



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

ANGLO SAXON

MILITARY ORGANISATION AND FIGHTING TACTICS

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Anglo Saxon – Military Tactics

Introduction

Like all armies, the fighting technics and military organisation evolve and adapt over time and through lessons learnt. The Roman army of Julius Caesar would not have been recognisable to Roman armies of the 2nd or 5th centuries. Nothing with regards to the military is constant and they constantly develop and adapt to whatever the current or likely threats may be.

Anglo Saxon armies

The Anglo Saxon armies of the late ninth and 10th centuries were rapidly becoming a national force that presented their enemies with a formidable foe. The catalyst for this transformation were the Vikings and the centuries of warfare that ensued which can be termed 'The Viking Wars'

Contrary to popular belief, the Vikings were no fiercer or more formidable than many of their opponents. Where they did excel was in raiding and their ability to spread fear amongst their victims. Their ships had shallow drafts so they could strike deep into territories by utilising rivers and then procuring horses and conducting 'Blitzkrieg' raids on ecclesiastical centres and unsuspecting villages. They were mobile and conducted fast moving raids.

Loot and slaves were a profitable economic source of easy wealth, tradable to an inexhaustible market.

These defenceless targets afforded the Vikings easy targets with little personal risk. Once the local militias received word that a raid had been carried out had and deployed to the scene, the Vikings were long gone.

The raids went on for decades and there seems to have been a lack of strategy to deal with them effectively. The people's of Western Europe and the Mediterranean, or at least their rulers did, just seemed to view them as pirates.

In England, in the mid ninth century) the Vikings (predominately Danes) began to deploy armies which overwintered in the country. The Anglo Saxons called these armies the Mycel Haepen here (Great heathen army) and these armies destabilised all of the Anglo Saxon Kingdoms with the exception of Wessex. Wessex itself was invaded and nearly succumbed but Alfred the Great managed to fight back and eventually forced the Vikings to sign a treaty in 866, which resulted in the establishment of the Danelaw.

Alfred then concentrated in reforming his army and fortifying Wessex by creating defensible towns called burhs. These reforms would nullify the Vikings and would be the future blueprint for the unification of England and the eventual defeat of the Vikings.

Thegns

The most important element with regards to Anglo Saxon armies were the Thegns. These were landowners who held land for the King or who possessed hereditary lands and who were obliged to provide military service as a condition of service to the King.

There was a hierarchy amongst Thegns with those who were noblemen being of higher status than a provincial landowner.

There were also hereditary Thegns who were deemed to be noblemen, but their lands did not automatically pass down to his family or descendants unless the King decreed it.

Royal Thegns, were those who served the King both as statesmen and military commanders. They attended the Royal Court and were members of the Witan.

By AD 850, Anglo Saxon society consisted of 'Thralls' (slaves), Ceorls (commoners) Thegns (noblemen) and Ealdormen or Earls (Governors).

Fyrd

The Fyrd (pronounced feared) was the Anglo Saxon levy summoned to war by the local Thegns or a summons from the King in times of emergency or national crisis.

There were three types of Fyrd.

The general , called out in an extreme emergency comprising mostly of Ceorls.

The Select, semi professional unit usually consisting of Thegns.

The Royal Fyrd. Professional warriors kept and maintained at the King's or their Lord's expense.

The general fyrd consisted of the Shire commoners (Ceorls) and was commanded by provincial Thegns and led by an ealdorman.

The Royal fyrd was composed of professional warriors who fought for a living, these were the hearthweru (hearthtroops) who were the personal household troops and bodyguards to the King and other high ranking nobles.

The men of the Royal fyrd were better armed, better motivated and better trained than those of the Shire levy's and they would also be better rewarded for their service.

When muster was called, the King's own troops would be joined by all the hearth-troops of his nobles, thus forming a professional army, the Royal Fyrd.

The Huscarles, who fought at Hastings with their great two handed axes did not appear until the 11th century and were formed by the Anglo-Danish dynasties that then ruled.

The select Fyrd in the 10th century was based on units of land called hides. A hide was the amount of land needed to support a family. Initially there was no defined size for a hide but it was eventually set at 120 acres. To ensure that in times of crisis, that the land was still cultivated and the harvest collected, one man for every five hides would be selected for military service. The people living within those 5 hides would be responsible for equipping the elected warrior and for covering his expenses whilst he was military duty. Hence the 'select Fyrd'.

Twenty units of 5 hides formed a hundred which was an administrative sub-unit of the shire. (ie The Wirral Hundreds). The 20 men raised from these 100 hindered hides likely served together as a unit. Men between the ages of 15 and 60 were expected to fight in the Fyrds when needed.

Ealdormen and Thengns we're equipped according to their personal wealth. Most would be armed with a shield, spear, sword and Langseax or scamseax (long sword like knives) and even an short handles axe. They would have had a shield, helmet and a chain mail coat. They would also have carried a general purpose knife called a seax, which was capable of killing a man.

The Ceorls of the general Fyrd would usually be armed with a spear and shield. Most would not have been able to afford any type of armour but the wealthier ones may have worn a leather hauberk. Many would have armed themselves with farm implements or heavy blacksmith's tools.

Bows and arrows were also used by the lower classes too though the Anglo Saxons do not seem to have utilised this weapon en-mass like the Vikings did.

The Thegns and Ealdormen as well as the Royal Fyrd would likely have rode to battle but dismounted to fight. It's a nonsense to suggest that the Anglo-Saxons didn't utilise horses on a large scale. When chasing a Viking raiding party, they would have done so.

Cavalry

There is some evidence that the Anglo-Saxons did use cavalry though they did not develop it to the level of European neighbours such as the Franks. The Brunanburh poem suggests that Athelstan's victorious army deployed cavalry during the battle in 937.

In 1055, A Royal Anglo-Saxon army, led by Edward the confessor's Norman nephew, Ralph de Sudley, had been trained to fight in the style of Norman cavalry. They met an army of Welsh and Rebel Mercians at Hereford and upon seeing their enemies approaching, the Saxons dismounted and formed into their traditional shield wall. The rebel army destroyed them and Ralph and his Norman retinue fled back to London.

When the Fyrds were summonsed, they would muster at a well known landmark, such as a standing stone or particular tree.

There is evidence that the summons was delivered by such as a Royal messenger or that a beacon system alerted them to deploy.

Equipment and food would be carried in carts or pack horse and non-combatant Ceorls were also hired as porters.

There is evidence that the Fyrds alternated in the field for given periods of time, thought to be about three weeks, in order that the armies remained supplied and motivated.

Tactical Formations

The shield wall was the standard deployment, with the most heavily armed and experienced warriors in the front rank.

Prior to the battle, an Anglo Saxon army would assemble on the field and the priests would deliver mass. A battle would begin with the two armies approaching each other.

Germanic people's used a war chant called the 'baritus' which built up their confidence and often terrified their enemies. The Anglo Saxons continued this practice.

After a period of shouting insults, javelins, arrows, rocks, sling shot and throwing axes would be hurled at the respective shield walls.

Evidence suggests that each Fyrd fought as separate units, but whether this was in battle lines with other Shire Fyrds arrayed in front and behind each other is not known with any certainty.

The shield walls would advance and push against each other. It was like a deadly rugby scrum. They would pull apart after several minutes, and then go through the process time and again.

The front lines must have changed during these breaks as it is impossible to fight continuously in that type of battle. Roman centurions would blow whistles to order a change in ranks, every five minutes or so, when in battle, so it is possible that the Anglo-Saxons and their enemies did likewise.

We know that units would form wedges and that one or several would burst out from the shield wall and attempt to smash through the enemy lines. We know that the wedges were led by warriors called 'ordfruma' point men, who presumably were at the head of the attacking wedge.

Command and Control

In a medieval battle, where you had to look into your enemies eyes, together with the noise, sweat and smell, it would have been nigh on impossible to know what was happening either side of you let alone what was happening anywhere else on the battlefield.

Injuries sustained were horrific, with limbs being removed, innards and excreta covering the ground, and dying and screaming men lying at your feet, causing a real obstacle for you to actually remain staying on your feet. Concentration needed to be intense and you had to remain focused on what was directly in front of you. Horn or bugle calls must have been impossible to have heard when engaged in fighting.

The Commanders would have been positioned on ground that afforded them a view of the battlefield, preferably from higher ground. Riders or runners would have been dispatched to the requisite units with orders to initiate or to the tactical reserve units to re-enforce any particular weak point. Even so, this must have been extremely difficult to instigate.

Once a shield wall gave way, that's when the large scale slaughter begins. A routed enemy if closely pursued will incur heavy casualties.

An defeated enemy has to maintain a disciplined withdrawal and remain a threat to the pursuing forces. Many will die but the many on the victorious side will not risk losing their lives once they know the battle is won. There was another factor too. Plunder!

The dead and dying would have been stripped of all valuables, from weapons, armour, personal belongings and everything else.

It would have been virtually impossible to prevent Fyrd men from the Shire levies from looting the dead and dying as things of value would enhance the quality of their and their families lives. In a time when most people lived at subsistence levels, the opportunity to acquire tangible wealth was seen as the right of a victor.

Attitude to Battle

The Anglo-Saxons were more fatalistic towards death than modern people. It was an everyday occurrence in a time when life was hard and when so many dangers abounded. Disease, wild animals, raiding enemies etc. We know that they believed strongly in fate as they still hung on to their pre-Christian beliefs that their lives were a thread spun by the three immortal sisters and that their end was pre-ordained.

The Warriors of the Royal and select Fyrds would usually stand and die with their King or Lord if they were defeated.

To abandon your King or Lord was an act of absolute cowardice. In pre-Christian times a deserter would be hanged in a secluded place or drowned in a bog in order that no one could witness their shame. In the Christian period, anyone of rank who deserted was declared a 'Nithling' and became a nobody whom anyone could kill with impunity.

Such was the hardness of early medieval life.