
**Berserk Rage through the Ages**

Although the berserks have attracted a host of researchers in the past, ever new students of the Scandinavian Middle Ages return to the origin and the role of those semi-mythic characters, obscure elite warriors, and literary figures. The problem is that most of what could be said about the berserks and has not lost its value to this day was said rather long ago. Consequently, modern scholars necessarily go over books and articles for several centuries, write balanced reports of the state of the art, but find it almost impossible to put forward a novel theory or refute the arguments of the opponents. The scholarship remains approximately where it was, except that now one can find all the relevant facts and references in one place, which is, of course, a good thing.

Samson’s learned and well-written work is no exception to the rule. It has the merits and demerits of a typical modern dissertation (an excellent command of the data and secondary sources in multiple languages, followed by relatively minor additions and guarded conclusions), but then one no longer expects this genre to break new ground. The defense of a dissertation has long since become a mere rite of passage: it testifies to the candidate’s ability to do research at a high level and teach students. This does not mean that everything in the present work is trivial, but what lays claim to originality in it could have been said in a long journal article. The blurb on the back cover of Les Berserkir informs the users that the book will be of interest not only to the specialists dealing with the language, history, and archaeology of the Viking Age but also to all scholars of the martial arts and religious beliefs of pre-Christian Europe. So it is, but, to repeat, experts will learn little from it that they did not know before. In this case it is not the author’s fault. Startling discoveries can hardly be expected from anyone who at present turns to the berserks.

Let me first outline the problem. The Scandinavian poets of the remote past seem to have known almost as little about the berserks as we do. The author of the skaldic *Haraldskvæði* mentioned them in his description of the 872 battle, whose hero was Harald Fairhair. Along with the *úlfheðnar*, that is, wolfskins, they howled and growled. It is not clear on whose side and why those warriors produced such menacing sounds. Perhaps Harald had berserks, as we visualize them, in his army, while his enemies enlisted wolfskins, but, not improbably, both groups fought for Harald. Even the difference of principle between the two groups remains unclear. Admittedly, the skaldic poem does not provide the historian with any useful information.

But for two circumstances, the word *berserkr*, along with the concept it renders, might have ended up among the other curiosities of Old Norse antiquity. The circumstances are such: Snorri wrote a chapter about the berserks in *Ynglingatal*, and they or their namesakes figure prominently in the sagas recorded in the 13th century. In *Ynglingatal*, Snorri described the berserks, Óðinn’s bodyguard prone to “berserk rage”, in detail, but, strangely, he found no place for them in his *Edda*. In the many myths he knew about the gods, Óðinn travels either alone or with two divine companions. Reasonable explanations of this discrepancy have already been offered. Whether or not they are acceptable to everybody, the facts from the skaldic *drápa* and *Ynglingatal* cannot be used as belonging together and supplementing each other in a natural way, the more so as in the *Poetic Edda berserk* is a rare and vague synonym for “an ancient warrior”, and nothing can be learned about those fighters from the verses in which they are mentioned. Finally, the saga berserks are gangs of brigands, often outlaws. Unlike the ancient berserks, they were described very well, even though the emerging picture is stereotyped with regard to both language and content. The scenes usually present able-bodied men traveling in groups of six or twelve or, if single, nearly invincible bullies bent on challenging honest farmers to duels, in order to seize their property and wives. All of them are aggressive psychopaths whom fire does not burn and iron does not “bite”.

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Yet since they are occasionally represented as pagan, a Christian priest has some power over them. Like the “hidden people” of folklore, they are especially unhappy and active at Christmas.

A mountain of theories has accrued around this body of facts. The structure of Samson’s book reflects the composition of that mountain. In addition to the introduction, we find 1) a short history of the research up until now, 2) the etymology of berserkr and ulfheðinn, 3) the berserks in skaldic and eddic poetry, 4) the berserks in Norway at the time of the 872 battle (here three sagas are in focus: Vatnsdæla, Grettla, and Egla), 5) trance and lycanthropy in Egla, 6) Óðinn’s berserks, 7) the literary figure of the berserk and its stereotype, 8) Þórir hundr at Stiklastaðir with – allegedly the last Norwegian berserks in the 11th century, and 9) the evidence of archaeology and epigraphy. Those nine chapters are followed by a conclusion, illustrations, and a voluminous bibliography, directly or indirectly related to the subject at hand.

Two etymologies of the key word exist: berserkr is said to mean either “bareshirt” or “bearshirt”. Each solution has eminent supporters. The cult of the bear among the ancient speakers of Germanic is well-documented, but reliable evidence also testifies to superstitions connected with nudity. Scholars are free to choose the facts that confirm either view. Samson opted for bearshirt, though it is hard to imagine a human warrior fighting with a bear’s hot and heavy fur on. The same holds for a wolf skin. However, warriors could wear animal masks or some substitute of fur. Since Samson concentrated on bears, he also studied the wolfskins figuring in the poem (they too, it will be remembered, howled and growled) and therefore devoted considerable space to lycanthropy.

For the specialist, the most interesting chapters are the last two, even though they are unable to tip the scale in any argument. The description of Þórir and his allies at Stiklastaðir matches both the picture alluded to in Haraldskvæði and the one emerging from the sagas. Snorri borrowed it from the poem by Sighvatr Þórðarson, who did not fight in that battle, for, with the king’s approval, he had gone on a pilgrimage to Rome. Yet even if he had participated in the engagement, Snorri’s description need not have taken at face value: he could have used the formulaic “berserk language” of his days. In 1030 no one had firsthand knowledge of the berserks of old. Their name and deeds had long since become the stuff of legend, while the descriptions of the contemporary cutthroats who called themselves berserks seem to have had universal currency. We are unable to decide why the berserks called themselves this. Probably the sobriquet appealed to them. Former soldiers or Vikings, now homeless, unemployed, unmarried, mentally unstable, and shunned, they...
might have found satisfaction in bearing a great and famous name and imitating the outward traits of their model.

We will also never know whether Þórir’s men really behaved like a group of berserks or whether Sighvatr strove for a poetic effect. The historic value of the picture he drew should not be exaggerated. The facts gathered in the last chapter are less controversial. However, the motif of animal warriors, the existence of animal masks, and the presence of the often-described Germanic comitatus require no proof. The question is what all those things tell us about the original berserks. In my opinion, very little. On p. 342, that is, already in the conclusion, Samson lists many books dealing with warrior unions and animals in the traditions of the Indo-Europeans. In this context, he could have added dozens of titles on theriomorphic deities and shape-changing. They would have reinforced our conviction that long ago the line separating human beings from animals was easy to cross.

In some form the berserks probably existed, and knowledge of them survived the “institution” by many centuries. As already noted, even at the time the Eddaic songs were composed, no one remembered anything definite about them. Apparently, in the semi-legendary past kings used to surround themselves with elite warriors who impersonated wild beasts (les guerriers-fauves). At the moments of high excitement akin to ecstasy, they “howled” and “growled” and perhaps even became temporarily impermeable to pain. Samson, I believe, is right that no poisonous mushrooms or intoxicating drinks were necessary for achieving such a state. Not surprisingly, those warriors won the admiration of their more timid contemporaries. Their image reflected the ideal of a chieftain’s loyal follower, and their behavior found reinforcement in the universal belief in shape-changing. That image proved to be surprisingly stable. All the rest is guesswork. Snorri’s description of the berserks requires careful examination rather than blind confidence. Samson’s book is interesting to read from first page to last because the subject matter is so engrossing and because his style is always transparent. Yet one should not expect from it definitive new answers to old questions.

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