



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

ANGLO SAXON NAVY

TAKING THE WAR TO THE SEAS

Contents

Anglo Saxon Navy	3
Introduction	3
Drakar.....	3
In Britain	3
King Alfred	3
Frisian Navy.....	4

Anglo Saxon Navy

Introduction

Then King Alfred ordered that warships be built to meet the Danish ships. They were nearly twice as long as the others; some had sixty oars; some more, and they were both swifter and steadier and had more freeboard than the others. They were built neither after the Frisian design nor after the Danish, but as it seemed to him that they could be most serviceable.

Drakar

Everyone is familiar with the Drakar Viking longships (Langskips) that brought terror and destruction to Europe, North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean between the 8th and 11th centuries but there is little attention paid to the sea going abilities of the nations who were under attack.

Naval power was well established in the Mediterranean with several peoples being able to conduct naval warfare. The Turks, Franks, Muslims, Italians and, above all, the Byzantines could deploy large fleets manned with marines and in the case of the Byzantines, a weapon that all feared, 'Greek Fire'.

In Britain

In Britain, the Celtic peoples and the Anglo Saxons were all sea going peoples, though it appears that had developed ships that were specifically designed for warfare upon the sea. Nonetheless, these peoples all had a sea going tradition and each had skilled mariners. The Viking Invasions would be the catalyst for the development of a war fighting capability to fight at sea.

Like the Romans in the 3rd century BC, the Anglo Saxons, originally a predominately Infantry fighting force, had to adapt a new fighting method to survive. The Romans had no tradition of naval warfare until forced into building a navy during the first Punic. They captured a Carthaginian warship, back engineered it and built a fleet. Shortly afterwards they were defeating the greatest maritime nation of the age at sea.

King Alfred

King Alfred was the first Anglo Saxon King to raise a Navy. From his reign onwards, all the Kings of England would maintain a professional Navy. Even after the Norman conquest in 1066, King William maintained the policy initiated by Alfred, to operate a naval fighting force. The Normans, even though they were decedents of Vikings, had not maintained a Navy and the fleet that brought them to England had been raised on a voluntary basis, with ships being hired from local merchants and fishermen.

The Normans inherited a functioning and well equipped navy following their invasion.

The 'Trinoda Necessitas (Latin for three knot obligation) as demonstrated in the Anglo Saxon chronicles, was a law that literally meant ' threefold tax. It was a law that compelled Anglo Saxon Lords to fulfil obligations as a duty to the King.

These three obligations were the maintaining of roads and bridges, (Bridge-bote) the building of fortresses, (burh-bote) and serving in the local militia (Fyrd-bote).

We know that the Anglo Saxon word 'Fyrdunga' applied to the works that were conducted by the land fyrd and we know that they used the word 'Skipfyrdunga' which shows that there was a ship fyrd who fought at sea and who maintained the fleet. Whilst no great detail is known about the actual system that was used, it seems reasonable to assume that major ports, such as those which would later be called the cinque ports, had a naval militia or a maritime fyrd.

Alfred the Great specifically designed sleek fast moving warships, in order to take the fight to them on the high seas. The Anglo Saxon chronicles tell of several victories of English ships over the Vikings. It appears that many Frisians served in the Anglo Saxon fleet alongside Anglo Saxons.

Frisian Navy

Examples are –

851 AD. Sea battle off Sandwich.

875 AD King Alfred defeated 7 Danish ships at sea. Location not recorded but likely off the South coast.

882 AD. King Alfred defeated 4 Danish ships. Again, the location is not recorded.

885 AD. Mouth of the river Stour. Anglo Saxons defeated a fleet of 16 Viking ships.

896 AD. 9 Anglo Saxon ships attack 6 Viking ships off the isle of White. 62 Frisians and Anglo Saxons were killed as were 120 Danes in this skirmish.

Several Anglo Saxon defeats at sea are also recorded but it is clear that they were now sufficiently competent enough to take on the Vikings at sea and this must have had a psychological impact upon the would be raiders or invaders, as they could no longer expect to sail into English waters without the fear of being attacked before they reached land.

It is probable that the Anglo Saxons had developed a watch system which was capable of alerting their fleet to the presence of any Viking fleet and thereby enabling an effective interception.

Necessity is the mother of invention as they say, so we should not be surprised that the Anglo Saxons and others, such as the Franks, would be determined enough to challenge the Vikings at sea on the domain which they thought they were omnipotent.

In 934 AD, King Aethelstan's invasion of Scotland was supported by a huge fleet which is recorded as having raided as far north as Caithness. If it did, then it must have sailed through the Pentland Firth and passed by today's John o Groats and on and across what is now Thurso bay. The Orkney's are visible from both locations and only a short distance from the mainland. The Vikings were firmly entrenched on the islands at this time. How did they react? Why did they not challenge the Saxon fleet? Were they too intimidated by Aethelstan's fleet? Did they submit to him? We simply don't know, but it was clear that the Norse and Danes no longer ruled the whale roads.