition in Iceland, which was extremely rich in Celtic motifs. Áli, the protagonist of Ála flekks saga, changes into a wolf because of a slave's spell, which is worded as follows:

legg ek þat á þik, at þú verðir at vargi ok farir á skóg ok drepir bæði menn ok f[é], ok á þat fé grimmastr, er meykungr á, ok at því mest leggjaz. [. . .] Þat legg ek þó enn til við þik, Áli! at þá er þú hefir eytt öllu fé í [ríki] Þornbjargar dróttningar, skyndir þú í ríki fǫður þíns ok eirir þar hvárki fé né mǫnnum, ok ekki skal þér til unda[n]lausnar annat um þína æfi, nema at nokkur kona verdi til at biðja gríða fyrir þik, þá er þú verðr handtekinn, ok verðir þú af því lauss; en þat mun aldri verða.<sup>64</sup>

([t]his I cast upon you—you will become a wolf and run to the woods and kill both men and sheep, and be fiercest toward and attack most fiercely the sheep that the maiden-king owns. [. . .] Again I cast this upon you, Áli! that when you have destroyed all the sheep in queen Þornbjörg's kingdom, you will rush back to your father's kingdom and there show mercy to neither sheep nor man, and nothing will free you your whole life, unless a woman begs for mercy for you if you are captured. Only in this way can you be set free; but this will never happen.)

Áli's existence as a wolf is not necessarily permanent: he can be freed when certain conditions are fulfilled. The king, Áli's father, offers a reward for the wolf, which is finally caught, but Áli's foster-mother, who recognizes his eyes despite the wolf-shape, pleads for mercy for him. She takes the wolf into her custody and while she sleeps Áli emerges from the wolf's *hamr*, which is, in the end, burned.<sup>65</sup> It is common that men in animal form retain the appearance of human eyes. According to certain beliefs concerning shape-shifting, the soul settles into the animal form, that is, the animal's body, but it maintains its own form unchanged. The man within the animal can therefore be recognized by his eyes, which are a mirror of the soul. This occurs in other Icelandic sagas as well, such as in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and can be useful for breaking spells, but elsewhere it is thought to be enough simply to speak the name of the lycanthrope.<sup>66</sup> In

63. See Kittredge, "Arthur and Gorlagon," p. 256.

64. Ála flekks saga, p. 99.

65. In tales of shape-shifting, people commonly burn the animal skin, and this appears to be the most secure way of permanently finding freedom. Fire plays a very important role here, as elsewhere, in eliminating impurities, and it is often the only thing effective against sorcery and sorcerers as well as hauntings (cf. witch burnings and burnings of gravemound dwellers).

66. According to late Scandinavian werewolf tales, there are various ways of breaking werewolf spells; see, for instance, Odstedt, *Varulven i Svensk folktradition*.

both cases, it is necessary to recognize the human in the animal. While Áli received his wolf shape as the result of a curse, how he turned into a wolf is not depicted, nor exactly how he emerged from his lycanthropic form. But since the pelt (*hamr*) is burned, as is common, it can be assumed this is the case of a pelt that has been “thrown over” Áli (“steypist yfir”) and that then falls off, as occurs in *Tíóðels saga* below.

The story of *Úlfhamr* is a legendary saga from the fourteenth century. It is preserved in a fourteenth-century narrative poem in stanzas (*rímur*) (in AM 604 h 4to from circa 1550), and the narrative is also transmitted in verse-derived prose versions from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.<sup>67</sup> *Úlfhams saga* contains an extremely interesting variant of the werewolf motif. It deals in part with Hálfðan Gautakonungr, also called *Vargstakkr*. An evil spell cast by Vörn, whom he has defeated in battle, proclaims that he, along with his men, will transform themselves into wolves and wander around in the forest every winter. During the spring he gains his freedom and takes over the management of the government at home until the end of the summer.

There are certain differences between the verse and prose versions. In the *rímur*, the transformation is ambiguous, since *Vargstakkr* is like a wolf (“skyldi hann vörgum líkur”), whereas in the prose versions he actually has the shape of a wolf. The most prominent characteristics of the werewolf tale seen here are the spell and the seasonal transformation from man into wolf and vice versa. *Vargstakkr*’s seasonal transformation is unique, but comparable to other related stories, for instance the man-bear motif in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, where Björn is a man during the night and a bear during the day.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, the spell affects his close companions, which is a unique twist among comparable native Icelandic stories and medieval European narratives. Because of Vörn’s defeat (and death), the transformation takes on the quality of punishment or vengeance and is therefore closely related to the idea of the outlaw as a wolf. Despite the fact that Hálfðan and his men are without any doubt victims, the saga reflects the motif of the wolf as an animal of winter and a creature of darkness. Therefore, the story casts light on Hálfðan and his warriors as both human and animalistic at once, as actually befits “good” warriors.

67. See Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, ed. *Úlfhams saga*, in which all texts are edited diplomatically. *Úlfhams rímur* are also printed in *Rímna safn II*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 1913–22), pp. 133–69, and in a book accompanying a CD with a recording of the *rímur*. See Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, ed., *Úlfhams rímur*. Steindór Andersen kvedur (Reykjavík: 12 tónar, 2004); references to the *rímur* are to this edition, which has modern Icelandic spelling. The following quotations from the A, B, and C versions are from *Úlfhams saga*, here printed with modern spelling.

68. *Saga Hrólfs konungs kraka*, pp. 50–51.

Furthermore, Hildir, Hálfðan’s deceitful queen, seems to possess a wolf- ish nature. Not only is this reflected in her actions and manners, but also in a dream in which she appears as a she-wolf, leading a pack of wolves. She is even directly likened to a wolf (st. I, 20.2) and her army is described as an army of wolves, which tears apart their enemies’ bodies (st. II, 32.2). It should come as no surprise that the son of this wolf-natured couple is named Úlfhamr (“wolf-skin/pelt”), indicating that the son has inherited his father’s ability to change shape, just as Böðvar bjarki, in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, inherits the same ability from his father. Úlfhamr’s ability to change shape, by contrast, is nowhere described.<sup>69</sup>

Finally, it should be mentioned that vargar (i.e., actual wolves) are never far off when battles are fought in Úlfhams saga, and commonly the dead soldiers are eaten by them. This motif appears frequently in Icelandic narrative tradition; it is common in the kennings of *dróttkvætt* poetry, which may have served as a model here. This can be seen, for instance, in stanzas V, 26–27, which depict a battle with berserks and their team:

Allan dag gekk örva hríð,  
ógn er mikil að heyra.  
Vargar koma þar víst í stríð  
og velja um manna dreyra.

Arrows showered all day long,  
the noise inspired dread,  
Wolves, aroused by battle’s song,  
savored the blood of the dead.

Þann veg lyktar þundar sveim,  
þegnar dauðir liggja.  
Ylgur bauð þeim öllum heim,  
ýtar þetta þiggja.

This, then, was the battle’s end:  
the field’s strewn with slain.  
The she-wolf bade them like a friend;  
her offer none did disdain.<sup>70</sup>

Several features of the werewolf motif hint at a relationship to the Celtic stories, among them the spell and Hálfðan’s temporary existence as a wolf, which possibly has its origin in the same source as the stories of Bisclaret and Arthur and Gorlagon. Besides this, the deceitful wife, who is dissatisfied with the wolf nature of her husband and has her eye on a younger man, is present in all three of these stories. Úlfhams saga, however, also employs Germanic narrative traditions and resembles *Völsunga saga* in some ways, for instance, in the combination of werewolves and warriors. In spite of these obvious similarities, Vargstakkr’s story differs from other Icelandic werewolf stories in that it never mentions that as a wolf he is cruel—instead he lies out in the forest “in despair.” His misfortune is tragic and leads to his death, which also sets Úlfhams saga sharply apart from the Celtic stories. In all, Úlfhams saga adds an interesting variant to the werewolf motif, drawing

69. On the name “Úlfhamr,” see Breen, “Personal Names and the Re-creation of Berserker and Úlfhednar,” especially pp. 28–31.

70. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, ed. *Úlfhams rímur*, st. V, 26 and 27, p. 24; English translation by Jeffrey Cosser. For more examples, see, for instance, verses II, 32.2; III, 32.1; III, 41.4; V, 11.3–4; and V, 26.3–4.

partly on Celtic material and partly on Old Norse, along with some original additions, presumably by its fourteenth-century author.

Along with *Ála flekks saga* and *Úlfhams saga*, two other tales, *Tíóðels saga* and *Jóns saga leikara*, are distinctly influenced by the Celtic stories.

*Tíóðels saga* is extant only in late manuscripts, of which the oldest dates from circa 1600. The saga contains a motif similar to that of the story of Bisclaret, and even though the material is exploited in quite dissimilar ways, much of its material must doubtlessly derive from Bisclaretz ljóð. It is unlikely, however, that the author of *Tíóðels saga* used the version that is extant in the Norse translation as a source; it is more likely that he used another, independent source.<sup>71</sup> *Tíóðel* transforms himself, but his shape-shifting ability is not limited to one form, for he can change himself into a grey bear, a white bear, a wolf (*vargur*), or other animals. He usually changes shape and dwells in the forest three or four days each week. The story, however, tells of the occasion on which his deceitful wife managed to trap him in his white bear shape. In the end, his shape falls from him in a standard way, as is common in fairy tales of more recent date:

Og sem konungur gengur til herbergis sins sier hann huar madur sefur j sænginne bæde fridur oc fagur, oc þar kener konungur sinn gamlan vin Thíóðel riddara. En odrum megin j herberginu sier hann huitann oc leidinlegann ham.<sup>72</sup>

(And when the king walks into his room, he sees a man lying in the bed, fair and handsome, and there the king recognizes his old friend *Tíóðel* the knight. On the other side of the room he sees a white and unfortunate *hamr*.)

*Jóns saga leikara* is a chivalric tale from around 1400, preserved in AM 174 fol. from the seventeenth century. The story includes an evil step-mother who changes the protagonist, the king's son *Sigurðr*, into a wolf by striking him with wolfskin gloves. The blow seems to generate the charm, and the transformation into a wolf follows as a direct result: "oc sijndist hann aff því vargur vera"<sup>73</sup> (and because of this he appeared to be a wolf). This procedure, to hit the victim with a wolfskin glove, already appeared in the man-bear motif in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and seems to have roots that can be traced to the idea that shape-shifting follows in the wake of being

71. See Leach, *Angevin Britain and Scandinavia*, p. 212, and Marianne E. Kalinke, "A Werewolf in Bear's Clothing," *Maal og Minne*, 3–4 (1981), 139–44. Concerning *Tíóðels saga*, see also E. Kölbing, "Über isländische bearbeitungen fremder Stoffe," *Germania*, 17 (1872), 196; R. Meissner, "Die geschichte vom ritter Tíóðel und seiner ungetreuen frau," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, 47 (1904), 247–67.

72. Textual references to AM 578g 4to. See p. 7v.

73. Cited from AM 174 fol., p. 10r. The story has not been published.

clothed in an animal's pelt—sufficient here is the touch of a pelt, along with the stepmother's magic arts.<sup>74</sup>

A direct or indirect connection between the wolf and the stepmother occurs in several Icelandic stories and it seems that the relationship has a long history. Most of the Icelandic stepmothers (in the “stepmother tales”)<sup>75</sup> belong to the race of trolls (who are versed in sorcery), and the relationship between troll women and wolves goes back to ancient Norse folk beliefs. In the Eddic poem *Helga kviða Hjörvardssonar*, a troll woman rides a wolf, and there are numerous other stories that mention a connection between wolves and troll women.<sup>76</sup> Some people believed that troll women could change themselves into the shape of wolves. Presumably this plays a part in the fact that the magic arts of the trollish stepmothers have a tendency to be connected with wolves in one way or another. Margaret Schlauch believed that the connection between the evil stepmother and the werewolf motifs could have had its origin in Ireland and come from there into the Icelandic narratives.<sup>77</sup> However, the motif of the stepmother changing her stepson into a werewolf is found in many places apart from Ireland; it appears, for example, in stories from almost all the Nordic countries. These stories are of recent date and for the most part dissimilar to the Irish stories. It is rather unlikely that other Nordic nations derived the motif from Ireland, for if this had been the case, the Nordic stories would probably contain Irish motifs in addition to that of the werewolf. Therefore, the possibility that Icelanders recognized the connection between these motifs, i.e., the werewolf motif and the wicked stepmother motif, prior to the period of Celtic influence, cannot be excluded, since

74. *Saga Hrólfs konungs kraka*, ch. 25, p. 50, and *Jóns saga leikara*. See Åke Lagerholm, ed. *Drei lygisögur*, p. lxiii, and also p. lxy, where Lagerholm points out a parallel in a Norwegian folk song about the boy Lavrans. It should also be mentioned that gloves made of animal skin were used in magic ceremonies, both in *seidr* and other shamanistic practices; see Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976), p. 287. Furthermore, Celtic stories contain instances of persons placing spells on others by striking them with a wand; see Carey, “Werewolves in Medieval Ireland,” p. 39.

75. See Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “Stjúpur í vondu skapi,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 3 (1995), 25–36, and *Úlfhams saga*, pp. clxvii–clxxxi.

76. “*Helgakviða Hjörvardssonar*,” st. 35, and the prose text between stanzas 30 and 31, in *Eddadigte*, III, 26–28. See also the giantess *Hyrrokkin* in “*Gylfaginning*,” in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, p. 46. For more examples of the link between wolves and troll women, see Knut Liestøl, *Saga og folkeminne*, pp. 112–13, and Hermann Pálsson, “*Vargur á tölti: Drög að norrænni tröllafraeði*,” in *Heiðin minni. Greinar um fornar bókmenntir*, eds. Haraldur Bessason and Baldur Hafstad (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1999), pp. 141–57. It should be noted that, according to trials in Switzerland in previous centuries, witches were supposed to have ridden on wolves. See Douglas, *The Beast Within*, p. 159.

77. Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1934), p. 102. Cf. Carey, “Werewolves in Medieval Ireland,” p. 40.

a majority of the Icelanders originally came from Scandinavia, i.e., the territory of the wolf, and it is likely that stories about wolves were brought by the settlers to their new home.<sup>78</sup>

A unique variant, in which the stepmother motif, the spell motif, and the werewolf motif are combined, occurs in *Sagan af Þorsteini glott*, a folk tale of relatively recent date that was recorded at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is unusual in that the stepmother herself, Helga, is the victim of a spell cast by her own mother, a troll woman. The spell transforms her into “the most savage wolf-bitch” (*hin grimmasta úlftík*) who kills both people and livestock and is to be burned at the stake after the king’s men have managed to overpower her. Þorsteinn glott, Helga’s stepson, who also suffers from the ill will of the troll woman, resorts to counter-spells and finally manages to save his stepmother at the moment when four men are forcing her towards the fire.<sup>79</sup>

Finally, the motif is found in another folktale of recent date called *Hvað þýðir “sár”?* This tells of Vilhjálmur, a curious boy who has a spell cast on him because of his curiosity. Vilhjálmur, who is always asking questions, one day finds himself asked a question that he is unable to answer. For this, the questioner changes him into a wolf; he is to remain a wolf for one year. At the end of the year he meets the questioner but is still unable to answer the question, and he is now changed into a bear for a year. Everyone is afraid of the bear; at the end of the year he is still unable to answer the question and is changed into a bird. His ordeal ends well, however, and later, when he has to deal with a difficult situation, he appears to have gained control of his shape-shifting and is able to change himself into a wolf, a bear, or a bird at will.<sup>80</sup>

Of course the two folk tales above cannot be considered medieval, even though the main features of the werewolf motif, including the spells, persecution by the king’s men, and the temporary transformation into an animal, can certainly be traced back to medieval Icelandic material. It is noteworthy that in both tales people change into *úlfar*, not *vargar*.

78. For an example of Celtic influence on Danish narrative, see Kristensen, *Dansk Sagn II*, p. 239. In the folk ballad *Jomfruen i Ulveham*, which is extant in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish versions, a stepmother turns her stepdaughter (-son) into a wolf. See *Danmarks gamle folkeviser II*, ed. Svend Grundtvig (Copenhagen: Universitets-Jubilæets Danske Samfund, 1966), pp. 156–58, and *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad*, ed. Bengt R. Jonsson et al. (Stockholm: Svenskt visarkiv and Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1978), p. 30.

79. Oddur Björnsson, *Þjóðtrú og þjóðsagnir*, I (Akureyri: Bókaverzlun og prentsmidja Odds Björnssonar, 1908), I, 310–16. On the recording of the tale, see pp. 13–14. A variant of the tale, printed in Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*, IV, 580–82, does not include the shape-changing episode.

80. Björn R. Stefánsson, *Sex þjóðsögur* (Reykjavík: Bókaverzlun Ársæls Árnasonar, 1926), pp. 7–28.

The werewolf motif as found in the abovementioned stories can be seen to be closely related to the variant found in medieval Celtic literature. The main characteristic of the “romantic” or “courtly” werewolf—that he enjoys others’ sympathy—is present in the aforementioned Icelandic sources, in which the werewolves are, most of the time, victims of an evildoer.

#### A MORE RECENT VARIANT WITH NATIVE ROOTS

Despite the fact that werewolves in medieval Icelandic literature can be traced back to two different origins, an Irish and a Nordic origin, the motif in the Icelandic tales under discussion has common features. The werewolves are usually men who are put under a spell or deceived by women. Only four women, the mother of King Siggeirr in *Völsunga saga*, Idunn in *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*, Hlégerdr in *Sigrsards saga frækna*, and Helga in *Sagan af Þorsteini glott*, change into wolves. In the first three cases, the transformation is voluntary, as they all change themselves, and thus this appears to fit with the older, Old Norse/Germanic variant of the werewolf motif.

In stories of Old Norse origin, the werewolf is an evildoer and reflects the Germanic idea of the outlaw as a wolf, or vargr. Váli, Idunn, Sigmundur, and Sinfjötli change their shape as well as their nature and become more cruel after the transformation, while Asper, Gustr, Siggeirr’s mother, and Hlégerdr turn themselves into wolves in order to attack and fight other people.

Certainly, the werewolves with prototypes in Celtic stories are also cruel. Bisclaret, Áli, and Sigurdr live as wolves in the forest and therefore kill animals for food, but they seldom kill humans. Their wolfish nature is not deeply rooted, and their “better” (human) nature is always stronger. They are themselves victims of circumstances or curses and therefore enjoy a certain sympathy. They are extremely discontent as wolves and long to be freed, but this always depends upon the kindness of others. Furthermore, these wolves are no longer beasts of battle, as are the ones in the Old Norse/Germanic variant of the motif. Common to the Icelandic and Celtic-influenced material are certain formulaic phrases that bear witness to the motif’s standardization, for example, the werewolves’ disappearance into the woods. They run about “á viðom,” “á merkr,” “um morkena,” and “á skóg.” Furthermore, werewolves tear (“rífa”) their prey apart. While phrases are formulaic as well as naturalistic, since all wolves run off to the forest and tear apart their prey, they nevertheless show similarities in both the depiction of the werewolves and the vocabulary used.

## CONCLUSION

Now, having discussed the Icelandic sources that preserve the werewolf motif, it is appropriate to ask what role it played in the literature of a people who, as has been mentioned, never experienced any real fear of wolves, since they are not found in the fauna of the country. If we could ask the tellers of tales from past centuries what they were aiming at when they told stories of werewolves, it is not certain that they would have ready answers available, or that their answers would tally; they were simply participants in a narrative tradition, and consequently their stories and the motifs they contained necessarily reflected the images and symbols in use in Old Norse/Icelandic culture.

The image of the wolf in the literature of past ages is a complex one, reflecting both positive and negative attitudes on the part of man towards the ani-mal. This duality of attitude reflects fear, on the one hand, and a type of respect, on the other. Today, admittedly, we are used to seeing the wolf as a symbol of evil rather than good, a symbol of hunger and greed and aggression. The role of the insatiable wolf in Little Red Riding Hood is to swallow the little girl rapaciously, and this connects him to the Fenrisúlfr of Norse mythology, which swallows the sun at *Ragnarök*. The reason why men identify with the wolf may lie precisely here: that these characteristics of the wolf, hunger and greed, are both human characteristics. Hunger can arouse primitive urges in man, and a tough struggle for food encourages behavior that is reminiscent of that of the wolf. Thus, greed is a deep-rooted characteristic in man, though it may lie closer or nearer to the surface; and greedy people were likened to wolves from early times. The qualities symbolized by the wolf would seem to be innate in man too; in stories about werewolves they can be said to become incarnate, taking on a palpable form in the visible wild animal, thus becoming distanced from human nature. But the idea that the unconscious—or what is concealed in the depths of consciousness—can take control in this way is frightening and holds a fascination for people today just as it had in earlier ages.

As has been seen, the werewolf motif in Icelandic literature plays two roles. In the older stories, there is a direct relationship between man and wolf, and the motif is closely connected with Germanic battle traditions. Stories of the thirteenth century and of more recent date probably played a rather different role from the beginning, being rooted in the narrative art of the medieval courts, from which their atmosphere and romantic outlook sprang. These stories were probably valued primarily as entertainment value; nevertheless, the comparison between man and wolf must have appealed to the audience's imagination in the same way as before.

Medieval Icelandic literature preserves ancient ideas of shape-shifting in stories of werewolves. This ancient motif, found in the Eddic poems as well as Snorra Edda, was “reborn” in legendary sagas and romances from the thirteenth century and later and was primarily influenced by foreign literature, such as the story of Bisclaret and perhaps other tales of Celtic origin. As native Icelandic stories of werewolves already existed, even though they were of different kind, the native and imported traditions came to mingle, each influencing the other, thus leading to a combination of two variants of one motif. Stories rooted in the Celtic heritage were colored by the native Norse tradition, while the older Norse stories came under the influence of the Celtic tales. This cross-fertilization already appears in the thirteenth-century *Völsunga* saga, and even more distinctly in the fourteenth-century *Úlfhams* saga, which draws upon the Old Norse variant of the motif, that of the *úlfhéðnar* (animal warriors) and outlaws, while at the same time it reflects the Celtic material. This tale, along with other Celtic-influenced stories, shows how the conceptual world of chivalric literature influenced an ancient motif.

The Old Norse belief in werewolves seems to have disappeared among Icelanders in the fifteenth/sixteenth century, for the werewolf motif hardly appears in the literature from that time on, apart from the two folktales mentioned above.<sup>81</sup> We may surmise that the Celtic material played its part in this, by “romanticizing” the idea of the werewolf and finally making him more like a fairy-tale figure than the actual shape-shifter that people originally believed in, with his connection to animal warriors and outlaws.

81. For references to more recent sources, see Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, ed., *Úlfhams* saga, p. ccvi.