

The Legacy of the Berserker

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Abstract: The Norse saga of King Hrolf Kraki provides us with the only account of berserkers, (bear shirts), that shows them acting in a realistic court setting. When they appear at the king's court, returning from a season of raiding, they display hostility and contempt toward all present, even King Hrolf. Curiously the king fails to take offense. The best explanation for his equanimity is that this berserker display is merely one of ritual hostility intended to reinforce the status of the berserker and to ensure his separation from any other warriors of more normal character.

Certainly, this behavior must have seemed odd to later bards whose task it was to relate the old tales in a fashion that lent to them a narrative coherence. This old ritual behavior seems to have been reinterpreted in at least two ways.

First, berserkers fought alone. It simply was not safe to fight in concert with a berserker, because in his frenzy he would fail to distinguish friend from foe. The habitual lone fighter is a later reworking of this old berserker feature. Such lone fighters are found in Slavic (Igor Monomakh), Celtic (Cú Chulainn), and Greek (Herakles, Ajax the Greater).

Second, the berserker aloofness founded upon hostility may serve to explain some puzzling animosities and withdrawals in heroic lore. In Germanic one has the unmotivated hostility of Hrothgar's apparent bodyguard, Unferth, toward Beowulf. In Iranian one has the odd hostility of the Nart band toward its leader (Sosruquo or Pataraz). In Indo-Aryan one finds Indra abandoned by his band, the Maruts, when he fights the serpent, Vṛtra. In Anatolian the storm god Tarhunus is also abandoned by the other gods in his fight with the dragon, Illuyanka. Most notably in the Iliad the prolonged withdrawal of Akhilleus from the combat around Troy is most easily explained as an older, reworked berserker theme. His savage conduct once he returns to the fray also fits the berserker pattern.

All these instances suggest that the berserker is not merely a Norse or Germanic phenomenon, but rather one of Indo-European heritage. If so, then we may see in the *ṛkṣas* of Rama's army the "bears," that is berserkers, since no bears live in India south of the Himalayas. Here, as in Norse, the name of these warriors survives.

Keywords: berserker, Indo-European mythology, bear, heroic lore.

1. Introductory remarks

I spent some weeks in my youth reading the Iliad (Land, Leaf, and Myers) and was impressed with one odd feature that lingered as a puzzle for decades afterwards: why does the central hero, Achilles (Akhilleús) spend most of the epic tale sulking in his tent, and when he does emerge, why is he depicted as such a savage? I had read other epics, Gilgamesh, The Poem of the Cid, Beowulf, and had come to expect a noble, valiant, and frequently present central hero as essential to heroic narrative. This paper is an answer to this, my personal puzzle, but also to many other peculiar features, often overlooked or simply accepted at face value by scholars and found in the lore of a wide range of Indo-European peoples.

At the outset I must emphasize that I am not compiling a list of berserker features. Others have preceded me in such an effort. I am, rather, focusing on features that have lingered down into attested literature in a form that has been reinterpreted, because the original has become unintelligible to the storyteller of a later but descendant culture.

2. The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki

Berserkers were warriors who fought in a state of frenzy, indifferent to pain, to wounds, and even to death. The appellation itself is transparently */ber/* ‘bear’, */serk/* ‘sark’ or ‘tunic.’ The only extended depiction of berserkers and their behavior is in *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (Byock, 1998). This “old” (*fornaldar*) saga (original title *Hrólfs saga kraka*) also has a shamanistic figure, Böðvar Bjarki (“Little Bear of Battle”), who shamanistically projects himself onto the battlefield at one point as a giant bear. He and his friends stand in an antagonistic role to the berserkers. Berserkers are usually considered to be a Norse phenomenon, fighters who were indifferent to danger, wounds, and even death itself. There were other “special” warriors, such as the *úlfheðnar* ‘wolf-hides’, and (Gothic) *Albis* (whence ‘elves’) “white ones” (that is, ghosts), but these are more obscure. One should note too Slavic werewolves, but no bears, suggesting that theriomorphic warriors may not have been confined to Norse. In fact, it is the purpose of this study to show that theriomorphic warriors, specifically bear warriors in fact were of Proto-Indo-European origin, not merely Norse nor merely Germanic.

3. Features

The account of a berserker group in Hrolf Kraki’s saga allows us to draw up an inventory of features, which prove to be diagnostic (see also Blaney, unavailable to this author). First, they enter court as a group of twelve, (Kershaw: 43-44, n. 8; Colarusso 2006), returning from raids. Second, they wear armor and are heavily armed. Third, they sit apart, at the king’s right side. Fourth, they insult everyone upon entering, including King Hrolf Kraki himself, who, quite remarkably, takes no offence at their words. Similar insults are hurled at Svipdag (Kershaw: 58, n. 30) when King Hrolf and his retinue visit King Aðils’ court. Finally, they remain aloof from “ordinary” fighters, including Bjarki and his companions.

Raiding and wearing armor, however, were both widespread in this era. These features are not diagnostic. Aloofness, close links to a ruler, and insulting one and all regardless of status are distinctive traits that must be seen as diagnostic and in need of explanation.

This array of three diagnostic features, plus the wearing of pelts occurs in a variety of narratives across the Indo-European realm, in tales in a form that I shall argue to be ancient, even though the bard has reinterpreted one or more of these older features in a way that was more consonant with the moral values of his or her era.

As a word of caution, I must emphasize that some of these traits are canonically those of the hero archetype (see, for example, Miller 2000). They may be necessary to the identity of the berserker, but not sufficient to define the berserker as such. Reciprocally, the extent to which berserker patterns have themselves influenced the form of the Indo-European hero would be a promising topic for future research.

4. Overview

As a fighting elite close links to a ruler would seem to be traits of any warrior who was deemed vital to the defense of a kingdom or state. The berserkers seem to have formed a “professional” class of warriors (Kershaw: 42-44; 59). They were highly valued fighters, “weaponized psychotics,” if you will (*ibid.*: 69-74). They were apart, both as a group and as individuals. They were aloof not merely because of their elite status, but because they were dangerous, crazy. This makes tactical sense since frenzied fighters cannot be coordinated with one another or the rest of the troop.

The practice of insulting, even challenging everyone regardless of rank, however, seems utterly strange. A contemporary parallel might be seen in the swagger and bragging of fighters in boxing or wrestling as now commercially staged. The overtly hostile *haka* traditional greeting of the Maori might be seen as a ritual display of martial prowess, in effect a warning to a newcomer among other functions. One might best view this feature of the saga as a retention of an ancient custom of ritual defiance and insult. King Hrolf sits through their tirades with equanimity because he sees it, properly under this hypothesis, as exactly that: meaningless ritual.

They maintained the insignia of youth initiation, the pelt of a bear that they had killed (*ibid.*: 62). Note in this regard the pelts of the *úlfheðnar* (plural; *úlfheðinn* singular), who wore wolf skins, and Herakles with his lion skin. Hitherto scholars considered such figures to have been a Norse phenomenon, because Norse lore offered the most detailed example of berserkers, with Herakles’s lion pelt being considered a mere coincidence of local significance only. Features in the lore of other Indo-European peoples imply, however, that berserker-like groups must have once existed in their histories. Therefore, the Indo-European community itself must have had berserker analogues, as I shall demonstrate (*contra* Kershaw: 61).

5. Lone Fighter by Choice

A canonical feature of the hero is the lone duel (Miller), wherein he may best demonstrate his prowess. In light of the above features such dueling might be interpreted rather as a relic feature of berserker battle mode. There are examples from Russian, Greek, Roman, Old English, and recent Caucasian, wherein the role of solitary fighter is depicted as a matter of choice, in fact as a hallmark of particular figures.

In Russian (Kievan Rus') there existed a title of esteem, based upon Byzantine Greek, *mono-machos* single-fight(er), lone-fight(er): Vladimir *Monomakh*, Igor *Monomakh*, of the *Monomakhovichi* branch of the Rurik dynasty of Kiev. An entire branch of a dynasty was known for its "lone fighters." This appellation has been borrowed from the Byzantine emperor, Konstantinos Th' Monomakhos (c. 1000 – 1011), who also fought as a solitary warrior¹. This Byzantine emperor had earlier models. In the Classical Greek corpus, one finds Herakles, and in the Iliad Aias (Ajax) the Greater, and Achilles. In Rome Publius Horatius Cocles alone fights off Lars Porsena of Clusium (Etruscans?) at the bridge over the Sublicius River (viewed skeptically by Livy, Dionysius, and Plutarch, probably because war was highly regimented in Roman times and the lone fighter had taken on an air of implausibility)².

In Old English one finds Beowulf. He must face the demonic Grendel to a combat consisting of a sort of arm wrestling, which of course entails doing so alone. He does so by his own choosing even though his warband has accompanied him.

If one turns to the contemporary ("recent" would be more accurate) Nart sagas one finds T'ot'arish, who must face the Great Serpent alone because the other Narts are "busy."³ The bard has gone to some length to explain why this hero has no assistance. The Nart heroes, Sosruquo and Pataraz, must also face their enemies alone. While the source languages are non-Indo-European, the theme is either borrowed through long contact with adjacent Indo-European peoples or is even more remotely a shared theme reflecting a remote common cultural zone with Proto-Indo-European. These last recent examples lack a dimension of overt choice, and therefore grade over into themes of abandonment, which is treated in the next section.

6. Abandoned by his "Comrades" (Alone Not by Choice)

In Anatolian (Hittite) Tarhunna, the storm god (Watkins; Güterbock; Hoffner) is abandoned by the other gods in his battle with the dragon Illuyanka. He is helped only by a maiden, I-na-ra (following the cuneiform ductus, which may represent 'Inara', 'Inra', or 'Inar'), by some accounts his daughter. From the neighboring and non-Indo-European Hurrian one finds the storm god Teshub, who is abandoned by the other gods in his fight with Kumarbi, a demonic figure.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilya_Muromets; accessed July 5, 2017.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horatius_Cocles, accessed 5 June 2017.

³ Circassian Minstrels: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eDmqM9dvJw>.

Both have parallels in Vedic where Indra, the storm god, is abandoned by his Maruts when he battles the dragon Vṛtra. He is helped only by the god Vishnu, who appears as a dwarf, but with three strides ironically creates all of space in which the adversaries may do battle.

Irish *Cú Chulainn* of Ulster is a lone combatant in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, holding off the entire massed armies led by Connachta (Kinsella). His state is attributed to the Ulstermen suffering from *couvade* and hence unable to help. A correlate of the small or youthful helper seen in the preceding traditions is the Boys Troop, which he once led. They, unfortunately, are massacred while he is in a trance-like three-day sleep. Their doom triggers a frenzied berserker-like wrath in *Cú Chulainn* when he awakens and discovers their fate. In fact in one account he is referred to as the “frenzied one of Ériu,” (Gantz: 170). We shall see again in Greek such a frenzied rejoining of the fray with Achilles.

In Russian *Ilya Muromets* performs his deeds alone when faced with the Tatar horde, being spurned by Samson Samoilovich and his bogatyrs (Bailey & Ivanova: 59-61). This group of twelve “holy” bogatyrs, aloof as possible, also suggests a berserker prototype. Here the rejection is explicit, however, and is based upon problems at court: the ruler, Prince Vladimir, treats his heroes with scorn. This is most likely a later rationalization for *Ilya*’s status as a solitary fighter. It might also be a shifting of the old berserker ritual animosity from the hero to the ruler, since the latter would be seen in subsequent eras as the individual whose conduct is beyond ordinary control.

7. Unmotivated Animosity

Turning now to the most peculiar feature of the berserker, ritual hostility, one finds inexplicable animosities, perhaps nowhere more pronounced than in the Caucasian Nart sagas (Colarusso 2016; 2002). The various heroes, (Warzameg, She Bartinuquo, Pataraz, Sosruquo) all stand in a relationship of hostility to the other Narts. Warzameg (Ossetian ‘*Urizmæg*’) is the eldest and the leader of the rest. His wife, Satanaya (Ossetian ‘*Satana*’) bears a mixed Iranian-Circassian name, /*sata-na-ya*/ hundred-mother-one.of, ‘Mother of a Hundred’, and seems to serve as a fictive mother to support the fictive brotherhood of the one hundred strong warband. The Nart sagas offer what is probably the most detailed portrayal we have of the Indo-European warband, even though it has leaked over into the non-Indo-European North West Caucasian peoples. Remarkably, the band stands in unremitting animosity not only toward its leader, but toward its heroes as well. Jealousy and rivalry are usually offered as motivations, but in fact this is likely to be a reworking of old berserker elite ritual hostility toward the rank and file of the warband.

A Germanic, specifically non-Norse parallel to this animosity, albeit on a smaller scale, can be found in Old English *Beowulf*. There one encounters Unferth, King Hrothgar’s bodyguard, who exhibits thinly motivated hostility toward *Beowulf*. He sits to the right at the king’s feet and is clearly apart from the rest of Hrothgar’s men, in diagnostic berserker fashion. Note also that Irish *Cú Chulainn* sits (as a boy) “ever after” on the knee of his king, Conchubur, once he has proven his warrior might (Gantz: 146). Later in the epic, after *Beowulf* has slain Grendel,

in a gesture of apparent camaraderie Unferth gives Beowulf a sword. One might construe this gesture as recognition on Unferth's part of the berserker status of Beowulf, but the giving of a weapon from an established figure to one of undetermined social role suggests that in the original "proto-tale" Unferth may have seen Beowulf as his squire or initiate. Kershaw (*op. cit.*: 57-58) argues that berserkers may have officiated at the initiation ceremony for youths who were to become warriors. Note that the name 'Beowulf' is unlikely to come from beo-wulf 'bee-wolf', "Bear," and therefore offers no onomastic link to 'berserker'. Rather it is from *beow-ulf* barley (grain)-wulf, (Markey, forthcoming, and references therein; Joseph Harris, personal communication), and may have obscure roots with an old grain god, *Bēow* 'barley' (← Proto-Germanic **bewwu-*).

8. Dramatic Withdrawal (a combination of Abandonment and Animosity)

In the figure of Achilles the Iliad presents a hero who withdraws to his camp, as mentioned above, ostensibly because of Agamemnon's insult to him (Book I). Agamemnon, the organizer of the war on Troy and seemingly overarching warlord, has taken away one of his war prizes, a maiden named Briseis. I have always felt that this action was a transparently inadequate pretext for Achilles's behavior. Achilles also exhibits hostility toward Agamemnon for this reason, even though this seems a bit audacious given Agamemnon's high standing. I think we can understand Achilles's behavior now as based on a berserker prototype. Homer and his predecessors were trying to make sense of berserker aloofness and ritual hostility.

This interpretation gains credibility when Achilles does emerge to fight, to avenge the death of his cousin Patroclus (Patroklos), perhaps originally his squire or initiate. He fights ferociously first with the men of Troy (Book XX), and then with a river, Xanthos (Book XXI), showing no mercy to other humans that he also encounters. His battle with the river would be an echo of an earlier berserker rage against inanimate objects, as seen in *Hervarar* saga (see §9). Finally he fights against Hector, abusing Hector's corpse in contravention of the accepted rules of combat (Books XXII). Homer depicts him as furious in his grief, but Achilles is a reworking of an earlier prototype who here in his fight with Hector and his defiling of Hector's corpse is exhibiting berserker frenzy (Gothic *wōþ*, German *Wut*).

A peculiar example of extreme aloofness is the Ossetian (Iranian) Nart Batradz, an unruly figure (Miller 2008), who dwells among the clouds and only descends to participate in the lives of the other Narts as a solitary warrior of indomitable power. One might see the cloud abode of Batradz as a literal and Christian influenced component of his status as an aloof and simultaneously consecrated warrior, Kershaw's *Weihekrieger* (p. 43).

9. Unmotivated Murderous Rage

Greek offers two other examples of murderous rage that can best be understood as reflexes of earlier berserker excess.

The hero Pelaeon kills his wife, Megara, and their three sons in a mindless rage. In a quest for expiation he visits the Delphic oracle. She tells him to change his name to Herakles and seek penance through labors to be stipulated by his cousin, Eurystheus. New name notwithstanding, Herakles kills again, mindlessly. This time the victim is Iphitus when the young man comes to offer his sister to Herakles. Both instances may be understood as reflexes of berserker rage and its unpredictability.

Norse berserkers were known to sink into dangerous moods, especially in the evenings. While I know of no instances of domestic violence in berserker homes their wives were advised to leave the home temporarily and to take their children with them if their husbands grew moody. This admonition is to be found in *Erbyggja saga*, [Joseph Harris, personal communication]. The berserker frenzy, Norse *berserksgangr*, seems to emerge of its own accord, beyond the volition or control of its bearers and on occasion to cause unwanted mayhem. Kershaw (pp. 43-4, n. 8) notes a group of twelve, Arngrim's sons in *Hervarar saga*, who disperse when they feel the madness welling up and fight with trees and stones until it has dissipated. I termed this psychotic behavior above, but it is unclear what sort of state this was in terms of modern psychiatry.⁴

10. Stigmatization of Berserker Excess

Berserker rage may have been originally viewed as holy, a god-given power (Kershaw: 71, n. 11), vital for the defense of his community, but it has undergone thorough stigmatization in the bulk of historical material. Greek offers two vivid examples.

In the Iliad the great warrior Tydeus in a frenzy gobbles the brains of his opponent, the slain Melanippus, thereby incurring the revulsion of the goddess Athena, who was about to bestow immortality upon Tydeus. This may be viewed as an explicit stigmatization of conduct that was seen as typifying the older, berserker style of combat with its grotesque (from a Modern and Classical perspective) savageries.

A similar stigmatization is depicted in the play by Sophocles, *Aias*. Aias (Ajax) slaughters a fold of sheep and sits in his tent, dazed, covered in their blood. He is seen as revolting and commits suicide in a state of despondency. Again, this can be understood as stigmatization of older berserker excess. Sophocles has rationalized his despondency by having it arise from a failure to be awarded the armor of the slain Achilles (West: 120-121; Hard: 155).

In sum if we follow Puhvel's (Puhvel 1987: 94-116) concept of moral inversion, we can see many features of the heroic heritage as morally inverted berserker virtues and not merely as an incomprehensible, archaic residue imposed upon the bard by his or her predecessors.

⁴ See the last discussion on <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berserker>; accessed July 22, 2017.

11. Sacred Heat, Proto-Indo-European *tepos (and Its Quenching)

Absent from the Norse account is any link between the berserker and heat, though it is stated that they were indifferent to fire, that flames could not harm them. Nevertheless, figures who are likely berserker reflexes (Puhvel's *comparands*) are often said to be hot and in some instances undergo a quenching to restore them to normal or to provide them with a steely skin. In the latter case the quenching may be late and reflect the metallurgical technology of the advent of the Iron Age (see Colarusso & Linn). The warrior's heat, however, seems to be older and to be a manifestation of the sacred Indo-European heat or *tepos (Old Irish *te* 'hot', Umbrian *tefru* 'burnt sacrifice', Latin *tepidus* 'lukewarm', Greek *téphrā* 'ashes', Old English *þefian* 'gasp, pant', Sanskrit *tāpas* 'sacred heat', *tāpati* 'warms, burns', Avestan *tāpaiti* 'be warm', Old Church Slavonic *toplъ* 'warm', Russian *tēplyj id.*, Hittite *tapissa* 'fever, heat')⁵.

In Irish *Cú Chulainn* upon returning from his first quest is in a frenzy, dangerous alike to friend or foe. He must be dunked in three vats of water (Gantz: 146) to restore him to normal. Somewhat less dramatic but still of interest is Lug, who turns red with the heat of rage when he accuses the sons of Turann of the murder of his father, Cian.

In Armenian Vahagn (a comparand or perhaps a borrowing of Vṛtrahan of the *Ṛg Veda*) emerges afire from a reed (Dumézil: 128).

In Ossetian (Iranian) the Nart Batradz is born aflame and must be dunked in seven vats (*ibid.*: 137-138). At the end of his life he turns red hot as he dances on his funeral pyre, whence, of course, comes his heat (May, Salbiev, and Colarusso 2016: 309; 418-421). From the adjacent North West traditions comes Nart Sosruquo, who is born aflame and must be quenched at birth by the god of the forge (Colarusso 2002: 52-54 (Circassian); 185-187 (Abaza); 329-335 (Abkhaz); 387-399 (Ubykh)). He then becomes invulnerable except where the smith's tong have held him, in his knees or thighs (Colarusso 2002; Colarusso & Linn).

In Greek the Nereid, Thetis, tries to roast the mortality out of her baby, Achilles and is interrupted by her husband, Peleus (Hard, *op.cit.*: 129). Enraged she abandons both. In another account, however, she dunks him in the river Styx, holding him by his heel, which remains his sole vulnerable spot.⁶ A heating and quenching episode seems here to have been split in two.

A similar roasting episode is found in accounts of the goddess Demeter when she is wandering in search of her daughter, Persephone. She tries the same with the infant Demoph(o)ōn, only to be stopped by the infant's mother (Nagy: lines 233-262).

In Slavic one may note that the Russian hero, Ilja Muromets, sits upon a stove for 33 years. He is said to have done so as the result of a childhood illness that left him incapable of anything else and to have been cured by two pilgrims, but this is a Christianized and moral inversion of an earlier tale wherein he makes an effort to absorb enough heat to perform heroic deeds⁷.

⁵ Mallory & Adams: 344-345; Derksen: 490.

⁶ Statius, Hyginus: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Achilles>; retrieved July 5, 2017.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilya_Muromets; accessed July 5, 2017.

12. One Eye or “Wheel” Eye

A feature restricted in Norse but found widely among berserker comparands is that of the one-eyed or round-eyed hero, and also villain. Only Odin is one-eyed and the significance of his condition stands apart from that of being a one-eyed or wheel-eyed warrior.

In Rome one finds Publius Horatius Cocles, whose agnomen means ‘wheel (eye)’, but who is depicted as one-eyed, having lost an eye in combat. His status as a lone fighter has already been noted in §5 above. The use of the term ‘wheel eye’ to denote being one-eyed is odd, but is found also in Greek (see below).

In Celtic Irish Cú Chulainn has battle tremors, Irish *riastartha* (Gantz: 136), in which one eye bulges out and the other sinks into his face. In addition, Balor of the demonic Fomoiré had a giant eyeball weapon that cast a lethal gaze.

Perhaps the best known example is from Greek with the *Cyclopes* (“Wheel Eyes,” singular *Cyclops*), again using this odd appellation to denote a one-eyed condition. These were three savage, primordial smiths who assisted Zeus by forging his thunderbolts for his battle against the Titan, Kronos.

In the Nart corpus of the North West Caucasians (Circassians, Ubykhs, Abkhazians) one finds one-eyed giants: Circassian *yinizh-es*, /yənə-ž/ giant, big-evil. The root occurs also in the name of the Abkhazian god of the forge, /a-yna-r/ the-giant-participle, “the Giant One.” This root may have been borrowed into Proto-Indo-European lore at an early time to give us Indo-Iranian **Indra*, and Hittite *i-na-ra*. Recall that the Greek Cyclopes were smiths and so too there is a link between the root used for one-eyed giants in Circassian and the god of the forge in Abkhazian.

Appropriation of the term ‘wheel eye’ for the one-eyed condition may be explained if we assume an ancient appropriation of the “wheel” eye from the evil eye motif. Normally when casting the evil eye, one is to close one eye and widen the other at the object of one’s malevolent intentions, resulting in a staring rounded eye in a one-eyed visage. Balor is a surviving manifestation of the old belief that one could cast death with the (enlarged and rounded) evil eye.

13. Onomastics

Germanic offers a transparent name for such wild fighters, Old Norse *berserkr*, whence into English and German, *der Berserker*, but also *der Wüterich* from *die Wut* ‘frenzy, rage, madness’, Old English *wōdlic*, ‘foolish, mad, furious’ (Hall: 417). The meaning is ‘bear-tunic, shirt’ or possibly ‘bare-tunic, shirt’, that is, “without armor,” but evidence from Indo-Aryan seems to rule out the naked interpretation. The source would be Proto-Germanic **bera-serk-er*. I have presented evidence for similar weaponized psychotics in Greek, Celtic (“the frenzies”), Slavic, Italic, Armenian, Iranian (Narts), to which we may now add Indo-Aryan, with Sanskrit *ṛkṣas* ‘bears’, the berserkers of Hanuman’s theriomorphic army in the Ramayana. Since there are no bears in India south of the Himalayas, one cannot explain the occurrence of this word in this epic as denoting actual bears. Such an allusion would have had little narrative effect and might even have bordered on the incomprehensible to both bard and audience.

Professor Yaroslav Vassilkov has informed me [personal communication] that references to *rkṣa* fighters are mentioned in the *Rg Veda* as well, so the reference to “bear” fighters must be old within Indo-Aryan. It might prove fruitful to search for an Iranian reference to “bears” where the actual ursid is an unlikely referent.

14. Proto-Indo-European Cult of “Professional” Warriors

We are now in a position to summarize the features of the original Proto-Indo-European (PIE) weaponized psychotic fighter.

While there is evidence for wolf-fighters and perhaps whitened ghost-fighters, the case I have made here is for those who took the bear as their emblem. The PIE form was **h₂ǵtḱos-* ‘bear’, Hittite *ḫartak(k)aš* (/Hrtka-s/), Greek *árktos*, Latin *ursus*, Old Irish *art*, (perhaps Welsh *Arth(ur)*), Germanic *Urho* (a personal name now largely confined to Finnish), Sanskrit *rkṣa*, Avestan *arəša* (whence PIE palatal **k̑*), Albanian *ari*, Armenian *arj* (Mallory & Adams: 138; Kloekhorst: 316). Based upon the preceding comparative work we can offer a list now of their features. First, they were lone fighters, and formed a distinct component within the second function, Dumézil’s kingly and warrior function, consisting usually of twelve. Second, they encoded their aloof status through ritual hostility, a hostility that was directed even at their liege, at whose right hand they would otherwise sit. Third, they wore totemistic animal hides from their earlier rites of passage, perhaps an ideological notion of being “forever young.” Fourth, they may have, in a practical gesture despite their pretense of remaining young, insured their perpetuation by having squires or initiates. Fifth, they were weaponized psychotics, and hence considered sacred, consecrated to the god of war. Mentally ill individuals in many cultures were often considered touched by the gods. Therefore, sixth, they could harbor sacred heat. Seventh, they exhibited battle tremors, including the evil eye, including, if Cú Chulainn is any evidence, frenzied fitful motions to mimic wild rage. They may even have entered into trance-like sacred states.

Surely if Indo-European expansion relied even to a minor extent or in particular regions on warfare for its success (Colarusso 2008), the “bears” would have been a particularly intimidating component.

This Indo-European figure that lies behind so many odd features found in the literature of the heirs to Indo-European culture is one of a barbaric holy warrior. Today we are beset by religiously enrobed terrorism. Tom Markey (personal communication) has suggested to me that this is not new. The world has seen this before, long ago, in the Norse berserker, consecrated to Odin, and before that in the Indo-European ‘bear’ warrior, consecrated to an as yet unnamed god.

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