



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

EGIL SKALLAGRIMSSON

ATHELSTAN'S ALLY AT BRUNANBURH

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Egil Skallagrimsson – Athlestan's Ally

Introduction

Egil Skallagrimsson was an Icelandic Viking who fought for the Anglo-Saxons at the battle of Brunanburh in 937 AD.

He appears to have had an adventurous life, but his life story, recorded by a relative, namely one Snorri Sturluson, over 200 years after the event's of Egil's lifetime, is embellished and as is typical with many of the Viking saga's needs to be taken with the proverbial pinch of salt.

Egils Saga

Egil's saga, portrays Egil as the great victor of Brunanburh. It is clearly a boastful and untruthful embellishment related by a biased author. Egil is said to have had 300 men, mercenaries, under his command at Brunanburh, a small contingent by any account. All we know is that they were fellow Vikings, predominately from Iceland, and that Egil and his crew were mercenaries.

In Iceland, Egil was feared and hated because of his predisposition to extreme violence and his renowned meanness. He was called Egil the mean or Egil the ugly by fellow Icelanders.

Legend had it that he was half troll and this was because he was a huge man with a fearsome appearance. It is likely that he suffered with Paget's disease which causes an unnatural thickening of bones particularly in the skull and which causes facial disfigurement.

Whatever the truth of his history is, it is plainly clear to see that he was a violent and fierce individual who had no qualms about killing anyone that he considered as an obstacle to achieving any of his aims. He murdered several people including children and was declared an outlaw at one stage of his life and he made countless enemies. He was clearly a dangerous and volatile individual.

In a violent period of human history, to be viewed as he was, does give rise to there being some truth with regards to his nature.

So what do we know?

Egil is recorded as being the greatest Skald in the Viking world during the first half of the 10th century. To see such a brutal and violent man as the greatest poet amongst his people is hard to comprehend, but the saga claims that he was.

There is even a physical description of him. He was said to have had a wide forehead, and a bushy brow, a broad nose, a thick beard covering most of his face, with an exceptionally thick jaw and chin, bald on top but with thick wolf grey hair, taller and broader than most men with a thick neck and huge shoulders. When angry, his face grew red and fierce. He had dark eyes and a swarthy complexion.

At the battle of Brunanburh, his brother Thorolf had been killed and it is said that at the victory feast, that King Athelstan noticed Egil sitting with his sword across his knees, slamming the blade in and out of its scabbard. He was obviously in a dark mood. Athelstan supposedly puts a valuable ring on his own sword and then approaches Egil and presents him with the ring. Egil accepts it, then starts drinking before composing a poem.

Athelstan later presented Egil with two chests of silver as compensation for the loss of Thorolf. Had Egil believed that Athelstan hadn't appreciated his part in the battle? Did the gift of silver pacify his renowned meanness?

An inference is made to Egil's burial of Thorolf and that the fact that the corpse was interred with gold arm rings and weapons and that that Egil was sulking at the grave side. Grieving for his brother or the buried gold.

It is recorded that years after Brunanburh, Egil's father asked him as to where the silver was that Athelstan had given him. Egil wouldn't say. His father, knowing his son's meanness, later took all his own silver and threw it into a bog to prevent Egil getting his hands on it. Egil's father died soon after and Egil himself became furious when he realised what his father had done.

Just before his own death, Egil took Athelstan's silver and had two slaves bury it. He then murdered the slaves and then boasted to his family as to what he had done and revelled in the fact that they would never find it.

Egil the Mean

Egil the mean was living up to his nickname.

He also was fond of fighting duels and is said to have killed an opponent, Alti the short, by tearing out his throat with his bare teeth.

Egil's story is a long and interesting one. He made many enemies, not least of those being King Harold Fairhair of Norway and his son, the infamous Erik Bloodaxe. He was involved in political intrigues and was even said to have murdered Bloodaxe's son as well as many other people, but if you want his life story, then you will have to study Egil's saga and make of it what you will.

Brunanburh

We will just concentrate on his involvement at Brunanburh.

Egil and his brother Thorolf were said to be adventuring in Flanders when they heard that the English King, Athelstan, needed men to fight against Anlaf Guthfrisson and his allies. They presented themselves to the King and agreed to take service in his army. Athelstan insisted that they be baptised and accept the Cross, which they agreed to do so, as long as they could worship their own gods too.

The saga then states that King Athelstan appointed Egil and Thorolf as the leaders of his army. This is typical of all the sagas which have to have the main character as the greatest hero of the of the coming events.

The saga calls Brunanburh, Wen Heath. It was to be a set battle at a given location, marked out by hazel rods. A level playing field to use a modern description.

The saga tells of plans and negotiations but the battle began as so.

Two of Anlaf's jarls, Adils and Hring set off with their army in the middle of the night and arrived near the battlefield at first light. They were spotted by Egil and Thorolf, who mustered their army and went out to meet them. Another column of Anglo Saxons marched with them. This unit was led by Alfgier, a Saxon Lord.

Egil led his contingent into battle. We know that his standard bearer was called one Thorfinn the strong but we don't know anything about the rest of his men.

Thorolf was armed with a thrusting spear whilst Egil had his sword 'Adder'. They had helmets and shields but wore no body armour. As befits the saga, Egil's contingent was much smaller than that of the opposing forces, so emphasising that Egil was a heroic figure who would fight against the odds.

Battle commenced but soon Alfgier was forced to retreat and flee from the battlefield. Thorolf then advanced toward Hring whilst Egil then went and dealt with the column led by the victorious Adils. Thorolf fought his way through Hring's bodyguards slaying many men until he came face to face with Hring. Thorolf then skewered Hring on his spear and lifted him above his head for all to see. He then planted the butt of his spear in the ground so all could see the impaled Hring writhing on the spear. Adils saw this and fought his way to Thorolf but realised that the cause was lost and he then ordered a retreat.

The saga then states that the main armies of both Anlaf and Athelstan arrived on the field and set up their respective camps.

Hundreds of men lay dead upon the field, so it is clearly implied that Brunanburh was to be a two day battle.

Athelstan then thanked Egil and his brother for their great victory.

The following morning the armies arrayed for battle. Egil told Athelstan that he wanted to fight alongside Thorolf and that they should be deployed to where the fighting would be fiercest.

Athelstan ordered Thorolf to lead a division based near the edge of the forest whilst he entered the plain with Egil alongside him.

Thorolf was met by the armies of Alba (Scots) and Strathclyde and battle commenced.

Athelstan and Egil confronted Anlaf's division.

As the battle developed, Adils and his men emerged from the forest and attacked Thorolf. Adils cut Thorolf down and killed him.

Egil, somehow, saw this from his part of the battlefield and in a rage fought his way towards Adils.

(This is clearly a poetic story designed to glorify Egil as, on a medieval battlefield, sheer chaos reigned and you would not be aware of anything other than what was immediately happening around you and you could not have let your concentration drop for a second or you would be joining the ranks of the dead and dying).

Egil slaughters many warriors but eventually reached Adils and kills him. The Scots and the men of Strathclyde begin to retreat and Egil and his Icelandic Vikings slaughter hundreds of them. Egil then attacks Anlaf's flank and the Norse Vikings begin to break, defeated by Egil's and his small band of Icelandic Vikings!

Athelstan orders a general advance and the pursuit of Anlaf's army begins.

The Saga claims that Anlaf was killed too, which of course he wasn't. He and Constantine, the King of Alba did escape.

The saga clearly portrays Egil as being the primary factor in this great victory. It's not true of course and in reality, Egil, with such a minor force was unlikely to have been appointed as a commander within Athelstan's army.

Egil buried Thorolf with his weapons and other treasures at the edge of the forest before attending the victory feast and being praised and honoured by Athelstan.

Egil eventually left the King's service and made his way to Norway. Further adventures would follow but you will have to read the full saga if you want to know the rest of the story. It's one of adventure, war, murder, feuds and political plots with all that entails.

Egil died in 995. People in Iceland today, still search for Athelstan's silver.