

The Berserkir

This letter appeared in Web of Wyrd number 7:

With reference to the ongoing discussion of the berserkir or "bear shirts" Viking warrior clan. P G Foote and D M Wilson state in their book, "The Viking Achievement" (Sidgwick & Jackson UK 1970) that the berserkers worked themselves up into a frenzy which gave them super-normal strength and made them indifferent to blows. It was generally believed that they had magical powers, although they were regarded as inferior to the great heroes of the Viking sagas. The berserkir howled savagely as they went into battle, and Foote and Wilson speculate that these battle frenzies were the result of excessive alcoholic intake. According to Icelandic Law (Christian version) anyone who fell into a berserk frenzy was considered highly dangerous and could be classed as an outlaw from society. The following verse from the epic poem "Atlamal" circa 11th century CE is believed to contain a reference to the berserkir and their method of fighting, as well as to another warrior clan who wore wolf skins, and may be connected with lycanthropy!

Full they were of fighters
and flashing bucklers,
western war lances
and wound-blades Frankish;
cried then the bear-pelted,
carnage they had thoughts of,
wailed then the wolf-coated
and weapons brandished.

It would seem the berserkir wore tunics of bearskin because the animal was their totem and they believed they could magically attain its strength. Their unorthodox fighting methods - akin to the "battle spasm" of Celtic warriors possessed by the god/desses of war - and the modern meaning of the term "to go berserk" suggest they were less than self-controlled but in fact fought, quite literally, like men possessed.

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