

Berserkir: A Double Legend

Prof. Dr. Anatoly Liberman
University of Minnesota (USA)
liber002@tc.umn.edu

Resumo

O artigo analisa o tema dos guerreiros da Escandinávia Viking conhecidos como Berserkir, concluindo que as tradicionais associações com o deus Óðinn, formação de grupos secretos e a utilização de alucinógenos foram produtos da fantasia dos escritores cristãos, sem nenhuma base histórica.

Palavras-chave: Mitologia, sociedade Viking, literatura medieval

Resumé

Le travail analyse le thème des guerriers de l'Escandinavie Viking ont connu comme Berserkir, que conclut que les traditionels associations avec le dieu Odin, formations de groupes secrets et l'utilisation des hallucinogènes allaient produits de la fantasia des écrivains chrétiens sans aucun base historique.

Mots-clé: Mythologie, société Viking, littérature medievale

It sometimes happens that modern scholars know something about antiquity and the Middle Ages hidden from those who lived at that time. For example, unlike Plato, we can etymologize many Ancient Greek words. Perhaps we even understand a few lines of skaldic poetry better than did Snorri. But *berserkir* (whom, to simplify matters, I will call berserkers, as is done in English dictionaries) fared badly. The Vikings' contemporaries had lost all memory of berserkers' identity. In the 13th century, berserkers reemerged in the sagas as society's dangerous outcasts and soon disappeared without a trace until medievalists revived them in their works. The berserker-related boom is now behind us, but an impressive bibliography of the subject testifies to scholarship devoid of a factual base and feeding mainly on itself. The central theses of this paper will be offered dogmatically, though each of them can be supported by multiple references. It should also be understood that I am by far not the first to draw negative conclusions from this scholarship.

In a description of King Haraldr's 872 battle, Þorbjörn hornklofi used the phrases *grenjuðu berserkir* and *emjuðu ulfheðnar*. The verbs *grenja* and *emja* mean 'roar' and 'howl' respectively, while *ulfheðnar* (plural) is a bahuvrihi, usually glossed 'wolfskins' or 'wolfcoats' and thus 'someone in wolf's clothing' (a compound like *Rotkäppchen*). In this context, it is tempting to take *berserkir* (also plural) for another bahuvrihi, namely 'bearskirts'. However, **berr* 'bear' does not occur in Old Icelandic outside the compound *berfjall* 'bearskin', so that *berserkr* must be either a partial borrowing from German (like *berfjall* = *Bärenhaut?*) or a relic of ancient usage. *Berserkr* does not turn up in runic inscriptions, and the skalds seem to have been unaware of berserkers' deeds. Contrary to **berr*, the nouns *bera* 'female bear' and *bersi*, *bessi/bassi* 'bear' have been recorded. *Ber-* is the historic stem of *björn* < **bernu-*; *bessi* is from **bersi*. Their existence does not prove that **berr* was also current in Early Scandinavian. From the semantic point of view *ulfheðinn* 'wolfskin' is not an exact counterpart of *berserkr* because wolves have skins, whereas bears do not wear shirts. This argument need not be shrugged off, but it may not be as weighty as it appears, for *serkr*, glossed 'timber' in English, in addition to 'shirt', designated a certain number of skins (whence the Russian numeral *sorok* 'forty').

The other possibility is to understand *berserkr* as 'bareshirt', that is, to reconstruct a substantivized adjective **berserks* 'bareshirted'. A warrior called this would be a man who fought without armor, in his 'bare shirt.' If Þorbjörn knew the word *berfjall* or some other words like it, he may have associated berserkers with bears, while, as pointed out above, the original meaning of *berserkr* 'bearskin' can be admitted only if the compound in question is extremely old. Proof for such an assumption is lacking, however. Nor do we know when *serkr*, a technical term of fur trade, was coined. If it is contemporaneous with the Viking age, then the bahuvrihi *berserkr* 'bearskin' can hardly be posited. As regards the content of Þorbjörn's drápa, we remain in the dark about who roared and howled: in the heat of battle; the roarers and howlers could have been Haraldr's followers as well as his opponents.

The next, and the most famous mention of berserkers occurs in Chapter 6 of *Heimskringla*. Óðinn's own men, it is said, "went to battle without coats of mail and acted like mad dogs or wolves. They bit their shields and were as strong as bears or bulls. They killed people, and neither fire nor iron affected them. This is called berserker rage." Snorri seems to have combined both possible interpretations of the word *berserkr*: they were (nearly) "bare" ("went to battle without coats of mail") and bear-like at the same time ("were as strong as bears"). Nor did he forget Þorbjörn's *ulfheðnar* ("acted like mad dogs or wolves"). It is usually suggested that Snorri no

longer understood *berserkr* ‘bearshirt’ and took it for ‘in one’s bare shirt’, which made him add “without coats of mail.” Since the meaning ‘bearshirt’ may never have existed, this suggestion has little value. Snorri’s main contribution to the berserker problem is his statements that berserkers served as Óðinn’s retinue, that they used to fly into a violent rage (one of its signs was biting the shield), and that they were invulnerable to fire and iron.

Þorbjörn’s sources of *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* will of necessity remain unknown to us. The few references to berserkers in the extant corpus of skaldic and eddic poetry are to warriors of old. They contain no factual details and do not antedate *Haraldsdrápa*. The phrase *brúðir berserkja* ‘berserkers’ brides (wives)’ may mean ‘giantesses’ or ‘female berserkers’; the second option is unappealing. But Snorri’s (unlike Þorbjörn’s) sources are to a certain extent recoverable.

The sagas relate numerous episodes, most of which have identical morphology. Around Christmas, a big, strong man, usually with eleven companions, comes uninvited to a farm, ready to take away as many valuables as possible and force the women to cohabitation. If the farmer is at home, he is no match for the intruders. Often he is away in a distant province of Norway (the action of some episodes is set elsewhere in Scandinavia, but Norway predominates). A brave Icelander happens to be visiting at this time and either accepts the chief bandit’s challenge to fight a duel or outsmarts the gang. The result is the same: all the miscreants are killed. At this juncture, the farmer returns and lavishes praise and gifts on the rescuer of his family’s honor and property. The deed is commemorated in a *vísa* and becomes famous. When berserkers are projected to a semi-legendary past, they appear as a king’s retinue, as happens in *Hrólf’s saga*.

Berserkers tolerate no resistance. Every attempt to thwart them makes them furious. It is at such moments that they begin to howl, foam at the mouth, and bite their shields. As a rule, swords and fire can do them no harm, though a Christian missionary can break the spell laid on fire (berserkers are pagan). Luckily, they live up to the formula of their magical invulnerability: unafraid of swords and flames, they can be cudgelled to death. In 13th-century Iceland, tales of plundering, raping bandits circulated widely, and Snorri described berserkers according to the “folklore” of his time. Yet their association with Óðinn is mentioned only in *Heimskringla*.

This is then the evidence at our disposal: an obscure line in a ninth-century *drápa* containing a word of unclear meaning and dubious origin; a few vague references in poetry to heroes of old called berserkers; several lines in *Heimskringla*, almost certainly inspired by contemporary yarns, and a formulaic theme “an unwelcome suitor is beaten by a fearless Icelander.” (The Óðinn connection will be examined later.) From this acorn a mighty oak sprang up. The research developed along the following lines.

1) Since berserkers evidently overpowered their enemies unprotected by coats of mail, mentions of naked Germanic and Celtic warriors from Tacitus onward have been used to prove the verisimilitude of Snorri’s report. However, if *ber-* means ‘bear’, nudity should not interest us. More importantly, *without coats of mail* does not mean ‘naked’, so that references to Tacitus and the rest can be dispensed with.

2) Those who believe in bearshirts find support in the well-documented cult of the bear. Having a bear’s coat on is the opposite of fighting in the nude. Such a coat would also be very warm and hamper movement. The most common explanation is that berserkers wore only animal masks and decorated their bodies with fur and claws; they allegedly did not impersonate bears but believed that they had become bears. From the works of this group one learns many interesting things about masks in various cultures, the role of the bear, and name giving (*Björn*, etc.) and forgets how slim the evidence is

that *ber-* in *berserkr* means ‘bear’. The thesis in need of proof becomes the foundation of the research that by its existence is expected to reinforce this thesis (approximately: since the bear played such a prominent role in ancient culture, *berserkr* must mean ‘bearshirt’).

3) In Þorbjörn’s drápa, *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* are mentioned in the same breath. This circumstance led to the investigation of lycanthropy in old days and at present, trials of werewolves, theriomorphic characters, and mythical heroes like Herakles with a lion’s skin. The wanderings of Sigmundr and Sinfjötli have been made especially much of, and multifarious events connected with initiation came to the foreground. Although Sigmundr and Sinfjötli were not berserkers, they were certainly *ulfheðnar*, and a deep understanding of their adventures is supposed to throw a sidelight on heroes-turned-bears.

4) Berserkers traditionally appear in groups. This fact allowed several scholars to develop the theme of Germanic secret unions. Here the implied provisos seem to be that, inasmuch as berserkers were warriors, Germanic warriors were berserkers and that since male unions (from initiation groups to Jómsvíkingar) existed, everything we learn about them is relevant for the history of berserkhood, even though berserkers never formed secret unions and were not initiated into any groups.

5) Snorri’s statement about Óðinn’s “own men” had particularly dire consequences for berserkology. Myths of Óðinn and later Odinic folklore were reexamined in light of this statement. An attempt was made to show that the *einherjar* (compared once with Harii) are berserkers and that the supreme demon’s (Óðinn’s) following in the wild hunt is also made up of berserkers. These are puzzling conclusions. The *einherjar* live in a male paradise of Valhöll: they fight by day and feast at night. Nothing is ever said about their howling, roaring, biting shields, wearing animal skins, or being invulnerable to iron and fire. In the wild hunt, the leader presides over a group of indistinguishable dead riders. The *einherjar* and the wild hunt have nothing to do with berserkers.

Óðinn was a war god. It must have been natural to associate any warriors with him, and this is what Snorri did, possibly under the influence of the Hrólfkraki type of stories. However, in his *Edda*, Óðinn is never surrounded by berserkers. On the contrary, he does most things alone. Sometimes he is accompanied by two other gods. If Snorri had known any tales or kennings about berserkers and especially about their close bond with Óðinn, he would have told and explicated them. His description of Baldr’s funeral shows how colorless the word *berserkr* became in the 13th century. Four berserkers are said to have been unable to hold Hyrrokkin’s “steed.” It is safe to assume that myths of Óðinn’s berserkers did not exist.

6) Berserkers’ hysterical fits are reminiscent of the *furor teutonicum*. In the sagas, howling and biting a shield is little more than an *effektnummer*, to use Axel Olrik’s word. Battle frenzy, along with war cries (*hurra*, *huzza*, *banzai*), is universal, and therefore it is hard to distinguish between cognate phenomena and typological parallels. In any case, there is no compelling reason to trace berserkers’ hysteria to the *furor teutonicum*. Many scholars wondered why berserkers behaved in such an irrational way. Perhaps they were intoxicated? Or perhaps they partook of poisonous mushrooms that could have deprived them of reason? If so, what mushrooms were they? Our ignorance of this subject makes irresponsible reconstruction especially tempting, and comparison between *berserksgangr* and running amuck (amok) suggests itself at once. Berserker mycology is a particularly amusing area of study.

7) An offshoot of the previous subject is research into ecstasy in myth and history, from the Greek Bacchanalias to the aforementioned *furor teutonicum*. The etymology of Óðinn's name belongs here too. Óðinn is a "furious" god (cf. Germ. *Wut*, Lat. *vâtes*, etc.), and madness presumably becomes him. It is never observed that in myths Óðinn is a calculating, shrewd, and perfidious god rather than the embodiment of religious ecstasy. Biting shields in his presence seems to be a silly thing to do. Only the wild hunt makes one think of a powerful onslaught, but this is late folklore. Since *Óðinn* is not an Indo-European name, we do not know when he got it. If the impulse behind name giving was his grim aspect in war, *Óðinn* may be compared with the verb *vaða*, not in the meaning of *wade / waten*, but in its Old Icelandic meaning 'rush, storm'. Such was the opinion of Jacob Grimm; today it is shared by few. Some features of a shaman are indisputable in Óðinn, but fury is not among them. It is, of course, possible that at every stage of Óðinn's career his name was understood differently: 'he who storms' (a god of war), 'he who exhibits fury' (a shaman), 'he who protects poetic inspiration' (the god of skaldic poetry). Before he became Óðinn and added a glamorous suffix to his name, he may have been Óðr (a wader, that is, 'wanderer', 'slow traveler, *vegtamr*').

If we dismiss idle speculations, we will come up with the following results. Some warriors were at one time called *berserkir*. They seem to have been elite troops renowned for their recklessness in battle; they may have fought without coats of mail. It is unclear whether folk etymology connected them with bears and whether Snorri or anyone heard an allusion to *ber-* 'bear' in their name. They had nothing to do with religious cults. Even in the oldest eddic lays, the word *berserkr* has an archaic ring, but it survived in people's memory and degraded into a synonym for 'fighter'. With the end of the Viking epoch, professional warriors found themselves unemployed. A similar disintegration of the military class happened when the epoch of chivalry and crusades came to an end, and in recent times when a huge contingent of the Soviet army went out of business. Displaced soldiers typically become urban riffraff. Unused to resistance, irascible, and thoroughly unhappy, former Vikings often developed psychoses that plagued the Middle Ages (cf. St. Vitus's dance, flagellants, and so forth), the violent analogs of depression, the scourge of our time. The disease was contagious, and its symptoms were easy to simulate. The very words *berserkr*, like the word *vikingsr*, acquired highly negative connotations. Gangs of such outcasts (young, unmarried, destitute men in their prime) became the bane of farmers' life in Norway and later in Iceland. Laws against berserkers and active attempts to eradicate them make their existence an established fact, even if all the adventures in the sagas were concocted for enlivening the plot. The rest, from poisonous mushrooms to secret unions and service to Óðinn, is (science) fiction.