**Encyclopedia > Berserker**

**Berserker** (or Berserk) were Norse warriors who were commonly understood to have fought in an uncontrollable rage or trance of fury; the berserker gang.

The Ælleðnar (singular Ælleðnir) mentioned in the Vatnsdœla saga, Haraldskvæði and the Völsunga saga were said to wear the pelt of a wolf upon their heads when they entered battle. (For example: Warinhar, Haimric, Theudberga, Hlodwig etc.)

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**Etymology**

**Bersærkr** (plural berserkir) is most typically translated as "bear's skin" referring to the bear skin clothing Viking warriors wore into battle, but also as 'not wearing armour', thought to connote light troops without armour. The berserkers wore decorated helmets made of metal and they wore chain mail covered by a large cloth. The berserkers fought with battle axes, swords, and spears. The most famous weapon would be their deadly throwing axe which the berserkers used with great skill.

**Literary references**

The earliest surviving reference to the term berserker is in Haraldskvæði, a skaldic poem written by Thórbjörn Hornklofi in the late ninth century in honour of King Harald Fairhair, the famous ruler of Norway. The poem was preserved by Snorri Sturluson. In this poem, Harald's army includes a warrior gang of berserkers fighting under his name at the battle of Hafsfjord. In it, they are described as Ælleðnar = "men clad in wolf skins". This grounds a connection between bears and wolves in Norse warrior culture and the common assumption that the word "berserker" itself originates from men wearing the skin of the bear. Snorri Sturluson goes on to mention berserkers in the Ynglinga saga: "his Óðin's men rushed forward without armor, were as mad as dogs or wolves, bit their shields, and were as strong as bears or wild bulls, and killed people at a blow, but neither fire nor iron told upon themselves" (Ch. 6). Berserkers appear prominently in a multitude of other sagas and poems including The Saga of Hrólf Kraki, many of which describe berserkers as ravenous barbarians who loot, plunder, and kill indiscriminately.

Much can be derived about berserkers from *Egils saga*. Egil's grandfather was named Kved-Ull meaning "evasive wolf", and this is generally ascribed as meaning he was a werewolf. Kved-Ull's son, referred to as Skalla-Grim, was a berserker. Kved-Ull and Skalla-Grim are both depicted as irresistible and violent throughout the saga. One commits suicide and the latter kills his offspring. *Frel Skallagrímsson* himself is described in the saga as attacking opponents with his teeth (namely when he ripped out a berserker's jugular vein during a duel). Patently, violence and gruesome tragedies permeate the berserker ethos described in Icelandic sagas such as this one.

**Historicity**

In 1315 Jari Eirík Hákonarson of Norway outlawed berserkers. Gráíóðs, the medieval Icelandic law-code, sentences berserker warriors to outlawry. By the 1100s organized berserker warbands had disappeared.

King Harald Fairhair's use of berserker "shock troops" became a sphere of influence. Other Scandinavian kings used berserkers as part of their army of hirdmen and sometimes ranked them as equivalent to a royal bodyguard. It may be that at least some of those warriors just adopted the organization or rituals of berserk warbands or used the name as a deterrent or claim of their ferocity.

Still, some scholars consider the frenzied and indomitable berserker and his bear-skin coat to stand right alongside horned Viking helmets as a "feature of later literary [works] rather than contemporary historical ones", placing the legitimacy of Norse sagas as historical records into question.

**Theories on the causes of the berserkergang**

Theories on what causes berserker behavior include ingestion of materials with psychoactive properties, psychological processes, and medical conditions.
According to a theory of spirit possession, the berserker rage was achieved through possession by the animal spirit of either a bear or a wolf. Berserkers would cultivate an ability to take over their body during a fight. This is seen as a somewhat peculiar application of animal totemism.

Botanists have suggested the behavior might be tied to ingestion of bog myrtle (Myrica gale syn: Gale palustris), a plant that was one of the main spices in alcoholic beverages in Scandinavia. The drawback is that it increases the hangover headache afterwards. Drinking alcoholic beverages spiced with bog myrtle the night before going to battle might have resulted in unusually aggressive behavior.

The notion that Nordic Vikings used the fly agaric mushroom to produce their berserker rages was first suggested by the Swedish professor Samuel Ödman in 1784. Ödman based his theory on reports about the use of fly-agaric among Siberian shamans. The notion has become widespread since the 19th century, but no contemporary sources mention this use or anything similar in their description of berserkers. In addition, the injection of bufotenine from Bufo marinus toad skin into humans was shown to produce similar symptoms to the "Berserker" descriptions. These findings, first examined by Howard Fabing in 1956, were later linked to the induction of zombie characteristics by ethnobotanists in 1983.

A UK television programme in 2004 tested the possible use of fly agaric and alcohol by training a healthy volunteer in the use of Viking weapons, then evaluating his performance under the influence of fly agaric or alcohol compared to no influence. It was shown that use of fly agaric or alcohol severely reduced his fighting ability, and the tentative conclusion drawn was that berserk state was achieved psychologically; otherwise, berserkers would have been too easy to kill. Of course, this does not take into account the mindset that the berserker likely would have attempted to place himself in.

A simple theory attributes the behavior to drunken rage. It is also possible that berserkers worked themselves into their frenzy through purely psychological processes, perhaps using frenzied rituals and dances. According to Saxo Grammaticus they also drank bear or wolf blood.

U.S. professor Jesse L. Byock claims (in Scientific American, 1995) that berserker rage could have been a symptom of Paget's disease, Uncontrolled skull bone growth could have caused painful pressure in the head. He mentions the unattractive and large head of Egill Skallagrímsson in Egils saga. Other possibilities are mild epilepsy, rabies, and hysteria. Nevertheless, these theories are highly unlikely, as the berserkers would—seemingly—inevitably turn against each other instead of the enemies. During battle, they are consistently described in the frenzy of rage, yet, the berserkers, while sometimes purportedly felling allies, seem to have avoided attacking each other.

Manic depressive (bipolar disorder) offers another possible explanation for this behavior. During a manic state, the person affected is impulsive and often seems uncontrolled, and often perceived as exhibiting aggressive behaviour. (A dysphoric mania consists of a manic episode with depressive symptoms. Increased energy and some form of anger, from irritability to full blown rage, are the most common symptoms.) After the manic high where the person has elevated energy levels, and the manic state, the person affected is impulsive and often seems uncontrolled, and often perceived as exhibiting aggressive behaviour. (A dysphoric mania consists of a manic episode with depressive symptoms. Increased energy and some form of anger, from irritability to full blown rage, are the most common symptoms.) After the manic high where the person has elevated energy levels, and the ability to disregard risky behaviour, the person enters a depressed state that lasts for several days.

Max Weber used them as an example of charismatic authority.

Parallels in other cultures

Hilda Ellis-Davidson draws a parallel between berserkers and the mention by the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII in his book De cerimoniis aulae byzantinae ("Book of Ceremonies of the Byzantine court") of a "Gothic Dance" performed by members of his Varangian Guard (Norse warriors working in the service of the Byzantine Empire), who took part wearing animal skins and masks: she believes this may have been connected with berserker rites (Hilda R. Ellis-Davidson. Pagan Scandinavia. NY: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967. p. 100).

Similar behaviour is described in the liated, where warrior who are "possessed" by a God or Goddess exhibit superhuman powers.

Some aspects of the Malay phenomenon of running amok bear a close resemblance to berserkgang.

Among the Irish, Cúchulainn acted in the 'battle frenzy', or 'contortion', and many other famous Irish warriors from the pre-Christian period became possessed and frenzied. They are described in texts such as The Tain as foaming at the mouth and not calming down after battle until doused with cold water.

Modern usage

See also Berserkers in popular culture.

The word "berserker" today applies to anyone who fights with reckless abandon and disregard to even his own life, a concept used during the Vietnam War and in Vietnam-inspired literature (Michael Herr's Dispatches) and film (Oliver Stone's Platoon). "Going berserk" in this context refers to an overdose of adrenaline-induced opioids in the human body and brain leading a soldier to fight with raging fearlessness and indifference, a state strikingly similar to that of the 9th century berserkers observed in this article. "Going berserk" is also used colloquially to describe a person who is acting in a wild rage or in an uncontrolled and irrational manner. A recent controversy among law enforcement and
emergency medicine professional, and civil rights advocates involves a state called "excited delirium," in which a 'berserk' individual dies after the use of restraints. This state may be related to the berserkergang. From the individuals who experiences going berserk, it can be best described as the 'little death' as awareness is retained of the events leading up to and after the berserk event, but there is no memory of the actual berserk episode. As it relates to a highly charged, threatening environments the loss of life awareness and the self preservation instinct, can be very disturbing, leading to sufferers avoiding situations where episodes could occur. Berserkers are also a character class that players may choose in many role-playing games. These characters are usually able to deal massive amounts of damage per hit, yet are relatively easily killed (usually because the player has no control over the character's actions).

References

- Ole Högberg, Flugsvampen och människan. Section concerning the berserker myth is published online [1] (In Swedish and PDF format) ISBN 91-7203-555-2

See also

- Bear worship
- Running amok
- Cúchulainn, Warp spasm
- Björn the Pale
- Werewolf
- Vampire

External links

- Berserkergang (winterscapes.com)
- Berserkergang (vikinganswerfady.com)

Results from FactBites:

Olwydd.Org: Barbarians: Berserks (568 words)
1. The berserk called Cyclone is the last that is taught by guild leaders.
2. The penalty received when a berserk ends is determined by how low your inner fire is at the end.
3. The ability to berserk while continuing a dance is gained at 180th Circle.

Berserker at AllExperts (1581 words)
1. Berserkers (or Berserks) were Norse warriors who had sworn allegiance to the sky god Odin and worked themselves into a frenzy before a battle.
2. Berserkers are reported to have worn bearskins in battle serving as armor or a symbol of their proclivity for worshipping the spirit of the bear.
3. Snorri Sturluson goes on to mention berserkers in the Ynglinga saga: "his [Odin's] men rushed forward without armor, were as mad as dogs or wolves, bit their shields, and were as strong as bears or wild bulls, and killed people at a blow, but neither fire nor iron told upon themselves" (Ch.

More results at FactBites »
Berserk (manga). From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Jump to navigation Jump to search. This article is about the manga. For the 1997 anime adaptation, see Berserk (1997 TV series). Berserk. Berserk (Japanese: ベルセルク, Hepburn: Beruseruku) is a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Kentaro Miura. Set in a medieval Europe-inspired dark fantasy world, the story centers on the characters of Guts, a lone mercenary, and Griffith, the leader of a mercenary band called the "Band of The Hawk". Berserker - Encyclopedia. GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES. BERSERKER (from the "Sark" or shirt of the "bear," or other animal-skins worn by them), in Scandinavian mythology, the name of the twelve sons of the hero Berserk, grandson of the eight handed Starkadder and Alfhilde. Berserk was famed for the reckless fury with which he fought, always going into battle without armour. By the daughter of King Swafurlam, whom he had killed, he had the twelve sons who were his equals in bravery.