

A Review of 'The Myths and Realities of the Viking Berserkr'

Natalie M. Van Deusen
University of Alberta

2024-10-03

Dale, Roderick, *The Myths and Realities of the Viking Berserkr* (London: Routledge, 2022), 208 pp., \$54.99 (pbk), ISBN: 9781032164205.

The word *berserk* has taken on a number of meanings in the modern English language. Its use calls to mind the image of a frenzied, violent, and animal-like warrior on the battlefield who is immune to any attacks against him. In contemporary consciousness and usage, the word has become synonymous with a fit of insanity, and ‘going *berserk*’ means losing one’s senses or becoming in some way out of control. In addition to this, *berserkers* feature prominently in popular culture reimaginings of the Viking Age. Such understandings inform how the figure of the Viking Age *berserkr* (pl. *berserkir*) is read in primary source materials, and for popular and scholarly audiences alike have painted a somewhat one-dimensional picture of this figure and his relationship to society.

In this monograph, which is a development of his PhD thesis, Roderick Dale revisits the Viking Age *berserkr* and reexamines the place of the *berserkir* in Viking Age and medieval anthropological, archaeological, and literary sources in an effort to present a better and more nuanced understanding of how people living in Scandinavia during the Viking Age and Middle Ages understood this figure and what he represented. The study comprises six chapters, which are prefaced by an introduction and which are followed by two appendices.

Chapter One aims at providing a working definition of the *berserkr*. Dale begins with the Old Norse literary sources in which *berserkir* feature, noting that they appear in 14 out of the 40 Icelandic family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*), with even greater representation when taking into consideration other literary genres and works (such as the *fornaldarsögur* [legendary sagas] and Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*). Dale outlines previous scholarly interpretations of the *berserkir* before proposing and defining five broad and functional group types, into which all examples of *berserkir* in the Viking Age and medieval sources may be categorized: King’s *berserkr*; hall-challenging *berserkr*; *Hólmgöngumaðr* (duellist); viking *berserkr*; and Christian *berserkr*. Dale concludes that ‘what is missing from the literary descriptions of *berserkir* are descriptions of men stripping off their clothes in a frenzy or of men wearing bear or wolfskins’ (p. 21).

Chapter Two explores the central question of whether the *berserkir* were universally monstrous characters in Old Norse literature, as they tend to be in popular culture representations of them. Dale points out that in Old Norse literature, monstrosity did not mean animalistic or frenzied, but rather a threat to order and the status quo. In this way, *berserkir* of various types *were* monstrous—and may have been viewed as even more so in those instances in which they did adopt animalistic qualities. Ethnicity and names also were markers of alterity for *berserkir* in the literary sources, and several naming patterns may be identified in not only the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, but also Norwegian charter evidence. The chapter concludes with considerations of the special powers attributed to the *berserkir*, as well as shapeshifting,

which draws on both literary and image-based evidence, all of which makes clear each particular representation of a *berserkr* must be considered individually.

Chapter Three concentrates on the history of the iconic *berserksgangr* (*berserkr* fit or frenzy). Dale begins with the etymology of the word and a description of those physical signals that accompany the state. Early research on the *berserksgangr* is considered, which sought to explain how it was caused by demonic forces or black magic. A much longer section of the chapter focuses on the various substances, illnesses (physical and psychological), and religious practices that since the seventeenth century have been argued to have induced the *berserksgangr*. Dale concludes by examining saga examples and patterns, which suggest that medieval authors and audiences did not regard the *berserksgangr* state as one of uncontrollable frenzy.

The etymological focus continues in Chapter Four, which seeks to explain the etymology and meaning of not only *berserkr*, but also the related *úlfheðinn* (wolfskin, pl. *úlfheðnar*). It includes a discussion of the etymology of the Old Norse *berserkr*, which may mean either ‘bare-shirt’ or ‘wearing a bearskin’ but is best translated to modern English as ‘champion’. Dale also considers how medieval audiences understood the term *berserkr*, and what it meant to them. Chapter Five turns from the medieval literary sources to the sources available from Scandinavians during the Viking Age, to better understand what *berserkir* meant to people living in Scandinavia prior to the time of the sagas. Since no runic evidence includes references to *berserkir*, the Viking Age written evidence Dale relies upon is skaldic verse, as it would have changed very little in transmission due to its complex and rigid poetic diction, as well as law codes. He then links literary depictions of *berserkr* in initiation rituals to archaeological evidence that confirms such practices existed prior to the Middle Ages. The concept of the Odinnic warrior is also considered through artefactual evidence, which suggests that people in the Viking Age, too, would have seen *berserkir* as champions and as warriors closely linked to nobility.

In Chapter Six, Dale concludes that ‘by picking out and analysing only the episodes that feature *berserkir* and only from a limited range of texts, scholars have failed to address the full meaning of who and what a *berserkr* could be and are not presenting a complete picture’ (p. 157). Dale’s study takes a ‘holistic and medial approach’, which makes a distinction between the historical reality of the *berserkr* and his interpretations in Old Norse literature, and the various nuances and complexities within even these representations. Summaries of the preceding chapters are offered by way of conclusion, and are followed by two appendices. Appendix 1 is a list of names of *berserkir* in Old Norse literature and where they might be found, and indicates how common (or uncommon) these names are in Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Appendix 2 presents in Old Norse and English translation those three strophes from *Haraldskvæði*, which contain the earliest known references to *berserkir*.

This is an outstanding and much-needed study of a Viking Age and medieval figure that is well-known but widely misunderstood, both in popular imagination but also within scholarship. Dale’s work is exemplary in the way in its interdisciplinary

approach to the sources, how it brings archaeological and anthropomorphic evidence into conversation with written sources ranging from saga literature and mythological texts to law codes and historical records, and, most importantly, how it recognized nuance, complexity, and the need to consider individual examples within their specific contexts. This will certainly be a foundational study for any scholarship on or related to not only the figure of the *berserkr*, but Viking Age and Old Norse society more generally.

Natalie M. Van Deusen
University of Alberta
vandeuse@ualberta.ca

The Ted K Archive

Natalie M. Van Deusen

University of Alberta

A Review of 'The Myths and Realities of the Viking Berserkr'

2024-10-03

Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, Volume 19 (2025), pp. 1-2.

<<https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.29290>>

www.thetedkarchive.com