

**“A Furore Normannorum, Libera Nos Domine!”  
A Short History of Going Berserk in Scandinavian  
Literature and Heavy Metal**

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**Abstract**

The motif of the *berserkr*<sup>1</sup> (“one whose actions are recklessly defiant”) and of “going berserk” (“going mad”, “to become violent and uncontrolled”) has a long-standing cultural history, especially in old Scandinavian literature. The following essay aims to portray the history of the motif from Old Norse literature to its presence in today’s culture and particularly in heavy metal music. I aim to show how the motif is used to act as both a channel for aggression and as social criticism.

**Key Words:** Berserker, heavy metal, madness, chaos, critical madness.

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**1. Multifarious Metal Madness**

Heavy metal and the madness-motif are, without any doubt, the perfect match. Madness, in its meaning of crazy and/or stupid behaviour that could be dangerous, is ubiquitous in the world of heavy metal: This kind of madness is not only present at metal concerts, where the crowd goes wild and bang their heads or perform the “Wall of Death”; it can be found in the lyrics, the music and maybe even in the attitude of fans and musicians, too. To the outsider, this world may seem threatening and nihilistic. Critics generally assume that heavy metal has a dramatic effect on teenagers as well as “causing madness and death”<sup>2</sup> in that it negatively influences young people's lives to a great extent. Some regard metal music as an attack on traditional values. Metal indeed seems to glorify violence, death and negativity itself, with band names such as *Slayer*, *Mayhem*, *Twisted Sister* and *Napalm Death*, let alone album titles like *Massive Killing Capacity* or *Butchered at Birth* – titles that can hardly be enjoyed by a healthy mind.

However, as Robert Walser correctly perceives the phenomenon by calling it *critical madness*, it is not madness that heavy metal brings to the world; heavy metal is merely a means of reflecting and criticising the insanity taking place in society, such as social indifference or violent conflicts

between different groups of people. In fact, there are even ways of curing people with the help of heavy metal in therapy. Strangely enough, the music (among other, mostly popular mainstream music) is also used to torture people in detention camps. Deena Weinstein suggests a “figural and contextual interpretation rather than a literal reading”<sup>3</sup> of heavy metal. Weinstein, while saying that there are basic similarities among themes of songs, states that there are “significant core thematic complexes”, namely clusters of the Dionysian and the Chaotic. Surely, the madness-motif and with it, the berserker, belongs to the latter. Like Walser, she views in motifs such as disorder, conflict, opposition and contradiction a readiness to acknowledge the facts of life and try to deal with them.

The berserker-motif is a way of expressing both madness and social criticism in heavy metal songs and thereby a medium of coping with the world, of coping with annoying comments of people around you or anything that makes a person go mad. In order to facilitate text comprehension, the following section will help to explain the background of the berserker.

## 2. The Berserker in Literature and History

Descriptions of fierce heroism and wild fury as being peculiar to the Germanic people already appear in the writings by and records of ancient authors. A Nordic phenomenon among their fighters is the *berserkr*, who is said to be a long-haired, huge and vigorous warrior fighting in uncontrollable anger and who is reputed to be insensitive to pain. Old Norse sagas, Skaldic verses, annals and historical works contain a great abundance of berserker characteristics, the most famous being Snorri Sturluson's berserker-definition in the *Ynglinga Saga* that portrays them as mad, inhuman fighters without body armour:

Woden's men went without hauberks and raged like dogs or wolves. They bit their shields and were strong like bears or bulls. They killed men, but neither fire nor iron could hurt them. This is called *berserksgangr*.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, characteristics include howling, flashing eyes, twisting faces and bodies and foam coming from their mouths. This raging madness arises whenever a berserker is irritated or whenever he enters battle. The berserker appears mainly in stereotypical roles: He is often a king's bodyguard or belongs to an elite troop. Being often considered as an outlaw or troublemaker, he appears as unwelcome suitor<sup>5</sup> or heathen demon, too.

The actual existence of a warrior called *berserkr* outside of literature is highly contested. Klaus von See<sup>6</sup>, who does not doubt the existence of similar warriors (he regards the word *berserkr* in the “*Haraldskvæði*” as being not an established term, but an invention and addition of a later poet),

places the berserker-motif in medieval literature rather than in real life. According to von See, there are neither runic inscriptions, nor are there any occurrences of the word in the collection of medieval Scandinavian law texts. Even proponents of the assumption that the berserker existed in history, like Clive Tolley, assign most of the cultural aspects, like initiation rites, to the world of literature.<sup>7</sup> As a motif in Old Norse literature – more specific Eddaic poetry, Skaldic poetry and sagas – , however, there is an immense amount of sources that display these grim warriors; the earliest reference deriving from the already mentioned poem “Haraldskvæði”. Later, the word mainly appears in Eddaic-Skaldic poetry and Icelandic prose from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, for example the *Islendingadrápa* (approx. 12<sup>th</sup> century) and *Grettis Saga* (approx. 14<sup>th</sup> century). What is striking is the gap of nearly 250 years without any reference to the motif.

Michael P. Speidel builds up a slightly different picture of the berserker by tracing their history back to the timespan between 1300 BC to 1300 AD. He draws on archaeological evidence from the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, thus suggesting an origin of an alleged berserker-tradition in the late Bronze Age. The warriors of the Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta fought the Hittites and the Babylonians as berserk-like fighters. They shed their armour and part of their clothing in sight of the enemy.<sup>8</sup> This was an uncommon phenomenon in the Babylonian-Assyrian tradition where warfare included orderly rows of heavily armed and disciplined soldiers and might have shocked the combatants. Speidel's reference is an epic that describes and praises the berserk fighting style.

They are furious, raging, taking forms strange as Anzu.  
They charge forward furiously to the fray without  
armour,  
They had stripped off their breastplates, discarded their  
clothing (...)  
The fierce heroic men danced with sharpened weapons.<sup>9</sup>

Speidel's argumentation connects the long-lasting tradition of this fighting style and their code of honour and behaviour to the tribal culture the people lived in.<sup>10</sup> However, their downfall came with growing influence of the Romans' armies: With their more civilised warfare came simplified clothing and lighter weapons which made fighting easier. But even some time after this change, berserk troops were hired from outside to support the soldiers.<sup>11</sup> According to Hermann Güntert, the berserk tradition died out with the arrival of Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

The sources disagree on what made people become berserker. Güntert claims the rage to be inheritable and come out when a person was thwarted or slightly irritated, whereas others have suggested various

medicinal explanations<sup>13</sup> such as fungi, roots or intoxicating tonics, and even witchcraft.<sup>14</sup> The rage was, according to Speidel, roused by shouting and singing or screeching like raucous birds, war songs were sung and dances on the battlefield fanned fury and bonded the warriors together.<sup>15</sup>

There is a lack of clarity in terms of etymology with respect to the prefix *ber-*. Von See delivers two main approaches linguists worked out<sup>16</sup>: The first perspective connects *ber-* to Old Norse *berr/beri* (bear), resulting in the thought that berserker were bear-fighters (meaning they were particularly brave). Others assume that the adjective *berr* meaning bare or naked and which is in general viewed as being more probable than the first approach.

### 3. Heavy Metal Berserker

The berserker-motif can be found in various areas of contemporary culture. It appears in many different contexts and forms and has, for example, made its way into the world of the homonymous Japanese anime film, telling the story of the mercenary Guts in violent battle and explicit sex scenes. More frequent is the utilisation of the berserker as a motif in song lyrics, especially of heavy metal music: Many bands, not just from the Nordic countries that are generally known for having the berserker character in their literature, have adopted the motif. In the following, my aim is to analyse exemplary lyrics of heavy metal songs by Thyrfing, Amon Amarth, Månegarm, Unleashed and Manowar that feature the berserker-motif and find out in what way it illustrates a connection between heavy metal and madness. Remarkably, most songs naming the berserker are both short and brutal, as is the fight of the berserker.

The narrator in the song “Berserk” by Unleashed connects his present day hate with the wrath of the Norsemen, his ancestors, the Vikings: “One thousand years ago/In this land of ice and snow/Man lived with hatred just like me/The wrath lives on eternally”<sup>17</sup>, thus linking our contemporary industrialised and globalised world to a time, when the Vikings still set out to explore and to raid. By doing so, he also suggests a hereditary wrath that needs only very little excitation to burst out. The narrator in this song feels the berserk rage coming and in the present, as it seems, slays another person he hates. On their internet page, the band states in their “Declaration of War” to fight against “the enemies” who are not further identified, but who seem to be anyone “at school, at work or at any place they choose as a battle ground”<sup>18</sup>. This gives a hint on how to understand the “Berserk”-lyrics and the concept as seen by Unleashed: The mixture of references to the Viking Age, Norse mythology and further “old” material works as an ideology and is there to provide strength and stamina.

The narrator of “Going Berserk”<sup>19</sup> by Thyrfing describes his state when going to battle. The song provides information on the berserker-state, in that a connection between drinking mead and becoming a berserk is

suggested and the fighter is fearless in battle. The berserker is “high on death” and there is a reference to a phenomenon that is often described in mythology as well: the threat coming from the eyes of the fighter. The protagonist is living a fantasy of power (“Oh, how sweet my enemy is recoiling/His brothers have abandoned him/They're running like cattle”), that is comparable to Unleashed's berserk: All of a sudden, the enemies realise the hopelessness of their situation, the fact that they will never come out of this battle alive.

Manowar's song “The Sons of Odin”<sup>20</sup> from the album *Gods of War* lists facts and fiction known of the Viking Age, among them lines about discussed facts of the berserker and their fighting style:

And in their hour of need  
He sent forth unto them  
The Berserker Rage  
Now gods and men  
They rose up from the ground  
Screaming like wild animals  
Such is the gift of absolute power  
No blade or weapon could harm them  
They killed men and horses alike  
And all who stood before them died that day  
Hail Gods Of War.

In this song, the narrator seems to walk alone through the night, thinking of an already fought battle. He sounds proud of his deeds. The lines “Killers of men/of warriors friend” indicates the historical assumption that berserker were hired by kings or jarls to support their troops. Loyalty to fellow fighters is important to the narrator “sworn to avenge our fallen brothers”), whose thoughts oscillate between thoughtfulness and pride about his deeds and that they will some day result in his death and his going to Valhalla. The number of references to and comparisons with nature are striking. “Through the black night/ I pounder” and the berserks are “Screaming like wild animals”.

Especially in the Nordic viking and folk metal subgenre, there are numerous albums and songs that include the motif of the berserker without explicitly mentioning it. Among them is the album *Vansinnesvisor* (Songs of Madness) by Thyrffing from Sweden.<sup>21</sup> It is an album dedicated to negativity and the darker side of mankind that can be resolved only by “kick[ing] the walls [of the dark tunnel] out and create that light yourself”.<sup>22</sup> Since the band members state to be very interested in the Viking Age, a connection between the lyrics of the title song “Vansinnesvisan” (The Madness Song)<sup>23</sup> and berserker can be made, even if there is no mention of the word itself in the

text: the lyrical I is angry to a degree bordering on madness and is telling about slaying people. It is not clear though, why he/she is killing and why the death of these people will not or cannot be mourned by their relatives and beloved, as the text also states. The only person who is able to stand by the graves and mock the memory of the dead is the slayer him- or herself. It is neither clear who the aim of all this aggression is, nor is it obvious who the “I” in the song is. Even in terms of time and place, the song is universal, since there are no references whatsoever. “Ingen hjältars sal, ingen himmelsk fröjd när makter (na) (era) öden utmäta/Blott spott och spe era eftermälen färga ” (No Hall of Heroes, no heavenly joy when the powers rate your fate/Only mockery and scorn will be your remembrance) may give a hint that the slain are no followers of Odin (Hall of Heroes meaning Valhalla, where those who died in combat are guided by the Valkyries), but Christians who tried to convert the heathens to their faith. The descriptions of the state of the first person narrator are strongly reminiscent of the berserker characteristics. One of the band members says about this song in an interview:

It's about all those feelings inside when you loose your fucking mind with rage and anger and how you'd like to piss on the graves of those who have ever done you wrong.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the lyrics include indications of excessive hate, like “Länge nog har era maskättna huvuden vilat på era veka axlar” (Long enough has your worm-eaten head rested upon your weak shoulders). There are various indications concerning the berserk state “En längtande känsla sprider sig I mina nävar och lustan brinner” (A longing feeling is spreading in my fists and belligerence is burning) and fight “Klinga stolt när ben möter stål, klinga stolt när sårsvetten droppar” (It is a mighty sound when bone meets steel, the blade is proud when the blood is dripping from it). The last line of the lyrics, “I mitt vansinne fann ni livets ruttna slut” (In my madness, your life found its rotten end), gives a final hint on the person as acting as berserk in the slaying.

Comparable to this is Amon Amarth's song “Metalwrath”<sup>25</sup> that does not explicitly tell anything about berserker and describes wrath as a “code we live by”. This song is symptomatic of the connection between metal and madness, it is a song about metal madness as a way of life. Amon Amarth use a pun on the double meaning of metal (metal music and metal as a material): “We fight the world/With glowing metal/Now the falses will pay”<sup>26</sup>.

In the song “Vredens Tid” from the homonymous album<sup>27</sup> by Månegarm from Sweden, there is no appearance of the word berserker either. But the figure of the berserker seems to arise from memories, thousands of years after his existence, a memory, the narrator can take comfort from: “Minnen svunna stiger åter ur tidens vittrande stoft./Ur leden stiger de fram,

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en gyllene flamma av hopp.” (Lost memories arise again, from the withering dust of time./They step forth from the ranks, a golden flame of hope.”). But then again, this figures are threatening and powerful “Ett föraktets dova töcken, närd av nid och hån./Bländad av raseri, på hämndens vinger buren” (The dull haze of disdain. Nourished by spite and scorn/Blinded by fury. Borne on the wings of vengeance.) and bear the characteristics of the berserker in literature: “vredens herrar” (masters of wrath) and “skapare av vanvettets kaos” (creator of the chaos of madness), they act brutally and are blind to helplessness “Vanmakten inför vredens hand, speglar/i blinda ögon.” (The powerlessness before the hand of wrath, is mirrored in blind eyes).

#### **4. A Social Berserker**

In the lyrics discussed above, the berserker-motif appeared as escapist element and metaphor for finding a vent for experienced disappointment or unjustness. The motif appears as flame of hope and consoling remembrance of a reputedly glorious past, where loyalty and honesty were values that counted and where you could fight for something that was even worth dying for. It also mirrors the state of headbanging and “going berserk” in the moshpit at concerts, drinking mead or other alcoholic drinks, and maybe a dream of not being as civilised as you have to be in everyday life. It is about criticising others without caring for the right words, of finding a vent for aggressions. And finally, it is a way of expressing both madness and social criticism in heavy metal songs and thereby, a medium of coping with the world, of coping with annoying comments of people around you or anything that makes a person go mad.

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Old Norse for berserker; Pl. *berserkir*.
- <sup>2</sup> R Walser, *Running With the Devil*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 1993, p.146f: Walser is referring to the lawsuit against Judas Priest where the band was accused of driving two young men to suicide.
- <sup>3</sup> D Weinstein, *Heavy Metal. A Music and Its Culture*, DaCapo Press, 2000, p.34.
- <sup>4</sup> S Sturlusson, *Heimskringla*, Ynglinga Saga 6.
- <sup>5</sup> See B Blaney, 'The Berserk Suitor: The Literary Application of a Stereotyped Theme', *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 54, 1982, p.279.
- <sup>6</sup> K von See, 'Berserker', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschung*, vol. 17, 1961, p.129.
- <sup>7</sup> C Tolley, 'Hrólf's Saga Kráka and Sámi Bear Rites', *Saga Book*, vol. 31, 2007, p.6; 18.
- <sup>8</sup> See M Speidel, 'Berserks: A History of Indo-European "Mad Warriors"', *Journal of World History*, vol. 13, 2002, p. 254f.
- <sup>9</sup> See Speidel, op.cit., p. 255.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 280.
- <sup>12</sup> H Güntert, 'Über altisländische Berserker-Geschichten', *Beiträge zum Jahresbericht des Heidelberger Gymnasiums*, vol.10, 1912, p. 22.
- <sup>13</sup> A Guðmundsdóttir, 'Um Berserki, Berserksgang og Amanita Muscaria', *Skírnir*, vol. 175, 2001, pp.317-353.
- <sup>14</sup> See M Speidel, op.cit., p. 274.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> See von See, op.cit., p. 132.
- <sup>17</sup> Unleashed, 'Berserk', *Victory*, Century Media, 1995.
- <sup>18</sup> Unleashed internet page, accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2010, [http://www.unleashed.se/yggdrasil/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=356&Itemid=32](http://www.unleashed.se/yggdrasil/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=356&Itemid=32).
- <sup>19</sup> Thyrfing, 'Going Berserk', *Thyrfing*, Hammerheart, 1998.
- <sup>20</sup> Manowar 'The Sons of Odin', *Gods of War*, Magic Circle Music, 2007.
- <sup>21</sup> Thyrfing, 'Vansinnesvisan', *Vansinnesvisor*, Hammerheart, 2002.
- <sup>22</sup> Interview with Thyrfing on Metalkings.com, accessed 20<sup>th</sup> September 2010), <http://metalkings.com/reviews/thyrfing/thyrfing-eng.htm>.
- <sup>23</sup> Thyrfing, *Vansinnesvisor*, op.cit.
- <sup>24</sup> Interview with Thyrfing on Voices from the Dark Side, accessed 21<sup>th</sup> September 2010, <http://www.voicesfromthedarkside.de/interviews/thyrfing.htm>.
- <sup>25</sup> Amon Amarth, 'Metalwrath', *The Avenger*, Metal Blade Records, 2000.
- <sup>26</sup> Amon Amarth, op.cit.
- <sup>27</sup> Månegarm, 'Vredens Tid', *Vredens Tid*, Displeased Records, 2005.

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