



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

ANGLO SAXON & VIKING

WARFARE IN THE 10TH CENTURY

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Anglo Saxon and Viking warfare, 10th Century

Introduction

Despite popular myth, the Vikings were not invincible. From the time of Alfred the Great's victory at Ashdown in 871 the Anglo-Saxons had realised that unity and the implementation of the 'Burgh' or Burghal Hidage system would enable them to counter and usually defeat Viking armies.

The Viking Wars

The Viking wars had started in 796 and in England, effectively came to an end in 1066. There would be isolated raids under Norman rule but the threats of invasion had diminished.

The first Viking raids, were relatively small scale and the Anglo-Saxons viewed them as pirates, however as they became increasingly regular and the size of the hostile forces increased, it was realised that the threat posed the possibility of conquest and dynastic change.

There was no united England at this time and part of the problem with dealing with the Vikings was the fact that the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms were involved in incessant warfare amongst themselves.

The failure to have a national strategic plan to deal with the invaders saw all the kingdoms, other than Wessex, succumb to the Vikings and Wessex itself, only just survived.

It was Alfred the Great's victory at Ashdown that proved to be the catalyst for Anglo-Saxon recovery, though the process would take over a century.

The battle of Largs, fought in 1263, in Scotland, is considered to be the end of the Viking Age.

Burhs of Wessex

The total manpower designated to guard the Burghs of Wessex at the end of Alfred the Great's reign was in excess of 32,000 men, which was in addition to the men required to serve in the Fyrd. What this demonstrates is that Wessex was able to raise a large fighting force for defence of the homeland though there are no records pertaining to their logistical capabilities or their ability to deploy and maintain large expeditionary forces outside of their own Realm.

By the early 10th Century the Burghal Hidage system in Wessex went into decline as the Viking threat had receded. However, Alfred's daughter, Aethelflaed implemented the system in Mercia and the future King, Athelstan, would utilise it.

Organisation and Recruitment.

The Anglo-Saxon armies were made up of two distinct types of troops, the county Fyrds, a type of militia of part time warriors who would be deployed in times of crisis and who were often reluctant to do so and the professional 'Heathweru' or household troops. These warriors made up the official bodyguards of Kings and other high ranking Anglo-Saxon nobles. When summonsed by the King, these warriors became the select Fyrd, a dedicated and fierce professional army who were every way the equal of their Viking counterparts, the Hersir's.

The Heathweru were selected from the general population which enabled low-born individuals to rise to a position of high status as professional warriors in the service of a particular Lord or a King.

The most important element of Anglo-Saxon armies were the Thegns, a class of warrior noblemen who ranked between an ordinary freeman and hereditary nobles of what can be described as the ruling class of the time.

By the end of the 8th Century, many Thegns were appointed directly by the Kings and were granted lands, these were called Royal Thegns whilst lower ranking or provincial Thegns would be responsible for the raising and the deployment of the local Fyrd. The Royal Thegns would serve as the 'Officer class' in the select Fyrd.

The famed 'Huscarls' of Anglo-Saxon lore, did not materialise until the early 11th Century and were a conception of the Anglo- Danish dynasties.

Each Thegn was required to supply a fighting man from every five hides, a hide being a unit of land which would support a family, though hide's were never a standard size because of factors such as soil quality. Initially each hide had to provide the sum of 4 shillings to support the chosen warrior for a period of two months.

25 hides made up a Hundred, an administrative sub-unit of a Shire and this seems to have developed into a military sub-unit of 20 local men who served together.

By the 10th century, following the successful rise of Wessex and Mercia, many new landholders of Danish and Norse decent served in the Fyrds and supplied men accordingly.

The Anglo-Saxon armies

The Anglo-Saxon armies were similar to those of the Vikings with the elite warriors being similarly attired. The Anglo-Saxons never developed efficient cavalry, though Athelstan used some units at Brunanburh, it was probably to pursue the Norse and allied army once it broke and fled.

A elite warrior's battle gear would have weighed between 30 -35 Kg, which is lighter than a modern infantry man's equipment, but prolonged face to face fighting was exhausting even for such physically fit men and the combination of mail and under armour padding would have caused overheating and severe fatigue. Fighting in this period was horrifically brutal and medical treatment was rudimentary, a combination of herbal remedies and rhymes.

Cavalry and archers were never used in great numbers by Anglo-Saxon armies and this may have been because in a 'heroic Age' their mindset was entrenched in a tradition of warriors meeting face to face. In short both cavalry and archers were deemed to be beneath the shield baring warriors. Anglo-Saxon cavalry were likely more akin to mounted infantry.

Battle of Hereford

At the battle of Hereford in 1050, an Anglo-Saxon army, commanded by a Norman, had been trained as cavalry. When the enemy, a combined force of Welsh and Anglo-Saxon rebels attacked, the Royal army dismounted and suffered a catastrophic defeat. The Norman commander and his retinue fled, leaving their reluctant cavalymen to be slaughtered.

Little is known of the tactics used at the time other than that shield walls were the usual formation, though the Viking forces initiated the wedge or 'boar's snout' formation in order to break a shield wall.

By the time of Brunanburh, many of the Vikings were Christian or professed to be, but their previous pagan religion glorified war and this was a contributing factor in the savagery of the early Viking armies.

The Vikings, however, did not have any inhibitions with regards to using archers en-mass. Also, though likely out numbered at Brunanburh, they would have had much more experience of warfare than most of the local Fyrd men that they faced.

The Local Fyrds

The local Fyrds would not have been as well equipped or motivated as the select fyrd and would usually be utilised as a holding force with orders not to engage until the select Fyrd arrived in the field and they would likely have been used as a reserve division when battle was initiated. The local Fyrd was initially designed to combat raiding parties but would evolve to support the select professional Fyrd in times of crisis.

This may have occurred at Brunanburh, as the Fyrds of Cheshire, Shropshire and such would have reached the proposed battlefield before the select Fyrd and Athelstan had mobilised and deployed. I would imagine that they had been told to avoid battle and their role was to observe and report back on the Norse activities whilst awaiting the arrival of Athelstan.

Athelstan's delay in deploying is well documented and it is known that he was heavily criticised at the time, but it is likely that he wanted to ensure that he had sufficient troops to overwhelm his enemy, as a defeat, even at a regional level, could have had serious consequences.

The scope of this presentation does not allow me time to be specific about possible tactics used in other known battles and to discuss the number of scenarios that could have played out, but what is known for certain, is that Athelstan's delay and Anlaf's seeming inertia, by not either attacking Chester or breaking out of the Wirral, allowed the Anglo-Saxons to raise an army that was likely defeat the Norse and allied army and even if a tactical defeat was suffered, then the cost to the Norse allied force would have been so costly, that it would likely have neutralised them. This happened at the battle of the Holme in 902AD when the Vikings won a tactical battle but the Anglo Saxons claimed the strategic victory. The loss of life on the Viking side was so serious that they had to abandon their campaign.

Brunanburh

At Brunanburh, if Anlaf was prepared to fight a defensive battle, then he ought to have occupied and built defensive formations on Storeton ridge, which would have been a formidable obstacle to overcome.

The Chronicles state that the battlefield was agreed upon and that when Athelstan arrived, that he initiated negotiations for a number of days. It eventually dawned on the Norse alliance that they had been duped and that battle was imminent and weighted in the favour of Athelstan.

The withdrawal of the Norse was likely not an option, as to lose face would have likely fractured the alliance, which was tentative in the least. All these early medieval leaders were opportunists and likely to turn on each other if a clear advantage for them manifested itself. King Constantine had been an enemy of the Vikings and had fought a major battle against them at Corbridge in 918 AD.

Athelstan's aunt, Aethelflaed had made a treaty with Constantine and the Britons of Strathclyde which was relevant at the time that the battle of Corbridge was fought and some ancient sources, namely the annals of Ireland suggest that she may have been present at the battle with an Anglo-Saxon force.

Why is it believed that the battle was fought in the Wirral?

A number of academics believe that the battle took place here based on documentary evidence sources, topography and entomology. The battle of Brunanburh a casebook also concludes that the battle was fought on the Wirral.

There is also a folklore tradition that a great battle was fought in the vicinity of Bromborough.

Michael Livingston edited the book and credence should be given to him as he recently discovered the important battlefield of Cynoscephalae, a pivotal battle between Republican Rome and the Antigonid Macedonian forces of Philip the V.

This led to the destruction of Macedonia as a major Mediterranean power and the conquest of Greece.

What is significant, is that Livingston applied a technique which he calls 'All source Analysis'. He used this methodology to conclude that Brunanburh was fought on the Wirral.

Aftermath of the battle.

Documentary sources state that Anlaf and some of his army escaped across the Dingesmere. There is no mention of the Anglo-Saxons having been able to access the Norse fleet and burn it as was customary.

After the battles of Stamford Bridge, Benfleet, Buttington, Cynwit, and others, the Anglo-Saxons successfully burnt the Viking fleets, which sealed a complete and memorable victory and which had a psychological effect upon the Norse both within the Danelaw and within the Scandinavian homelands. Defeat meant death or enslavement, the risk and the fear factor must have been pondered on greatly.

The Dingesmere may well have stretched from the North Wirral coast to the Noctorum and Ford valley. Noctorum is old Irish for 'The dry hill' and it is likely that firm ground suitable for the deployments of armies was only available south of this area.

Were the Anglo-Saxons too exhausted to pursue their enemies across the marsh or did they not know how to cross it safely?

This was a comprehensive Anglo - Saxon victory of considerable magnitude. It fostered the idea of a National identity and set the physical boundaries of England more or less as we know it today.

With regards to the shield wall, each man needed a metre to stand in, therefore 500 men stretched for half a kilometre and if they were six deep, then this equated to 3000 men.

The armies at Brunanburh were said to be exceptionally large and whilst some estimates are clearly over exaggerated, 8 to 10,000 may have been feasible, which draw comparisons with the size of the armies at Hastings, and if this were to be the case, the shield wall could have spread over a kilometre in length with reserve divisions behind it.

It's all guess work, and it is unlikely that we will ever identify as to how many people fought and died on that day. As was usual for the times, propaganda would always glorify and enhance a significant event and in a predominately illiterate society, this would have been believed.

The Viking age was not yet finished and Anlaf emerged again to become a threat and Anglo - Saxon England would have a number of Danish Monarchs from 1013 through to 1042. Anglo- Saxon England was a short lived entity, born out of incessant warfare and when the country was subjugated by the Normans the Anglo-Saxons would endure hardship, but in the end it was the Normans who were absorbed and the unified nation of England would arise.