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Berserkers In Medieval Literature

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Berserkers In Medieval Literature

By Kris Seely

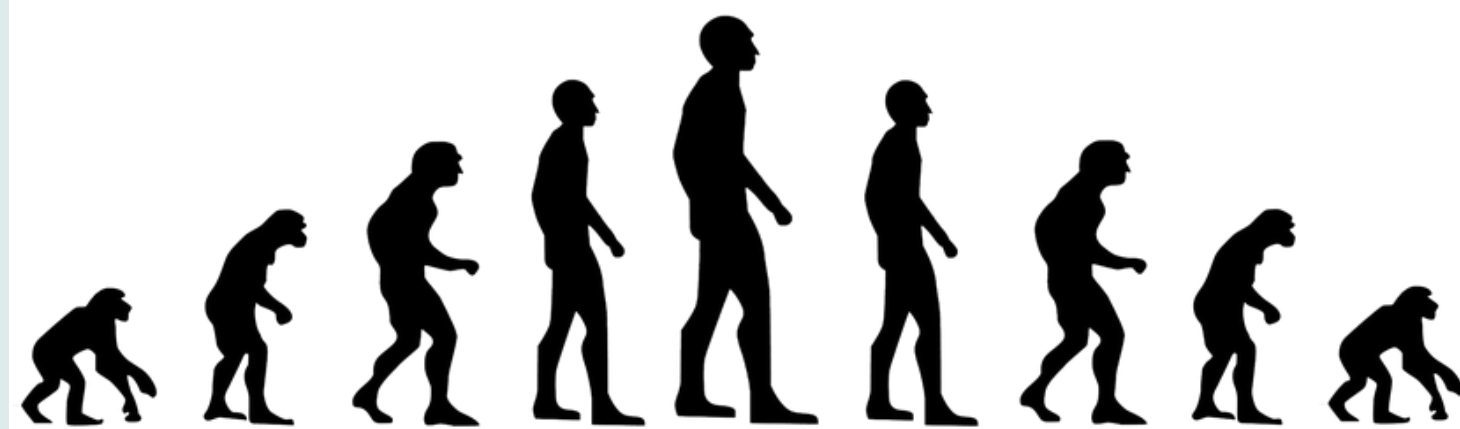


Abstract

The Berserkers in Norse mythology were said to turn into bears, wolves, or in a broader sense predators, and Berserkers were said to have superior physical abilities in sports and combat. Whether or not the Berserkers were supposed to be able to shift into an animal form or if they simply drew power from said predator is unclear but the connotations connected to the Berserkers is as if they were shapeshifters. Shapeshifters have a forbidden connotation to them which makes readers both terrified and curious about them. Kind of like when someone sees something gross or unnatural and has to show their friends. That being said, the idea of a human possessing attributes such as the skin, the strength, and/or the speed of an animal is common in works of mythology, religion, and fiction and is important because of how people perceive it. In some ways the idea of changing shape is evolutionary because it implies that mankind is still able to circulate back to nature but it also implies that there is something feral, ferocious, and rebellious against common norms that makes people stop to question how important what they are doing now is. The possibility of an animal shape implies a more global viewpoint that said shapeshifter is closer to nature and in today's world that is considered very important but also threatening to progress. An example of this is The Hobbit by Tolkien which embodies the evolutionary aspect and contrasts with the negative connotations of the shapeshifter that is prominent in medieval Icelandic literature.

What is a Bear In Mythology?

- Considered sacred and powerful spirits.
 - Not animals but spirits.
- Odin the Norse Deity was said to turn into a bear.
 - Odin stood for wisdom and magic which transferred to the symbolism of the bear.
- So by being connected to bears the symbol of Odin, the Norse peoples were connected to the magic and wisdom of the Gods.
- The typical bear weighs 130-660 lbs
 - A young but fully grown bear weighs about as much as a fully grown human



Evolution

What about Shapeshifters is so appealing? A shapeshifter is someone with a predators instincts, and the fact that a shapeshifter has an animals instincts makes it primal or closer to nature. Based on the popularity of shapeshifters in modern literature and television such as Teen Wolf, the idea of being closer to nature can put someone on a pedestal that makes them physically better and resistant to the continued weakness of humankind, such as the strength or speed that helps in battle or in most cases shapeshifters have a resistance sickness and disease which romanticizes the idea of combining mankind with that of an animal.

The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki.

In this story there are two competing views of Shapeshifting. In the introduction there was a section on Berserkers which said, "The word, however, may also mean 'bear-shirt', reflective of the shape and nature of the bear assumed by these warriors." (Byock) The Berserkers wore protective bear skins and were said to go into a complete rage during battle which gave them the perception that they were superhuman. But there are two main reactions to this, fear and loathing where they are perceived as killing machines and prizes when killed. The second is that they are kind of sexy, such as Bjorn. But in the saga there was a character named Svipdag who kind of made the berserkers look like crazy and kind of stupid. As if they were apathetic about their position, but defeating the berserkers is still an accomplishment of worth.

The question.

Researching shapeshifters begs one question: Does having animal instincts change the morality of the shapeshifter as a human, and is the perception of shapeshifters based on person? In the Saga of King Hrolf Kraki a character named Bodvar is considered a hero and seems to have dominion over the bear that he sent into battle at the end of the saga. Bodvar's father Bjorn was cursed to turn into a bear and was slaughtered by his own people, but Bodvar and his brothers were conceived while Bjorn was cursed so Bodvar was not just human. And while Bjorn was turned into a martyr and Bodvar a noble hero. Shapeshifters were judged by their actions, and it's very human .

