



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

BATTLE OF ANGLESEY SOUND

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Battle of Anglesey Sound

Introduction

Magnus Barelegs and the Vikings in Anglesey and the battle of Anglesey sound 1098 AD

Following the Norman conquest of Anglo-Saxon England in 1066, there is a mistaken belief that Viking activities ceased in the British isles. In Scotland, the Viking age can be said to have come to its final end, following the battle of Largs in 1263.

In England.

In England, the last great battle had been fought at Stamford Bridge on the 25th of September 1066, when the last Anglo-Saxon King, Harold Godwinson destroyed the army of Harold Hardrada. The occasional raids would still take place and there were incidents when large Viking fleets threatened the eastern coast, but these posed little threat to the new Norman dynasty.

In Wales

In Wales where permanent Viking settlements had had been limited by the hostile and warlike tribes and the difficulty of the terrain, the activities of the northmen had been mostly limited to small scale raiding and to intervening in political disputes that were endemic between the various Welsh Kingdoms.

The Viking sphere of influence was the Irish Sea and the west coast of Britain. They controlled the sea lanes and they had formed powerful bases in Dublin, the Isle of Man, Cumbria, the Western Isles of Scotland Galloway and much of the coastal regions of Ireland. The Irish Sea of the 9th and 10th centuries was a marine motorway for raiding and trading, with slavery being a major economic factor.

The various peoples of the seaboard, Scots, Pict, Britons, Irish, Saxons and, latterly, the Normans had complicated relationships with the Vikings, often waging war against them, sometimes making political alliances with them and on some occasions, fighting alongside them as allies.

The Vikings of the 8th and 9th centuries were not those of later periods. By the mid to late 10th century, many Norse and Danes had integrated with the various peoples of Britain and most had converted to Christianity and were adopting many of the customs and cultural habits of the indigenous peoples.

The Vikings who operated on the Western seaboard of Britain were almost exclusively Norse whilst the Danes had concentrated on the Eastern side of Britain and the Western coastal areas of what is now France.

The Norman conquest

The Norman conquest of England would have profound consequences for the rest of the British Kingdoms and Ireland over the course of the following centuries. The Anglo Norman kingdom of England would wage relentless wars of conquest in a bid to dominate complete control over the whole island of Britain, as had the Anglo Saxon King, Athelstan in the 10th Century.

By the middle of the 10th century, Norse Dublin was a major trading city with a flourishing slave market. The Lords of Dublin could afford to raise armies and hire mercenaries from the the rest of the Viking world.

Dublin's Sea Lanes

One of Dublin's most important sea lanes was that which linked them to a large Viking settlement on the North Wirral and Lancashire coasts. This enabled them to operate an overland route to York .

Therefore the route from Dublin to the Wirral was of great strategic importance meaning that Anglesey and the North Wales coast were critically important.

It appears that a major defended Viking trading centre stood at Llanbedrgoch, near red wharf bay in Anglesey and that it had been possibly founded in the mid 11th century.

It is not known as to whether the Vikings had seized control of Anglesey in that period or that they had been permitted to form the settlement by the powerful regional Welsh King, Gruffuadd ap Cynan. This Welsh King was the ruler of Gwynedd and his seat of power was just a mere 16 miles away from the Viking settlement at Llanbedrgoch.

Gruffuadd eventually established an independent Welsh Kingdom that would hold power over the region for over a century but he had close ties with the Vikings of Dublin.

Gruffuadd ap Cynan

We know that Gruffuadd ap Cynan, had been in exile in Dublin when he was young, following a dynastic dispute in Gwynedd in which his grandfather had been slain. He fled to Dublin with his father. Some sources suggest that he had actually been born in Ireland and that his mother was Hiberno Norse, having been related to both Sihtric Silkenbeard and a descendant of the Irish high King, Brian Boru.

The Viking Silkenbeard dynasty were ruling in Dublin during this period and they must have had a vested interest in keeping control of the Irish Sea routes in order to maintain the trading, raiding and slaving routes.

It is believed that Gruffuadd ap Cynan married the granddaughter of Sihtric Silkenbeard but that he was forbidden to attack the killer of his grandfather, Gruffuadd ap Llewelyn, who now called himself King of Powys.

Despite Sihtric's order, Gruffuadd ap Cynan sailed for North Wales where he surprised and captured his enemy along with his wife. He didn't kill Gruffuadd ap Llewelyn because he was married to another granddaughter of Sihtric. Such were the complexities of early medieval diplomatic marriages and treaties.

Gruffuadd ap Cynan returned to Dublin with his prisoners but upon arrival he incurred Sihtric's wrath. The Viking returned the prisoners to Wales despite Gruffuadd ap Cynan arguing that he was the rightful King. Sihtric died shortly after these events but the new Viking ruler forbade Gruffuadd ap Cynan to reclaim his rightful throne.

Gruffuadd ap Llewelyn

In 1063, Gruffuadd ap Llewelyn, who had grown more powerful since his kidnapping incurred the wrath of the Anglo-Saxon King, Edward the Confessor.

An English army, led by Harold Godwinson launched an attack on Rhuddlan. The slippery Gruffuadd ap Llewelyn managed to escape but Harold and his army defeated the Welsh and then began to ravage the land.

Gruffuadd ap Llewelyn's own people eventually turned on him and he was assassinated.

Gruffuadd ap Cynan then approached Harold Godwinson and claimed his birthright, however he was refused as Harold favoured another Welsh dynasty that had assisted him in his war against Gruffuadd ap Llewelyn.

Gruffuadd ap Cynan would again try to reclaim his Kingdom in 1075. The Normans now ruled in England and they were determined to subjugate all the peoples of Britain.

Gruffuadd ap Cynan landed in Anglesey in 1075 and approached the Norman Lord, Robert of Rhuddlan and asked for help in reclaiming Gwynedd. Robert agreed to help him. The current ruler of Gwynedd was one Trahaearn ap Carradog but the ensuing war went badly for Gruffuadd ap Cynan who was defeated and forced to flee back to Ireland.

Robert of Rhuddlan's

Robert of Rhuddlan's help had been cursory at most. He was happy to see the Welsh at war and sought to use their civil wars to his advantage. He began to seize parts of the disputed lands, eventually provoking Trahaearn ap Carradog to meet him in battle, where he defeated the Welsh at the battle of Mynedd Carn in 1081. Trahaearn was one of the casualties of the battle.

Gruffuadd ap Cynan returned from Ireland and was acknowledged as King by the people of Gwynedd but his reign would be short. The Norman Lord of Chester, Hugh tricked him into a meeting at Rhug, near

Corwen, where he was seized and taken to Chester, where he was imprisoned for over a decade. Hugh was determined to rule the area of Gwynedd and expand Norman control.

Gruffuadd ap Cynan, is said to have escaped from Chester some 12 years later. He fled to Dublin and took refuge with the Vikings. In 1094, he returned to Wales and led attacks on a number of Norman held castles. His successes were tentative and he could not force the Normans from Gwynedd and eventually he was forced to flee back to Dublin.

The Battle of Anglesey Sound. 1098.

In 1093, Magnus Barelegs became king of Norway. Much of Norway's wealth at this time was directly connected to the trade that was conducted via the Irish Sea. Barelegs was intent on controlling this area in order to ensure Norway's wealth was not compromised. He was concerned with the Norman activities in north Wales and saw them as a direct threat to his ambitions.

Barelegs set forth with a war fleet in 1098, exactly the same time that Gruffuad ap Cynan had been forced to flee from Gwynedd. The Normans were busy ravaging Anglesey at this time and were seemingly intent in conquering the area. Were they to be successful, Dublin itself, would have been under threat.

It seems inconceivable that Barelegs had not understood the political situation in Wales and that he realised that a Viking friendly Welsh King would be a useful buffer against Norman incursions. It appears that the Viking fleet conducted a lightning attack on the Norman army near to what is now Aberlleiniog castle on the shores of Anglesey. Little is known of the events of the actual battle but the Vikings did defeat the Normans.

A legend persists that after the battle, when the Vikings had returned to their ships, that one of the Norman leaders, Earl Hugh of Shrewsbury, waded into the water and screamed abuse and threats towards the Vikings. It is said that Magnus himself, shot an arrow into Hugh's throat.

In the aftermath of the battle, Barelegs installed Gruffuadd ap Cynan as his puppet King in Gwynedd, where he ruled until his death in 1137, old and blind in his own bed. There would be no more Norman threats for decades.

Following the Norman invasion of 1066, the Vikings had realised that England was too powerful an enemy and one that they could not hope to defeat, but in the rest of the British Isles, they continued to assert their influence for the following 200 years.