

Barbarian Personae

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It is probably trite to say that there are two ways of playing a barbarian in the SCA. The right way and the wrong way. The wrong way conjures up visions of bunny fur bikinis and Conan-esque swords and garb. These visions are based on fantasy literature and films which have no part in an SCA event. The right way to be a barbarian opens up a rich world of possibilities allowing access to varied and colourful cultures. It gives you a full chance to express your desire to be different and to shock the Tudor types and yet still allows you to be totally period.

To be a barbarian does not necessarily mean being plain and dull in appearance. Particularly when coming from a nomad culture, barbarians tended to wear their wealth. This means that clothing, weapons and jewellery are as rich and extravagant as they can afford. Tartans came into being as an attempt to use the maximum amount of bright and expensive dyes among the more affordable colours (note that there is no such thing as a 'Clan Tartan' in period). Magyar and Skythians loved to wear garnitures - a carved solid gold plate worn on the chest and studded with as many garnets as would fit on.

It should always be remembered that a barbarian is only a barbarian when looked at from another culture. Amongst themselves they regard each other as being cultured and respecting traditions while the city dwellers are decadent, treacherous and suitable only as prey. From a Byzantine perspective (with quite some justification) Skythian nomads, Bulgar tribesman and Norman Crusaders are all equally Varangs (or foreigners) and thus all equally barbarian.

Perhaps the best way to define a barbarian culture for our purposes is that it is a culture where allegiance is owed more to a family, tribe or *volk* (or people) than to a city, a nation, a religion or a feudal overlord. Barbarians will be commonly found working for the more effete civilised cultures who hire them for their skill at fighting. Thus the Byzantines had the Varangian Guard, the Skythicon, the Laticon and many other foreign troops. This gives a barbarian access to good weapons, clothing and armour as well as cultured tastes in food and wine (should they wish it). These barbarian troops owed allegiance either to their tribe (when, like Pechenegs, the whole tribe hired on at once) or to their unit (like the Varangians) or general more than to their employer. Barbarians typically had a very high (if idiosyncratic) concept of honour which they insisted on expecting all people they met to follow.

The first part of being a barbarian is to work out what sort you want to be. Very loosely they divide into late period and early period types. The late period barbarians are exemplified by the Vikings and the Mongols. Each of these cultures was viewed by the recipients of their attention as an unlettered scourge of God, but in reality they represented wide-ranging and complex societies.

Mongol customs and behaviour are very well documented and are bizarre enough to satisfy the 'desire to shock' in any individual. At the same time their clothing is hard to find and their customs are so rigid that, to play one seriously requires a great deal of dedication and could readily lead to ending up as a Laurel. In another vein, the desire to fight hard and party hard is well capable of being expressed as a Viking. This does not necessarily mean bulk drinking until you fall over (this is more characteristic of some of the 'civilised' cultures such as Normans and French). While drunkenness was common, so was the ability to play the 'harp' and make up long and complex stories on the spot. The mighty warrior who could entertain was courted by Princes. At the same time traders were held in high esteem and journeyed from Vinland to Cathay, spreading wealth and different tastes throughout their society.

The early period barbarians usually came from comparatively simple and direct cultures. Typical early period barbarians include Picts, Scotti, Franks, Magyar, Burgunds, Vandals, Goths (of various flavours), Huns, Alans, Sarmatians, pre-Muslim Arabs and Vendels. Each of these has their virtues and their drawbacks. Some are easier to play than others. It is hard to be a proper Pict in a modern culture with decency laws. Clothing was fairly minimal and would often consist solely of woad and ritual tattoos. Females would normally be bare chested. The practice of ritually taking the

heads of enemies slain in battle (and keeping them hanging from your chariot) is hard to translate into an SCA context. Food was simple and not very nutritious (which led to their stunted size) and some groups practiced cannibalism.

The Goths and Vandals became corrupted by their contact with Rome and adopted many civilised customs and practices. Some Ostrogoths made themselves the Emperors of Rome and Visigoths and Vandals established city-based Kingdoms in Spain and North Africa and the Franks produced Charlemagne (whose Empire was only just above the level of the barbarian).

Magyar, Huns, Alans and Sarmatians were mounted and generally nomad cultures who have similarities to Mongols, without being as complex and without the resources of a culture that ran from China to Poland. Burgunds are as close as you can come in an SCA context to a prototypical fur clad, axe wielding mob without many redeeming virtues. In battle they waited in forests and, when their enemies were far enough into the woods the Burgunds all charged at once. When they were a short distance from the enemy they threw their axes - the 'typical' Hollywood barbarian two headed axe - and then closed on their opponents. They won many of their battles with these subtle tactics, but were so poorly organised that they could not carry on a long campaign.

As can be seen from this brief look there is a wide variety available in the choice of Barbarian cultures. The advantages of being a barbarian include the ability to be a continual surprise to the people around you and the enjoyment of being completely different. Barbarians can have a lot of fun at camping events, after all, they did invent both whisky and vodka as well as more exotic drinks such as kumis. They know how to party, to tell stories and to entertain. They can be the ones who are wearing the best jewellery around (both males and females) and with the most comfortable clothes. Depending on where you come from, linen, fine wool, silk, leather and furs are all fairly typical as clothing materials. If you wish, you can wear the clothes and put on the manners of the city culture whom you may chose to work for (Byzantium is highly recommended - they pay well and have good clothes).