



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

BURHS

BUILT BY AETHELFLAED AND ATHELRED

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Burhs

Introduction

The Burh (pronounced as Borx by the Anglo Saxons) system was designed and initiated to combat marauding Viking war bands and armies.

The Franks

The Franks had initiated the system as their northern border was initially, the only Christian state that bordered the homeland of a nation that we recognise today as being predominately Viking. Viking is a generic description originally used to describe pagan Scandinavians pirates and it is true that most Vikings were Scandinavians but also that most Scandinavians were not Vikings.

A number of factors were the catalyst for the 'Vikings' leaving their homelands, environmental issues, economic necessity and an opportunity to get rich quickly, being some of those reasons. The first Viking raids were piratical, easy targets providing loot and slaves and offering little resistance were too tempting to resist. Monastic centres were a preferred target as they offered significant reward with little personal risk, other than that presented by a sea journey.

It took some time for the rulers of the Christian lands to respond collectively to Viking raids and as was typical in 'God fearing' societies, these raids were seen as punishments inflicted upon the populous by God for their lapses into sinful ways. '**A Furore Normannorum Libre Nos Domine**' (from the fury of the Northmen, Lord, deliver us) was allegedly raised as a prayer at church services throughout Christendom.

Viking Raiders

There is little doubt that the original Viking raiders committed acts of great barbarity and cruelty. The same reports of their acts of terror are recorded by the clergy from lands that stretched from Western Europe, throughout the Mediterranean world, across North Africa and into the Middle East and the lands of the Byzantine Empire (Eastern Roman Empire). Christian and Muslim alike saw the Vikings as savages. As stated, the Franks, built wooden or stone stockades called burhs and occupied them with fast moving, mobile cavalry units which could respond rapidly when raiders were abroad. This strategy worked and would be adopted in other realms, mainly in England.

Alfred the Great

Alfred the Great modified this system to deal with the Vikings. A document called the 'Burghal Hidage' records: 30 Burhs in Wessex, 2 in South Mercia and 1 in Hwicce (A Mercian tribal land). They were basically, fortified towns with their size being dependent on the number of hides needed to support them, both with provisions and manpower.

A hide was a measurement of land but there was no standard size. The quality of the land and its productivity determined the size of a hide. It was really a unit of land that could support a family. The poorer the productivity, the larger the hide needed to be. It was not until the late Saxon period that a hide became standardised as a unit of land amounting to 120 acres.

Burhs

Burhs were often refortified Roman towns but in Wessex but new ones were constructed in order that none of the population were more than 15 miles from a burh in times of danger. Not only were they places of refuge with granaries, a church and very often a mint but they also became centres for markets and trade and sessional courts. No burh was ever taken by the Vikings other than one that was attacked whilst under construction, namely the one at Andredsweald.

Roads were maintained between Burhs, known as Herepaths (army roads) for the rapid deployment of troops. Each Burgh was manned by sufficient troops based on a formula depending on the lengths of the burh's walls. Wessex In Wessex, the 30 Burhs were defended by over 30 thousand men at any one time, based on a rotational system, so in times of crisis the defensive force could likely quadruple and this enabled the Kingdom of Wessex to maintain a large field army that could be deployed and supported and

supplied with men, horses, weapons and food. This system effectively nullified Viking armies and made them impotent.

You could not attack 30 Burhs at once. A siege was protracted and the longer it went on for, the more vulnerable the attacker became. As the attacker became weaker through loss of men, lack of food, disease etc, the easier it became to destroy them. The Vikings would be forced to retreat back through a hostile land where they were subjected to guerrilla type attacks. Exhausted and demoralised they would then be confronted by a highly motivated Anglo-Saxon army and they would either have to surrender or be destroyed. This is what usually happened.

Athelney

It is interesting to note that when Alfred and his retainers were taking refuge in Athelney that the nearby town of Lyng had been fortified and was linked to the monastery on Athelney by a causeway, effectively making it a so- called double Burh.



Athelney is on the right. The red Line marks the position of the wooden causeway and the town of Lyng is on the right.

Edward the Elder

When Alfred was succeeded by his son Edward the Elder in Wessex, his daughter, Aethelflaed had been married to one Ethelred, a nobleman of Mercia and an ally of Alfred. The pair appear to have formed a strong bond and together with her brother in Wessex, the two Kingdoms waged a war against the Danes in east Anglia and the rest of the Danelaw. Ethelred, in time became chronically ill and the burden of power in Mercia became the responsibility of Aethelflaed. She became a leader of great magnitude, successful in war and with the domestic rule over Mercia. Both Edward the Elder and Aethelflaed continued to expand the burh system, building them at strategic points and ever moving northwards. These burhs would, firstly, contain the Viking's ability to roam at will and would ultimately be a key factor in their eventual defeat.

The following Burhs are known to have been built or refortified by Aethelflaed and her husband Ethelred.

1. Bridgenorth
2. Chester
3. Eddisbury Hill.
4. Runcorn.
5. Tamworth
6. Warwick
7. Chirbury
8. Stafford
9. Wednesbury.
10. Shrewsbury
11. Hereford
12. Oxford.
13. Worcester.
14. Church town
15. Bremsbyrig - This burh was originally attributed to Bromborough on the Wirral but academia now favours Bromesberrow in Gloucestershire.
16. Sceargate
17. Warbury
- 18 Gloucester

There are possibly more, but all the above lie at strategic positions such as fords, at places where major roads converge or at positions that overlook routes that armies had to take to enter Mercia.

The Mercian Register states that Aethelflaed constructed 10 new Burhs, with Tamworth and Stafford being the only two that can be identified.



Aethelflaed's mound. Warwick castle. A Burh once stood where the much later walls now stand.

Byrig

Whilst byrig is the plural of fort, it is also the dative case, meaning to the fort or for the fort. Byrig evolved into the words berry or bury which described the settlements, large farms or manor houses that evolved around the fortifications. Bromsgrove is another contender, so though its exact location is still disputed. It was originally thought the site of Bromborough Court house on the Wirral was possibly a burh but excavations have conclusively ruled this out.



The remains of the Burh's north western wall at Wallingford.

10th century,

By the 10th century, many of the smaller Burhs had fallen out of use. Chisbury, Burpham and Sashes were amongst them. The larger Burhs, those which had been designed as planned towns, continued to thrive as urban economies and administrative centres.

Aetherflaed, would often construct a Burh at a river crossing, even if one was already standing on the opposite side of the river. Any enemy would now have to contend with two defensive sites which would have inflicted a high attrition rate on any attacker, even if they had managed to take one of the defensive positions.

As stated, the Vikings were never successful in taking a fully constructed and defended Burh. There are actually no records on the Vikings even conducting any prolonged siege against any Burh in Wessex and only one elsewhere, namely the Burh at Exeter, which held out until Alfred arrived with a relieving army. Many Burhs had been Roman towns and these were refortified and any damaged walls were repaired. Several old hillforts were also converted into Burhs. Many Burhs were also entirely new fortified sites built at strategic locations.

Double Burhs

Double Burhs became more common in the early 10th century. Byrig was the plural for a Burh which often pertained to a large Manor house, stronghold or farm where a local Lord resided in times of peace. When danger threatened, he would move his family and personal retinue to a nearby Burh.

Byrig is preserved in the names of several towns such as Bury St. Edmunds. The local Fyrd was responsible for maintaining the Burh whilst the Royal Fyrd served and protected the King and his family. In the middle-ages, only eight Burhs had become municipal status. They were Chester, Maldon, Hertford, Buckingham, Tamworth, Bridgenorth, Stafford and Warwick.

The largest Burhs had been Warwick, Winchester and Wallingford.

The Mercian Register states that Aethelflaed constructed 10 Burhs, with Tamworth and Stafford being the only two that can be identified.

Athelstan granted the right to mint coinage to the Burhs and in the 10th and 11th centuries no coinage was to be struck other than in a Burh.