



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

# ERIC BLOODAXE

THE LAST NORSE KING OF YORK

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# Eric Bloodaxe

## Introduction

**Hail to you Eric, be welcome here and come into the hall, gallant King.**

## The Eiriksmal

So reads the epitaph, the Eiriksmal, written by an unknown Norse poet in the service of Eric's widowed wife.

## Eric Haraldsonn

Eric Haraldsonn, nicknamed blood-axe for his ruthlessness in battle, was the probable son of Harald Fairhair, a King of Norway. A saga about his life and adventures is believed to have been written but it has been lost and therefore, his story has had to have been reconstructed from a variety of sources and thus, fact and legend merge, but he did exist and he left his mark on history.

He ruled Norway for two short years between 932 to 934 and he would reign as King of York on two occasions, namely between 947 to 948 and then, again, between 952 until 954.

There is much debate about Eric's parentage with one source even suggesting that he was the son of Harald Bluetooth but most acknowledge that Fairhair was his biological father.

Two sagas, namely the Heimskringla and Egil's saga claim that Eric had become a pirate by the age of 12 and that he was large and exceptionally strong and powerful and that he showed great valour. It is said that for the following 8 years that Eric would conduct raids throughout the Baltic sea and that he would also see action in Denmark and Germany.

## Raids

He is alleged to have raided, England, Scotland and Ireland as well as the coasts of Wales and France. He would also be part of a Viking raid into Lapland and into Bjarmaland (Northern Russia) where he is said to have sailed up the Dvina River and sacked the town of Permina.

One source stated that Eric married the daughter of the King of Denmark and that her name was Gunnhild and that she was a witch. Other sources suggest that he married a Cumbrian or British daughter of nobleman and that her name was Cathroe. Currently, it is impossible to verify as to who his wife actually was and it is even possible that he'd been married at least twice or that he even may have had more than one wife. We just don't know.

Eric had a number of half brothers according to the Heimskringler. They ruled certain regions of Norway but his father, Harald Fairhair, favoured Eric above them all and wanted to ensure that Eric would inherit the throne of Norway. To ensure this, the saga claims that Eric was instructed by Fairhair to kill his half-brother, Ragnvald as well as another sibling, namely Bjorn Farmann, the ruler of Vestfold. Upon Fair hair's death, Eric went to war with another two of his half-brothers, Olaf and Sigurd. He destroyed their armies and his two half-brothers fell in the battle.

Eric's subsequent rule over Norway was harsh and this resulted in a coup against him within two years and he was driven from the throne and Norway. He was replaced as King by his half-brother, Haakon. Eric is said to have fled to Britain, but again the sagas give different accounts. One even suggests that he went to Spain where he was killed in battle, but the majority agree, that he went to Britain. It seems likely, that he went to Orkney where he built up alliances and initiated raids against Scotland, Ireland, Wales and the Hebrides. He is said to have married his daughter, Ragnhild to a powerful Orkney Jarl called Arnfinn. Following the battle of Brunanburh in 937, York and Northumberland had come under Anglo-Saxon control, but Athelstan the English King had died two years later and his successor, Edmund, who was only 18, had not been able to keep control over Northumberland.

## Anlaf Guthfrithson

Anlaf Guthfrithson, the loser at Brunanburh, claimed the Kingship of York and was accepted by the local population, including the nobility and the Arch-Bishop, Wulfstan.

The five Boroughs of the Danelaw were then retaken by Anlaf, namely those at Stamford, Leicester, Nottingham, Derby and Lincoln.

Anlaf then got himself killed whilst raiding in English Northumbria, at a church in Tynninghame which is now near to Dunbar in Scotland, in either 941 or 942.

Amlaíb Cuarán, succeeded Anlaf and was supported by Wulfstan. War broke out as Edmund was intent on recovering the five Boroughs. The first clash took place at Northampton in which Edmund was triumphant but Amlaíb Cuarán retaliated by storming Tamworth. The loss of life on both sides was said to have been severe.

## Edmund

Edmund then besieged Amlaíb Cuarán and Wulfstan in Leicester. The pair of them managed to escape and the following year peace negotiations were held. Edmund ceded Northumbria to Amlaíb Cuarán as far south as Watling Street. Amlaíb Cuarán ruled with a co-ruler called Ragnall.

By 944, Edmund had gained sufficient strength to have been able to drive both of them out of York.

Sources state that by 945 that Amlaíb Cuarán was back in Dublin.

Edmund then raided Cumbria and then entrusted it to King Malcolm of Scotland in exchange for his military support.

Edmund was murdered in 946 when he intervened in a drunken brawl.

Edmund was succeeded by Eadred who then subdued Northumbria. Malcolm's support had been questionable and he too, had to swear fealty to Eadred. Eadred also brought Wulfstan under control and put an end to his political intrigues, or so he thought.

Northumberland though was not ready to submit to the English King. The mixture of Anglians, Norse and Danes had merged to create a people who wanted their own King and who considered themselves as a different nation. By 948, they had placed Eric Bloodaxe upon the throne.

## Eadred

Eadred reacted and attacked and burnt Ripon. A battle then took place at Castleford which forced Eadred to retreat, however, he then threatened the Northumbrian nobility with destruction and they expelled Bloodaxe.

Another Anlaf, then took the throne, namely on Anlaf Cwiran. The sources are at odds here so we cannot be certain of the true circumstances of events. One source stated that Eadred did nothing whilst another, the Annals of Ulster, states that the Northumbrians or Norse-Gaels attacked the Scots and Britons of Strathclyde, but it is believed that the Norse leader was probably Eric Bloodaxe. It is not clear as to what happened to Anlaf Cwiran.

These events took place in 952 but by 954, Eric's reign came to a final end.

A battle was fought at Stainmore in Westmoreland. Eric's army was defeated and he was killed during the fray. His enemy was Osulf, the high reeve of Northern Northumbria. Eric's killer was possibly one Maccus, son of Anlaf, but again, we cannot prove this conclusively. Maccus may have been connected to Amlaíb Cuarán.



**The grey cross on that lonely moor at stainmore, reputedly the grave of eric bloodaxe. (excavations found no trace of a burial).**

Wulfstan had again supported Eric and Eadred had by now had enough of him. He was arrested but was not killed. He was not imprisoned either but spent the last years of his life in Dorchester, still holding his position as Arch-Bishop of York but never being allowed to return there.

### **Egill Skallagrimsson and Bloodaxe\_**

In Egil's saga, Egil killed one of Bloodaxe's retainers and became an enemy of Eric's wife. Gunnhild ordered her two brothers to kill Egil, but the ferocious and warlike Egil slaughtered them both. Egil was then declared an outlaw by Eric. A party sent to capture Egil was slaughtered by him and then Egil managed to kill Eric's son Ragnald. Egil then laid a curse on Eric and his queen by erecting a pole with a horse's head on it. Apparently, a great insult. The saga then claims that some time later, that Egil was shipwrecked in Northumbria and was then captured and taken before Eric. Egil was sentenced to death but whilst awaiting execution, he wrote a 'Drapa', a heroic poem about Eric, who on hearing it, forgave Egil and released him.

Highly unlikely, one would think, but that's what the saga says. One will have to make their own mind up about that.

As with much of the history of this period, it is bot confusing and often contradictory. Maybe that's what makes it so interesting?