



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

EDMUND IRONSIDE

WARRIOR PRINCE AND KING OF ENGLAND 1016 AD

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Edmund Ironside

Introduction

Edmund was the son of the English King, Ethelred II, known as the Unready. Ethelred the Unready was King of England from 978 to 1013 and again from 1014 to 1016. He was only 12 years old when he first became King. His reign was plagued by Viking incursions and he proved to be an ineffective King who was unable to deliver a fatal blow to the Viking invaders.

The Viking Raids

In the 990's Viking raids were becoming an increasingly frequent problem for England. Ethelred paid 'Danegeld' in order to try and limit the attacks on his Kingdom but this just encouraged the raiders to see England as a ready and often easy source of money.

This period is sometimes termed the second Viking age following the creation of a united English state which emerged after the battle of Brunanburh in 937 AD and the success of Athelstan's successors, who established a national boundary that we would recognise today, though in reality, it was a tenuous state of affairs given that political shifts in Scandinavia, where evolving politics and conquests would lead to what would become a Northern Empire, a Viking Empire, with all the dangers that it would entail for the rest of Western Europe and the British Isles.

Ethelred

Ethelred committed an act on the 13th of November 1002, which some historians believe was a significant factor or indeed, the catalyst, for Sweyn Forkbeard's invasion of England in 1003. The event was the infamous St. Brice's day massacre, in which settled Norse and Danes were slaughtered throughout England. There is much uncertainty as to how widespread the slaughter actually was. The area known as the Danelaw still existed and was populated mostly by the descendants of Vikings, so it is difficult to see how this area could have suffered to the same extent as the Viking settlers living in English Cities or towns. Certainly, in places such as Oxford, many Danes were put to the sword.

Forkbeard

Forkbeard, was the King of Denmark and he had seized the throne from his father, Harold Bluetooth. He had a reputation for being ruthless and he would also be King of Norway and later England. He was also the father of King Harold II of Norway, Cnut the Great and of Queen Estrid Svendsdatter. Forkbeard launched yearly raids against England from 1003 until 1012 and amassed much wealth. He was a Christian, though the Chronicler, Adam of Bremen had described him as a pagan who persecuted Christians. Whatever the truth of the matter, Forkbeard was intent on making England a part of his Scandinavian Empire.

Forkbeard invaded Northumbria in 1013. Earl Uhtred the Bold, Lord of Bamburgh, submitted to him. Forkbeard took his army south, heading for London and as he progressed, the English Lords submitted and swore allegiance to him. Cnut, his son, accompanied his father.

When he reached London, the city was prepared to fight. Ethelred was supported by a famous Viking warlord, Thorkell the tall. Thorkell had been the leader of Viking armies campaigning in England but had defected to Ethelred after becoming disillusioned with his followers after they had tortured and murdered the Arch-Bishop of Canterbury.

The Viking attack on London was a failure and the army then went westwards and occupied Bath where the west country Thegns pledged allegiance to Forkbeard. On hearing this, Ethelred was expelled from England, along with his sons and London submitted to Forkbeard.

Ethelred fled to Normandy, the homeland of his wife, Queen Emma. Sweyn Forkbeard was declared King of England on Christmas day 1013. The first Viking King of England.

Cnut

Five weeks later, Forkbeard died at Gainsborough. His son Cnut was declared King of England by the people of the Danelaw but the Saxon Nobility brought Ethelred back from Normandy and he was able to drive Cnut and the Viking army out of England. A number of Saxon leaders who had sworn allegiance to Cnut and his father, Forkbeard, were rounded up and executed.

Ethelred was supported upon his return by his brother-in-law, Eadric Streona, Eldorman of Mercia, who would play a pivotal role in the events to come and he would, subsequently be remembered for being a traitorous turncoat.

In 1015, Cnut returned to England at the head of a Viking army. The young Prince Edmund took the war to him. He campaigned in Cheshire and the North with the Northumbrian Lord Uhtred the Bold. Ethelred, the King remained in London, supposedly too ill to take part in any campaign.

Pillaging the North

After pillaging the north, Edmund sent Uhtred north to attack Cnut. It is uncertain as to what exactly happened, but Uhtred submitted to Cnut and no battle was fought. Cnut summoned Uhtred to a meeting but whilst on-route he was ambushed by an Northumbrian Thegn called Thurbrand the Hold. Uhtred and forty of his men were killed. Cnut had instigated the ambush. The death of Uhtred resulted in a blood feud between the families of both Uhtred and Thurbrand, that would last for decades. In 1024, Thurbrand was killed by Uhtred's son, Ealdred, who in turn was killed by one Carl, a relative of Thurbrand. Carl's two sons were then killed by Earl Waltheof in 1074, 59 years after Uhtred's death.

1016

In 1016, Ethelred died and his son Edmund was declared King. Edmund would be given the cognomen, Ironside, for the war he would soon fight with Cnut.

Ethelred had been King of England for 37 years, the longest reign of any Anglo-Saxon ruler.

Edmund would fight five battles in 1016 against Cnut's Viking army, which was also supported by Anglo-Saxon allies.

The first battle was at Penselwood and proved to be inconclusive. The battle of Sherston followed and the Viking army was forced to retreat. It made its way back to London and besieged the city.

The next encounter took place at Brentford, where Edmund inflicted a defeat on the Vikings.

Edmund then defeated the Vikings at the battle of Otford (known as the second battle of Otford as a battle had also been fought there in 766 between Mercia and Kent) before taking his army to confront Cnut at the battle of Assandun. Eadric Streona, Edmund's uncle had fought for Cnut at Otford.

On the 18th of October 1016 the armies of Edmund and Cnut clashed in what was their biggest confrontation. Surprisingly, Edmund had allowed his uncle, Eadric Streona back into his entourage. It was to prove to be a fatal mistake.

Little detail is known about the battle except that at a critical point when it looked like Edmund would win, Streona went over to Cnut. After a hard-fought battle, Cnut held the field. Edmund may have been wounded.

A truce was made and it was agreed that the Kingdom would be split, with Cnut taking Mercia and Northumbria whilst Edmund retained Wessex. It was agreed that if one of them died, then the other would be King of all England.

Edmunds Death

On the 30th of November, Edmund died. He was 22 years old. Some sources state that he died of wounds inflicted during the battle, whilst others state that he was poisoned. One source even suggests that he was killed by a 'spike' that shot up from below whilst he was sitting on a toilet.

Cnut would rule until his death on the 12th of November 1035. Whilst he was King of England, he managed to build an Empire that included Denmark, Norway and parts of Sweden. He was succeeded by his son, Harold Harefoot.

1042

In 1042, the house of Wessex was restored to an Anglo-Saxon King, namely Edward the Confessor. In 1066, the Normans conquered England. A united Anglo-Saxon England, was in reality, a very short-lived thing.