



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

ANGLO SAXON CAVALRY

THE EVIDENCE FOR CAVALRY

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Anglo Saxon Cavalry

Introduction

Despite assumptions made by many historians that the Anglo Saxons did not use cavalry the evidence suggests that they did.

Compared to the studies of the militaries of the ancient world, where cavalry were used by the Greeks, Persians, Romans and the steppe peoples, like the Sarmatians, little is known about Anglo Saxon battle tactics, let alone, about their use of cavalry.

The Anglo Saxons

The Anglo Saxons had been recruited as mercenaries by the late Roman Empire, so they would have been familiar with Roman cavalry and once the Romans had departed Britain and the Saxon invasions had commenced, they came up against the Romano British armies, who did use cavalry in the late Roman fashion.

During the course of the so called Arthurian wars of the late 5th or early 6th centuries the Romano British victory over the Anglo Saxons at the battle of Badon Hill (Mons Badonicus) was effectively a victory for the cavalry over an infantry army. Romano British commanders such as Ambrosius Aurelianus, who was likely of noble Roman stock, would have been well aware of the importance of cavalry in the late Roman army and of the role played by cavalry at the battle of the Catalaunian Fields, when Rome and her allies, namely the Visigoths, Salian Franks, Burgundians, Saxons, Armoricans and Alans defeated Attila the Hun.

The question that should be asked is why would the Anglo Saxons not adapt to having some trained cavalry? The Franks and other Germanic peoples adopted the use of cavalry and the Goths, who were the ancestors of the Vikings used heavy cavalry against the Romans.

The Franks

The Franks, who suffered greatly from Viking raids and attacks eventually got the upper hand against the Vikings by utilising cavalry. It was they who had built the first 'Burh' defensive system as they were the only Western civilisation who had a border with a Viking homeland, namely Denmark. The Franks dispensed with infantry manning the Burhs and replaced them with highly mobile cavalry troops who were able to harass and disrupt raiding armies and bring other supporting cavalry units into the field quickly.

We know that Athelstan was given a gift of horses by a Frankish noble called Hugh, some 10 years before Brunanburh.

We know that the Anglo Saxon army that destroyed the Vikings at the battle of Farnham in 893 AD was fully mounted even though we do not have any further details of the battle, other than it was a significant Anglo Saxon victory.

The Brunanburh poem states that Athelstan had cavalry at that battle too, in 937 AD.

Angles of Northumberland and the Britons of Strathclyde

We also know that the Angles of Northumberland and the Britons of Strathclyde were using Roman style cavalry during the Pictish wars of the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries and there is clear evidence that the Picts too, used cavalry. The evidence clearly points a widespread use of cavalry amongst the peoples of Britain.

Aberlemno Stone

The Aberlemno Stone clearly shows helmeted mounted warriors attacking each other with lances. The helmets mirror those of the Anglo Saxon coppergate helmet from York.

The stones are only some three miles from the site of the battle of Nectansmere or Dunnichen moss, where a Pictish army, under their King, Bridei Mac Bill defeated a Northumbrian army, led by King Ecgfrith in 685 AD.

Northumbrians (Angles)

The Northumbrians (Angles) had previously inflicted major defeats on the Picts at the battles of Raith in 596 AD and at the battle between the two rivers in 671 AD.

The Vita Sancti Wilfrithi written by Stephen of Ripon clearly records the fact that the fleeing Picts were pursued by Northumbrian cavalry and cut down.

Another thing to consider as well, is that Roman cavalry had a specialised sword for cavalry use, namely the 'spatha' which had an average blade length of 39.4 inches as opposed to the length of the gladius infantry sword blade which averaged about 22 inches in length.

Anglo Saxon sword blades range between 34 to 40 inches in length, so clearly they would have been capable slashing weapons for a mounted warrior.

Whilst Anglo Saxon armies were predominately composed of infantry there is little doubt that cavalry units of well equipped high status warriors did exist. They were likely relatively small in number but they would have been highly effective for pursuing fleeing foes and for harassing and raiding enemy forces.

The myth

The myth that the Anglo Saxon's did not have cavalry has probably been based on an event that took place at the battle of Hereford in 1055.

A Royal Saxon army led by a Norman nephew of Edward the confessor, namely one Ralph de Mantes had trained an Anglo Saxon army to fight as cavalry in the Norman manner. The enemy were the Welsh under Gruffudd ap Llywelyn and a rebel Saxon force led by Alfgar, the son of Lady Godiva and Leofric, earl of Mercia.

When the rebel force approached the Royal army, to the horror of Ralph de Mantes, the whole army dismounted and formed a shield wall. The rebels Subsequently won the ensuing battle and Ralph and his Norman entourage fled back to London.

I think this episode may be the basis of thought as to why there is a general belief that the Anglo Saxons did not use cavalry.

If you've ever visited the Saxon cross at Neston, there are two mounted warriors on it, clearly armed with spears or lances.

We believe that the Anglo Saxons did utilise cavalry and whilst it may not have been as refined as the mounted units of the Franks and later Normans, they were effective enough to change the course of a battle and critical for pursuit of a retreating enemy.