Studies in Medieval History and Culture

THE MYTHS AND REALITIES OF THE VIKING *berserkr*

Roderick Dale

ROUTLEDGE

The Myths and Realities of the Viking *berserkr*

The viking *berserkr* is an iconic warrior normally associated with violent fits of temper and the notorious *berserksgangr* or berserker frenzy. This book challenges the orthodox view that these men went 'berserk' in the modern English sense of the word. It examines all the evidence for medieval perceptions of *berserkir* and builds a model of how the medieval audience would have viewed them. Then, it extrapolates a Viking Age model of *berserkir* from this model, and supports the analysis with anthropological and archaeological evidence, to create a new and more accurate paradigm of the Viking Age *berserkr* and his place in society. This shows that *berserkir* were the champions of lords and kings, members of the social elite, and that much of what is believed about them is based on 17th-century and later scholarship and mythologizing: the medieval audience would have had a very different understanding of the Old Norse *berserkr* from that which people have now. The book sets out a challenge to rethink and reframe our perceptions of the past in a way that is less influenced by our own modern ideas.

The Myths and Realities of the Viking berserkr will appeal to researchers and students alike studying the Viking Age, Medieval History and Old Norse Literature.

Roderick Dale has worked as an archaeologist throughout the United Kingdom and in research roles at University College Cork and the University of Nottingham. He currently works at the University of Stavanger. His research interests include Old Norse literature, Viking Age history and the reception of vikings in popular culture.

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To Karen, Jasmine and Strongbow

Frontispiece The *Sverd i Fjell* (Swords in the mountain) monument at Møllebukta, Hafrsfjord near Stavanger, Norway, commemorates the Battle of Hafrsfjord fought near here in the late ninth century. A contemporary poem records the presence of *berserkir* at this battle. Photo by the author.

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Abbreviations and Explanatory Notes

The following conventions have been adopted throughout this book.

Bibliographical abbreviations used in the footnotes

Abbreviations have been used for texts that have been referenced numerous times. Each time a text is referenced after the first, the conventions in the table below have been followed.

CV	Cleasby, Richard, Gudbrand Vigfusson and W. A. Craigie, rev. by W. A. Craigie *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957)
Edda	*Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. by Gustav Neckel, 5th edn, rev. by Hans Kuhn, 2 vols (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1983)
Fsn	*Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1959)
Ks	*Konunga sögur*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 3 vols ([n.p.]: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1957)
LMIR	*Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, ed. by Agnete Loth, 5 vols, Editiones Arnamagnæanæ Series B, vols 20-24 (Munksgaard: Copenhagen, 1962–65)
NGL	*Norges Gamle Love indtil 1387*, ed. by R. Keyser and P. A. Munch, 5 vols (Christiania: Grondahl, 1846–1895)
NR	*Norse Romance*, ed. by Marianne E. Kalinke, Arthurian Archives III-V, 3 vols (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999)
ONP	Helle Degnbol *et al.*, eds, *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog. A Dictionary of Old Norse*, 4 vols (Copenhagen: 1981-[2004])
Orðstöðulykill	Bragi Halldórsson and Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir, eds, *Íslendinga sögur. Orðstöðulykill og texti: The complete sagas of Icelanders with lemmatized concordance* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1996)
Snorra Edda	Snorri Sturluson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. by Magnús Finnbogason (Bókaverzlun Sigurðar Kristjánssonar: Reykjavík, 1952)

References to *Íslendingasögur* in the text are to the Íslenzk fornrit volume in which they appear in the form 'Íf, volume number, page number'. Primary sources that are not part of a series are referenced by name alone. Other texts are abbreviated to the author's name, a short form of the title of the work, and the page number after the first time they are referenced.

Explanatory notes

Translating Old Norse *berserkr* and *berserksgangr* is problematic because the English translations are semantically loaded. For purposes of clarity, the Old Norse terms are retained throughout except where specifically referring to Present Day English 'berserk' and 'berserker' being used in sources under discussion.

Lower case 'v' is used in the word 'viking' throughout, where it is being used as a descriptor of an activity or occupation, e.g., a viking voyage or a viking raider, unless directly quoting from another text which uses upper case 'V.'

The orthography adopted for general reference throughout the text is that used in *ONP* unless quoting directly from a source text. While the text largely uses Old Norse names and terms, in cases where a common English version of the name exists, this has been used as being more familiar to most readers. The Old Norse form is given where the word or name is first encountered.

Where quantification of elements within Old Norse literature has been undertaken, I have derived the data from searches done using *ONP* and *Orðstöðulykill*, unless otherwise stated.

All translations given in the text are my own unless otherwise stated.

Introduction

On a sunny day, you can head down to Hafrsfjord near Stavanger, Norway, where you will see the *Sverd i Fjell* (Swords in the mountain) monument. On the beach near the monument, you will see people relaxing, playing in the water, sunbathing, and maybe picnicking. Further out into the fjord, there may be water-skiers or people on paddle boards or people messing about on boats, as Kenneth Grahame would have described it. This peaceful scene with the beautiful backdrop of Hafrsfjord itself belies the bloody history that the monument, comprising three 10-metre tall swords, commemorates. The three swords represent three kings. The tallest sword is Haraldr *hárfagri* (Harald fairhair) who is supposed to have united Norway under his rule at the Battle of Hafrsfjord in the late ninth century. The two smaller swords represent the two petty kings he defeated. This battle took place in the late ninth century somewhere on Hafrsfjord and is the subject of the *Funn i Hafrsfjord* (Findings in Hafrsfjord) project which is looking for signs of it at the time of writing.

The battle is described in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, but, more importantly for this book, it is commemorated in the poem *Haraldskvæði* (poem about Harald) by the skald Þorbjǫrn *hornklofi* (possibly meaning 'horn-cleaver'), probably composed shortly after the battle. This poem contains the earliest surviving references to *berserkir*, a word that is usually translated as 'berserker' and it places *berserkir* and their companions the *ulfheðnar* 'wolfskins' firmly as historical figures. As I demonstrate in this book, there is a vast gulf between the modern English word's meaning and the Old Norse word's meaning which is why I use the Old Norse word *berserkr* (pl. *berserkir*) throughout to refer to the historical figures, reserving 'berserker' specifically for modern popular culture depictions. This place and this poem provide a jumping off point for an analysis of *berserkir* as they appear in Old Norse literature and for what their probable historical reality was. There are many views on these topics, both in scholarly literature and in popular culture, and I engage with as many as possible throughout to show the range of thought on the topic. The most common of these in popular culture are that *berserkir* fought naked or wearing bearskins while in a drug-crazed frenzy.

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In *The Last Kingdom*, Bernard Cornwell includes a historical note declaring that 'there is no evidence that lunatic nudists made regular appearances on the battlefield.'[1] He goes so far as to deny the existence of *berserkir* based on his preconceptions of what they were, which is very much in line with the popular conception of warriors who were so battle-mad that they threw off all their clothes before wading into battle. With *War of the Wolf*, the 11th book in the series, Cornwell introduces wolfskins, who use a salve of henbane to induce a berserk frenzy and heighten their already formidable combat prowess, even commenting that some of them fought naked to demonstrate their lack of fear.[2] Hjardar and Vike describe them as wandering brotherhoods of warriors, possibly descended from the Heruli mentioned by Tacitus, and who were particularly aggressive as a result of 'diminished responsibility.'[3] These positions are common ones adopted when analysing *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar*. Some scholars go further and declare that they are purely literary characters who never existed.[4] Others have sought the secret of their berserk fury in many and varied pathologies as I discuss in Chapter 3.

For me, these investigations miss the point. The key to understanding who and what they were is to understand the source material and to read it in full. Words have meaning that is dependent on context and will have had associated values for the medieval audience that enjoyed Old Norse literature. If we are to understand what a Viking Age *berserkr* was, we need first to understand what the medieval audience perceived them to be and we must avoid projecting modern meanings back in time.[5] We must then use that information to see how such figures would have fitted into Viking Age society socially and culturally.

This was the approach I took with my PhD thesis and this book is a development of that work, updated to include more recent research. In it, I explore and explain the meaning of Old Norse *berserkr*, from which the modern English words 'berserk' and 'berserker' are derived and I show how *berserkr* has been interpreted since scholars first started studying *berserkir*. Theoretically, explaining its meaning should be a simple task because the words are related. However, the modern English meaning of 'berserk' and its ubiquitous use in modern popular culture complicates the matter. As I show, the meaning of Old Norse *berserkr* changed when the word was adopted into English and that change has shaped how scholars have researched *berserkir* and their *berserksgangr* (the so-called 'berserker fit or frenzy'). This meaning is not restricted to English and it should be noted that the Scandinavian languages rediscovered and adopted the word in their own explorations of their past in the 17th century and afterwards. All of the Scandinavian languages use words derived from Old Norse *berserkr* to denote fury, rage, or a someone who is out of control. German has *Berserker*, while Samson translated *berserkr* into French as *guerrier fauve* (wild warrior) implying the bestial nature of these men for his work on *berserkir*.[6]

In the 13th century, when Snorri wrote about the madness that was *berserksgangr*, of how Odin's (Old Norse *Óðinn*) men attacked furiously like mad dogs or wolves and were as strong as bears or bulls, he created an enduring image that we see reflected in the modern meaning of 'berserk.'[7] While he did not call Odin's men *berserkir*, the fact that he was describing *berserksgangr* indicates that they were and that the attributes of shield-biting and howling that Snorri described are those of *berserkir* in Old Norse literature. These *berserkir* were fearless and invulnerable to iron or fire. They fought without armour and were practically superhuman. This image of ferocious, uncontrollable warriors has endured through to the present day and appears to be so strong that no one has questioned whether *berserkir* actually went berserk.

The focus on interpreting *berserksgangr* as violence and loss of control is counterproductive for researchers because it presupposes violence and loss of control instead of beginning by asking whether they really were out of control. Therefore, as with using Old Norse *berserkr* to refer to the people, I use Old Norse *berserksgangr*, to refer to their actions as described in Old Norse literature. I prefer not to use neologisms like 'berserkism' for *berserksgangr* because they still carry undertones of an *a priori* assumption of 'going berserk' and suggest an underlying pathology for something that almost certainly did not have one. This question of vocabulary and how we translate the Old Norse words is one that I return to because previous research on *berserkir* has been substantially shaped by scholars projecting modern meanings onto the past instead of understanding the modern meanings as deriving from, but not necessarily directly linked to, past meanings.

The main focus of this book is on the *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas), the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of the Icelanders) and the *konungasögur* (kings' sagas) because these represent the most closely native traditions, where the *riddarasögur* (chivalric sagas) are drawn from a variety of different, often foreign traditions. Nevertheless, when it comes to analysing the meaning of Old Norse *berserkr*, it is important to draw on all possible uses of the word. The *riddarasögur* include instances where romances from other languages have been translated into Old Norse. How the translators have used and understood foreign words and characterisations provides a useful window through which to view the meaning of Old Norse *berserkr*.

This book begins by setting out how we can define who and what *berserkir* were in Old Norse literature. This encompasses their roles and the way individual *berserkir* are depicted. It provides the baseline for all subsequent analysis. The focus then moves to those attributes they had that have been seen as aberrant, and thus monstrous, and considers to what extent they set *berserkir* apart from the rest of the society depicted in Old Norse literature. After this, I analyse *berserksgangr* in full as a literary concept and show the range of solutions suggested for it before offering my own interpretation. With these topics addressed, the final stage in identifying how medieval

audiences thought of *berserkir* is to provide a meaning for Old Norse *berserkr* that is not its etymology. The etymology shows the origin of the word, but its meaning is how the medieval audience thought about it and the etymology certainly pre-dates the medieval period, when the literature was written down, by at least several hundred years. It probably pre-dates it by much more than that as I argue when subsequently defining a model for the Viking Age (c.800–1050 CE) and earlier reality of *berserkir*.

Notes

1 Bernard Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 332.
2 Bernard Cornwell, *War of the Wolf* (London: HarperCollins, 2019), pp. 115–18.
3 Kim Hjardar and Vegard Vike, *Vikings at War* (Oxford: Casemate, 2016), pp. 97–99.
4 For dismissal of research into *berserkir*, see: Eric Christiansen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 33; Anatoly Liberman, '*Berserkir*: A Double Legend', *Brathair*, 4.2 (2004), 97–101; and Anatoly Liberman, *In Prayer and Laughter: Essays on Medieval Scandinavian and Germanic Mythology, Literature and Culture* (Moscow: Palaeograph Press, 2016), pp. 101–12.
5 The Viking Age is usually considered to have lasted from approximately c.800–1050 CE, but its boundaries are fuzzy and some scholars have theorised that its beginning can be pushed back to c.750 CE and its end to c.1100 CE. Periodisation varies according to location within Europe. For example, the Viking Age is part of the Late Iron Age (c.500–1050) in Scandinavia which is roughly comparable to the early medieval period in England. Thus, it can be problematic to refer to periods neatly when covering a broad geographic area as this book does.
6 Vincent Samson, *Les Berserkir: Les guerriers-fauves dans la Scandinavie ancienne, de l'âge de Vendel aux Vikings (VIe-XIe siècle)* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presse Universitaire du Septentrion, 2011).
7 Íf, 26, p. 17.

1 Defining the *berserkr*

With many characters identified as *berserkir* in the Old Norse literature of the 13th and 14th centuries, it should not be difficult to define them and to get to grips with how the medieval audience thought about them. The focus must be on this literature because the Old Norse word *berserkr* only survives in these manuscripts and is not known from any earlier sources. All other scholarly and popular culture interpretations of who and what *berserkir* were derive from this literature originally and all too often from just a limited part of it.

However, as with any literature, it is not always that straightforward. The narratives do not explain or describe *berserkir* in detail. They also assume knowledge on the part of the audience that fills in gaps and that we are not privy to.[1] Similarly, the characters are products of a culture that is not our own, so we will miss cues that the medieval audience would have recognised. We may even infer cues that are not there because our perspective of *berserkir* is coloured by our own modern experience, our own understanding of what Present Day English *berserk* means and the vast array of pop culture 'berserkers' that surround us. As a result, we can only be sure that we have identified *berserkir* when they are specifically named as such. From this starting point, it is possible to create a working definition of *berserkir* that can be used in subsequent analysis.

Old Norse literature

Old Norse *berserkr* is used widely in Old Norse texts.[2] The fact that *berserkir* feature in 14 of the 40 surviving *Íslendingasögur* alone demonstrates that their presence in the narrative was popular among the medieval audience. They are also a significant feature of other genres of Old Norse literature, being present in over 90 sagas and *þættir* (short stories), in both the *Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda*, in the Icelandic law code *Grágás* (the Grey Goose laws) and also being found in many Old Norse historical works.[3] These texts are the earliest written sources for the attributes of *berserkir*, which provide the basis for understanding and interpreting medieval understanding of *berserkir* and their historical reality in the Viking Age.

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The *berserkir* described in Old Norse literature have a varied range of attributes and are employed in a variety of roles. From this, it is clear that there were several traditions about *berserkir* extant in the period up to the end of the 14th century, possibly as a result of dialectal or geographical variation, but probably because it was used to refer to different, related concepts at different times.

Berserkir usually appear as stylised characters, but there is sufficient correlation between depictions and sufficient variety to identify patterns and traditions as well as determining those elements that deviate from the norm. These patterns transcend differences in depiction between different genres of Old Norse literature. While some type scenes are largely restricted to a specific genre, the ways in which the word *berserkr* is used are consistent across genres.

Any analysis of *berserkir* must address these issues, because they may illuminate aspects of the medieval concept of the *berserkr* and identify conventional motifs that affect definitions and understanding of both the medieval literary *berserkr* and the Viking Age *berserkr*. The distinction between the two will be identified and maintained, because the former is a largely literary construct and is an early form of popular culture. The latter can only be defined in terms of probable reality but is likely to have differed from the former.

Earliest references

The earliest known source for *berserkir* is *Haraldskvæði*, which was probably composed in the late ninth or early tenth century, although it only survives in later written sources.[4] Shortly after the Battle of Hafrsfjord, Þórbjǫrn *hornklofi* composed this poem to celebrate the victory of Haraldr *hárfagri* and he mentions the king's *berserkir*, who fought at the battle and are also known from *Heimskringla* and *Grettis saga*.[5] *Haraldskvæði* makes the connection between these *berserkir* and the *ulfheðnar*, because it states that the king's *berserkir* were called *ulfheðnar*. The fact that this source, probably dating from a time when *berserkir* were a part of society, makes the connection important, because it indicates a strong probability that the connection is genuine and not a result of authorial intervention in the narrative. It also enables comparison of *berserkir* with depictions of figures in wolfskins on archaeological artefacts.

Haraldskvæði states that both *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* howled (Old Norse *grenjuðu* and *emjuðu*).[6] It relates that they were reliable warriors in whom the king might trust and that they carried bloody shields in battle, as well as reddening their spears there.[7] Price identified them as drinking blood, from the line 'bergir hræssævar' (drinkers of the corpse-sea).[8] He translates this line as being a parenthetical statement describing the *berserkir*, where Finlay states that the expression is a kenning for a raven and thus a form of address to the raven, whom the Valkyrie is questioning.[9] Price states that this detail is 'graphic beyond the normal conventions of skaldic poetry.'[10] However,

this is not really the case given that skaldic verse often deals with battle and its outcomes and is replete with kennings for blood and wounds. If the phrase does refer to the *berserkir*, the expression is as likely to be a hyperbolic representation of the ferocity of *berserkir* as it is to be literally true. As with so many elements of interpretation of *berserkir*, texts are accepted too literally. No allowance is made for figurative expressions or hyperbole. However, the most recent critical edition identifies Old Norse *bergir*, which survives in this form only in this one expression, as a singular masculine noun. This must therefore make this a kenning for 'raven' and not a reference to a group of bloodthirsty *berserkir*.[11]

A *lausavísa*, or single independent verse, included in *Eyrbyggja saga* that has been dated to c.983 CE and was composed by Víga-Styrr Þorgrímsson makes reference to the *berserkir* that he has just killed and buried:

> hér hefr bilgrǫnduðr brandi
> berserkjum stað merkðan.[12]
>
> (Here has he, who does not fail to hurt with a sword,
> marked out a place for *berserkir*)

As with other poetical references, this verse does not describe their attributes or highlight what sort of warriors they were. It is left to the much later prose elements of *Eyrbyggja saga* to expand on the characteristics of the dead *berserkir*, Halli and Leiknir.[13]

Although much Eddic poetry is thought to be of Viking Age date, Old Norse *berserkr* only occurs in two Eddic poems: *Hárbarðsljóð* (37) (The Lay of Hárbarðr) and *Hyndluljóð* (24) (The Lay of Hyndla).[14] *Hárbarðsljóð* may date from the late ninth or tenth century, which would mean it was composed when historical *berserkir* could have been present in society.[15] It describes a flyting or duel of insults between Odin and Thor (Old Norse *Þórr*), in the course of which Thor states that he fought the 'brúðir berserkia' (brides of *berserkir*) on Hlésey.[16] McKinnell has suggested that they were giantesses and that this is a kenning for 'stormy waves,' and thus links *berserkir* to giants.[17] Even if the expression is intended as a kenning, *Hárbarðsljóð* maintains the impression of dangerousness that seems to surround *berserkir* by relating them to the forces that opposed the gods and men.

Hyndluljóð is of even less certain date than *Hárbarðsljóð* with Finnur Jónnson concluding that it dates from the mid-tenth century and de Vries stating that it dates from the late 12th century.[18] *Hyndluljóð* describes the hero Óttarr's lineage, in a bid to help him recover his inheritance from Angantýr, a *berserkr* known from *Hervarar saga*, *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Hversu Noregr byggðist*.[19] Angantýr in these sagas is a son of Arngrímr, to whose sons Óttarr is related.[20] Therefore, Óttarr is descended from a line of *berserkir*, which may explain the reference to 'brǫcon berserkia' (the din of *berserkir*).[21] This

reference to *berserkir* being noisy is a common feature of depictions of them. As with *Haraldskvæði*, *berserkir* are shown to have howling or shouting as one of their defining attributes.

From these early poems, it is possible to construct an initial image of *berserkir*. They were excellent warriors, who fought in the shieldwall, as *Haraldskvæði* states. Their presence in the shieldwall, fighting shoulder to shoulder, suggests that they were more disciplined than a berserk frenzy would permit. This is not too surprising, given that warriors suddenly leaving the shieldwall to charge the enemy would have been a disadvantage at a time when maintaining the line was an important part of winning the battle.[22] They were known for being violent and dangerous, as indicated by *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Haraldskvæði*, and for their howling and shouting as *Haraldskvæði* and *Hyndluljóð* show. The fact that this was seen as a defining attribute suggests that it was over and above the normal din of battle. For the rest of their attributes, it is necessary to examine other areas of Old Norse literature, such as the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*.

The roles of *berserkir*

There have been few studies solely of the role of *berserkir* within Viking Age society. Where this issue has been addressed, it has generally been tangential to the main study as with Danielli's work on initiation ritual.[23] One exception is Beard, who identified seven roles for *berserkir* in Old Norse literature:[24]

1 the primitive Germanic or Celtic frenzied fighter;
2 the king's *berserkr* and defender of the realm;
3 the king's *berserkr* but arrogant and unruly;
4 the *hólmgǫngumaðr* (pl. *hólmgǫngumenn*) or duellist;
5 the *hólmgǫngumaðr* but with a measure of invulnerability;
6 the 'viking' *berserkr*; and
7 the semi-magical *berserkr*.

According to Beard, these roles involved the *berserkr* living on the edge of or outside general society, even when ostensibly protecting it, as in cases 2 and 3. As part of his analysis, Beard identified 51 traits that *berserkir* could have, which included this exclusion from mainstream society, as well as holding no property and being both arrogant and unruly. He then compared these traits with those that saga heroes had and noted that both heroes and *berserkir* had many similarities, although the ultimate effect on society of the hero's actions was positive while *berserkir* had a wholly negative effect.[25] Apart from their effect on society, the chief point of difference was the animalistic nature and appearance of *berserkir*. Beard suggested that some of the dislike for *berserkir* may have arisen because their supposed uncontrollable fury was the sin of ire, one of the seven deadly sins.[26] Having catalogued and noted these differences and similarities, Beard concluded that *berserkir* lived