



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

CONSTANTINOPE

AD860AD – THE VIKING RUS ATTACK

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Constantinople – 860AD

Introduction

NB. The name 'RUS' originated from the proto- Finnish word for what we now call Sweden. They called it 'Ruotsi' which meant the 'men who row' in old Norse. The Rus spoke old Norse though in time, the language evolved to include many Slavic words. I refer to the Rus in the article below as the Viking-Rus, as essentially that's what they were, Vikings.

860 AD Constantinople

On the 18th of October 860 AD, the city guards of the great city of Constantinople were alerted to a fleet of over 200 longships appearing on the horizon. They had entered the Bosphorus from the Black Sea. The city's warning bells rang out and the guards stationed at the many gates of the city prepared to close and bar the entry into the city.

Constantinople, the richest and most important city of the Mediterranean world was under attack by a, as yet, unknown force. The Great Capital city of the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire had been caught totally unaware by this unforeseen attack. The city's warning bells alerted the villagers who lived in the nearby suburbs outside of the city walls and many of them fled for the safety of the city but those who lived in the small towns and villages that dotted both the western and eastern banks of the Bosphorus had no hope of reaching the city before these invaders. The Great city stood at the cross roads of the trade routes between Europe and Asia Minor and Africa. The population still considered themselves as Romans and their city was both a religious hub for Christianity and was seen as the bastion of civilisation amongst a world that was constantly under attack from Barbarians.

The city's gates were closed and the Byzantine troops and the able-bodied citizens of the city manned the walls in anticipation of an attack. The city's walls were formidable, totalling some 14 miles in length with 400 towers and fortresses divided along the wall's length with the landward approach being the most heavily defended. The great Roman walls had never been breached by any enemy and the likes of Atilla and his Hunnic horde and the Bulgars had all failed when trying to attack the great city. The Byzantines would have been confident within the safety of the city's walls but they had a problem with the lack of professional soldiers who were able to defend the city.

Emperor Michael III

The Emperor, Michael III was on campaign against the Abbasid Arabs and he had taken virtually all the troops that the Byzantine army could muster with him. He was invading the Islamic Caliphate and was besieging the city of Samsat, now in the east of modern-day Turkey, when the Rus fleet was approaching Constantinople. Michael had an army of 50,000 men with him, of which several thousand were usually based in Constantinople.

The enemy were Viking Rus. They had previously had limited contact with the Byzantine Empire but there had been little interaction between the two factions with the Rus firstly having been recorded only as recently as 839.

The ancient walls of Constantinople - A. Savin.



The Viking Rus had been predominately Vikings from what is now Sweden and Norway and they had started to make incursions into the Baltic in the 750's. The Slavic peoples who were confronted by these warriors called them Varangians. Warfare between these peoples lasted for decades but the Vikings managed to get a foothold within what is now the Ukraine and the founded their great city, Kiev. Many of the Slavic peoples of the area would become integrated with their Scandinavian conquerors and the name Rus was given to them by other tribes who populated the Baltic lands. Russia would take its name from the Rus who can rightly be considered to have been the founders of that nation.

The Viking Rus

The Viking Rus were, like their fellow Vikings in the west, driven by an obsession to gain wealth. Slaving expeditions were the quickest and most profitable way to gain wealth and the Viking Rus preyed on the peoples of the region. Trading and raiding along the Volga River the Viking Rus would have confrontations with tribes such as the Pechenegs, Prussians and Poles amongst others. They heard about the Great city of the Byzantine Empire and referred to it as Miklagard, which in old Norse meant the 'large city'. They had also met Byzantine traders, often in the slave markets of eastern Europe and Baltic areas. Trading furs and slaves for Byzantine silver and goods fuelled the imagination of the Viking Rus that the great city contained unimaginable wealth and in typical Viking fashion, they wanted that wealth.

The catalyst for the Viking Rus attack on the Byzantine Empire is debated but it appears that Byzantine engineers constructed a great fortress for their allies, namely the Khazars. The fortress at Sarkel disrupted the trade routes of the Viking Rus along the Volga and Don rivers. The Viking Rus were unable to control the route from the Black Sea to the Volga and on to the Caspian and Baltic Seas. This was something that they wouldn't or couldn't tolerate.

Whatever the truth of the matter, The Viking Rus arrived in the Bosphorus with a fleet carrying at least 5000 warriors. Their numbers, in reality, were too weak to consider an attack against the city walls and they would have stood little chance against a large professional Eastern Roman army in the open field.

The ecumenical patriarch, Photios I, of Constantinople recorded the following statement

“The attack by the “unknown people” or the “obscure people” was “like a thunderbolt from heaven”, and was as sudden and unexpected “as a swarm of wasps”.

Nicetas Oryphas

The city prefect Nicetas Oryphas sealed the city gates. He knew that the attackers could not storm the city walls but he must have been aware that the people living in the hinterlands around the city were now in serious jeopardy and he did not have enough troops to launch a sortie to either defend them or to drive the invaders away. The Byzantine fleet was not present when the Viking Rus arrived either. Part of it was deployed against raiding Danish Vikings in the Mediterranean whilst the main body of it was fighting the Arabs in the Aegean Sea.

Western Vikings

Western Vikings had attacked coastal towns and villages from Spain to Italy and also across the North African coastlines. The Byzantine ships used 'Greek Fire' against their enemies, which made them feared by both the Arabs and other piratical raiders. Greek fire was an incendiary weapon which was fired from the Byzantine ships by means of large tubes which acted as flame throwers. The Byzantines had been using this from 672 AD. It is believed that the compounds for 'Greek Fire' contained naphtha and quicklime and that it ignited on hitting water. The formula for 'Greek Fire' was a state secret and even today, scientists have not been able to replicate it as effectively as the Byzantines had done.

Viking Rus

The Viking Rus attacked the settlements along the coastline of the sea of Marmara looting and pillaging and slaughtering the inhabitants. Many women were taken as slaves as well as young fit men but the old and infirm were butchered.

The Islands of the Prince's, which today lie off the coast of the modern Istanbul, were the sites of several monasteries. In one of these monasteries, 22 former servants of the former Patriarch Ignatius of Constantinople, were taken as captives. On realising that these had served such a holy individual, each and every one of these people had their arms and legs hacked off with axes and were left to die in excruciating pain from shock and blood loss.

The Viking Rus pillaged the area for months whilst the defenders of the city could do nothing but watch the destruction from the city walls.

Emperor Michael III

The Emperor Michael III had been made aware of the attack on the city and had abandoned the siege at Samsat and was returning with the army but before he could reach the city, the Viking Rus left and sailed back into the Black Sea and headed back to their homeland.

There would be further Viking Rus attacks on the city of Constantinople, in 907 and 941 AD. Both ended in defeat for the Viking Rus. The attack in 941 was particularly disastrous for the invaders. The Byzantines sent out 15 ships which used 'Greek Fire' against the enemy fleet. The effect was devastating with dozens of the enemy ships being destroyed by the Greek fire. The remaining ships fled but were caught by the Imperial fleet off the Thracian coast. Virtually all of the Viking Rus ships were destroyed. Any survivors who made it to the shore were rounded up by local tribesmen and were handed over to the Byzantines. The prisoners were taken back to Constantinople where they were publicly beheaded. It was claimed by Byzantine that the Viking-Rus had numbered some 40,000 warriors and that the size of their fleet had numbered 1000 ships. Even if the force had been that large it was still too small to actually attack the city.



Image from an illuminated manuscript, the Madrid Skylitzes, showing Greek fire in use.

The attrition rate would have been enormous as Constantinople's defences were very formidable and the Byzantine army was a disciplined and highly effective fighting machine whilst their navy was superior to those of any of the other people's operating in the Mediterranean.

After these events the Viking Rus agreed to a peace treaty with the Empire. Many Viking Rus then served in the Byzantine army with the best of their warriors then joining the elite bodyguard to the Emperor. They are known as the Varangian Guard.

The Great City of Byzantium

The great city of Byzantium withstood several sieges from the time when it was made into the Capital of the Roman Empire. When the western Empire fell, it preserved Roman culture for nearly another thousand years. In the 6th century the Eastern Empire recovered parts of North Africa and even re-took Rome from the Goths. They were beset though, by a new enemy, namely the Muslim nations who would wage war against Byzantium for centuries.

Ironically, the first people to sack Constantinople were the Crusaders, allies of the Byzantines, who turned on their hosts in 1261 and replaced the Greek speaking Emperors with a dynasty of Latin speaking westerners. The city and the Empire fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. The Great city founded by the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great would now become Istanbul.