



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

# BESERKERS

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# Beserkers

## Introduction

Amongst many of the sagas, including that of the Norse Kings, a class of warriors are exalted and feared above all others. These were the Berserkers (Bersirkir in old Norse). Sometimes they were also referred to as 'wolfskins' (Ulfhednar).

### Beserkers

Amongst many of the sagas, including that of the Norse Kings, a class of warriors are exalted and feared above all others. These were the Berserkers (Bersirkir in old Norse). Sometimes they were also referred to as 'wolfskins' (Ulfhednar).

Were these warriors the truly the demonic creatures that the sagas claim or were they a type of elite soldier?

Legend portrays them as fearless, extremely violent, and under the influence of some hallucinogenic substance, thought to have been extracted from mushrooms. They are said to have believed that they were invulnerable to enemy weapons when induced into the berserker state and that they would bite their shields and howl like animals and work themselves into a psychotic frenzy before falling upon their enemies.

Any survivors of a village which fell victim to extremely violent men who looked and behaved like savage animals would have been the basis for enhancing the myths of such creatures as werewolves. Werewolf is old English for wolfman.

Maybe some parallels can be drawn with the North American Indians of the second half of the 19th century, who practiced the 'Ghost Dance' rituals in which they entered a trance like state and believed that by wearing Ghost shirts, that they were immune to bullets and that they would drive the white man from their lands. The subsequent massacre at Wounded Knee, put an end in that belief and to the cult.

### The Sagas

The sagas state that many berserkers inherited the trait from their families and, indeed, whole groups of brothers, sons and other male family members were said to have made up gangs of crazed warriors. It sounds unlikely, but it cannot be disproved. Maybe they were shock troops, induced to perform seemingly impossible tasks whilst under the influence of drink or drugs. Maybe they were members of a cult which glorified violence.

British troops in the Napoleonic and Crimean wars were kept fully supplied with rum by 'grog men' on the battlefield and they proved to be highly successful, but whether copious amounts of alcohol enhanced bravery or dulled the senses is a matter of opinion. Enraged fighting drunks would present an enemy with a real problem.

### Egil Skallagrimmson's father (Skallagrim)

Egil Skallagrimmson's father (Skallagrim) was said to have been a berserker and the hero's in most of the sagas usually killed at least one renowned berserker.

Certainly, Berserkers are imprinted upon Viking mythology and legend and it is likely they were real psychopathic warriors who performed impossible feats which may have perpetuated the stories and grew into fantastical legends.

Scandinavian and early medieval society was violent and there are always some individuals who take things to the extreme. Many warrior societies were 'brainwashed' in order to install beliefs and behaviours that are not natural for human beings. The Spartans, the Scythians and several of today's modern special forces are examples of how human nature can be adapted and devoted to extreme warfare.

The modern English word berserk is defined as being out of control or furiously violent and Christian writers have recorded the actions of Berserkers and referred to them as Heathen Devils.

It is possible that berserkers may have been bodyguards to Kings and other high ranking nobles, famed champions who had excelled in some particular battle, but there is a written account by a Byzantine during the reign of the Emperor Constantine VII ( 905 to 959) which is recorded in a book called Ceremonies of the Byzantine Court, of members of the Varangian guard, performing a war dance whilst dressed in animal skins and zoomorphic masks.

At the battle of Stamford Bridge (25th September 1066) a huge axe wielding Norse Warrior is recorded as holding the Saxon army up on a narrow bridge whilst the Viking army formed into battle array on the other side of the river.

It doesn't seem possible or realistic and it is likely that several Norse warriors held the bridge, replacing those who were cut down. Were these warriors Berserkers, under the psychotic influence of drugs or drink or were they just brave men who did what they believed was necessary? In any case, the Anglo-Saxons forced the crossing and slaughtered the Viking army and their King, Harold Hardrada.

Did these legendary warriors exist? You will have to make your own mind up.