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War and Ecstasy in the Scandinavian World
the Enigma of the Berserker



Samson Vincent, *Les Berserkir: Les guerriers-fauves dans la Scandinavie ancienne, de l'âge de Vendel aux vikings (VIe-XIe siècle)*, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2011.

Dale Roderick, *The Myths and Realities of the Viking Berserkr*, London/New York, Routledge, 2022.





Amanita muscaria (« fly agaric »)



Amanita pantherina

'Fascinating' *Sunday Times*

'A pharmacopoeia of interesting military history
and cultural anecdote' *Vice*

SHOOTING UP



A History of
Drugs in Warfare

ŁUKASZ KAMIEŃSKI

Dorbjorn Hornklofi, scaldic poem dedicated to Harald Fairhair
The Hrafnsmál (*Raven's saying*), IX c.

**I want to ask you about the equipment of the berserks, taster of the
corpse-sea,**

What provision is made for war-daring men, those who surge into
battle?

They are called wolf-skins they,

Who bear bloody shield in combat;

They redden spears when they come to war;

There [at Haraldr's court] they are seated together

There, I believe, he, the sovereign wise in understanding,

may entrust himself to men of courage alone, those who hew into a
shield

Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglingarsaga* (Heimskringla saga) about 1225-1230

chap. VI – Of Odin's accomplishments

Odin could make it so, that in battles his enemies became blind or dead or filled with fear, and their weapons bit no more than sticks. On the other hand, these men went without mail-coats and were mad as dogs or wolves, bit their shields, were strong as bears or bulls; they killed men, but neither fire nor iron affected them. This is called going berserk (*Berserkerangr*).

Snorri Sturluson, Haldfan's black Saga (Heimskringla saga), about 1225-1230

chap. 5, Halfdan's marriage with Hjort's daughter

There the **berserk Hake** came against him with thirty men, and they fought. Sigurd Hjort fell there, after killing twelve of Hake's men; **and Hake himself lost one hand, and had three other wounds (...)**. He ordered a feast to be prepared, intending to hold his wedding with Ragnhild; **but the time passed on account of his wounds, which healed slowly; and the berserk Hake of Hadeland had to keep his bed, on account of his wounds, all the autumn and beginning of winter.**

Saga Hálfðanar svarta in vol. 1 of *Heimskringla eða Sögur Noregs konunga*, ed. by W. SCHULTZ, Uppsala, 1869-1872.



Ivory Chesspiece
(Trondheim v 1160-1170)

Berserk wearing
a Bear-skin coat

Snorri Sturluson, Harald Harfager's Saga (Heimskringla saga), about 1225-1230

Chap. 9, King Harald's Home Affairs

In winter he had caused a great frigate (a dragon) to be built, and had it fitted-out in the most splendid way, and brought his house-troops and his **berserks** on board. The forecastle men were picked men, for they had the king's banner. **From the stem to the mid-hold was called *rausn*, or the fore-defense; and there were the berserks. Such men only were received into King Harald's house-troop as were remarkable for strength, courage, and all kinds of dexterity; and they alone got place in his ship, for he had a good choice of house-troops from the best men of every district (...)**

Thor Haklang, who was a great berserk, had laid his ship against King Harald's, and there was above all measure a desperate attack, until Thor Haklang fell, and his whole ship was cleared of men (...).



Nordic Warrior fighting
two bears
Bronze plate
Öland Island (Sweden)
End of VI century

Snorri Sturluson (?), *Egil's saga* *Skallagrímssonar*, 1220-1240

Chapter 9 - Battle in Hafr's Firth

Harold held on his way from the north, with a large force, having his guards on board. In the forecastle of the king's ship were **Thorolf Kveldulfsson, Bard the White, Kari of Berdla's sons, Aulvir Hnuf and Eyvind Lambi**, and in the prow were twelve Berserks of the king.

Snorri Sturluson (?), *Egil's saga* *Skallagrímssonar*, 1220-1240

Chapter 9 - Battle in Hafr's Firth

They now start, and soon come to the island. There was a fair plain near the sea, which was to be the place of combat. The ground was marked out by stones lying round in a ring. Soon came thither Ljot and his party. Then he made him ready for the combat. He had shield and sword. Ljot was a man of vast size and strong. **And as he came forward on the field to the ground of combat, a fit of Berserk fury seized him; he began to bellow hideously, and bit his shield.** Fridgeir was not a tall man; he was slenderly built, comely in face, not strong. He had not been used to combats.

Grettis saga, (Icelandic saga, end of XIII c.)

Chapter 2, V - Battle of Hafrsfjord

King Harald made for Thorir's ship, knowing him to be a terrible berserk, and very brave. The fighting was desperate on either side. **Then the king ordered his berserks, the men called Wolfskins, forward. No iron could hurt them, and when they charged nothing could withstand them.**

Grettis saga, (Icelandic saga, end of XIIIe c.)

Chapter 19, II-III - Berserks at Haramarsey

Before leaving Eirik summoned all his Landmen and the larger bondis to meet him. Eirik the jarl was an able ruler, and they had much discussion regarding the laws and their administration. **It was considered a scandal in the land that pirates and berserks should be able to come into the country and challenge respectable people to the *holmgang* for their money or their women, no wergild being paid whichever fell.** Many had lost their money and been put to shame in this way; some indeed had lost their lives. **For this reason jarl Erik abolished all *holmgang* in Norway and declared outlaws all robbers and berserks who disturbed the peace (...)**

The worst of these ruffians were two brothers named Thorir Paunch and Ogmund the Bad. They came from Halogaland and were bigger and stronger than other men. **When angry they used to fall into the berserk's fury, and nothing escaped that was before them. They used to carry off men's wives, keep them for a week or two and then send them back.** Wherever they came they committed robberies and other acts of violence. Jarl Eirik had declared them outlaws throughout Norway.

Icelandic law prohibiting the practice of *berserksgangr* (*Kristinna laga þátr*, beginning of XII^e c.)

"If a man is seized by the fury of the fury warriors, then he incurs temporary proscription, and in the same way the men who are present, unless they restrain him. Then none of them is [punished], if they were able to restrain him. But if this happens often, then there is temporary proscription".

Grágás. Islændernes lovbog i Fristatens Tid, éd. Vilhjálmur Finsen, I, 1852, p. 23, in Samson Vincent, *op.cit.*, pp. 197-259, § 167.

The elements provided by different sources are often discordant: they may appear as an elite military troop, the King's personal guard, invincible mythical warriors of Odin, as a pseudo-totemic enemy to overcome, and finally as a bloodthirsty social outcast practicing theft and rape.

It is easy to see how the notion of the berserker can be, and was, easily instrumentalized to serve various narrative purposes of the different Icelandic poets and authors.

Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* (c. 1220)

(..) men asked Halfdan to attack Hardbeen and his champions man by man; and he not only promised to fight, but assured himself the victory with most confident words. When Hardbeen heard this, a **demoniacal frenzy suddenly took him; he furiously bit and devoured the edges of his shield; he kept gulping down fiery coals; he snatched live embers in his mouth and let them pass down into his entrails; he rushed through the perils of crackling fires; and at last, when he had raved through every sort of madness, he turned his sword with raging hand against the hearts of six of his champions.** It is doubtful whether this madness came from thirst for battle or natural ferocity. Then with the remaining band of his champions he attacked Halfdan, who crushed him with a hammer of wondrous size, so that he lost both victory and life; paying the penalty both to Halfdan, whom he had challenged, and to the kings whose offspring he had violently ravished.

Elton, Oliver (1905) *The Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*. New York: Norroena Society.
See Medieval and Classical Literature Library Release #28a Archived 5 August 2017 at the Wayback Machine for full text.



Thank you

