



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

# IVAR THE BONELESS

THE BOGEY MAN OR HERO OF THE VIKING AGE

# Versioning

**Version**

Draft

0.9

1.0

**Date**

27 July 2020

28 July 2020

29 Nov 2020

**Comments**

Original Draft

Reformatted

Initial Publication

# Contents

Ivar the Boneless – Bogeyman or Hero? .....	4
Introduction .....	4
All in a name .....	4
Reputation .....	4
Reputation .....	4
Ivar and the Great Heathen Army .....	5
Irish Campaign .....	5
Tribute .....	5
Death & Legacy .....	5

# Ivar the Boneless – Bogeyman or Hero?

## Introduction

Ivarr hinn Beinlausi or Hyngwar (in old English), Ivar the boneless, was said to be the first born son of Ragnar Lodbrok and his third wife, Aslaug.

### All in a name

Boneless may have derived from the Danish word 'Ben' which has two meanings in old Danish, namely leg and bone. Beinlausi could therefore mean boneless or legless.

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Another possible explanation could be the result of a mistake, namely a early medieval scholar with a limited knowledge of Latin may have misinterpreted the Latin word for 'Hated' ( Exosus) and written the words exos ( ex = without & os = bone) without bone.

If true, then Ivar should be known as Ivar the hated!

His name could also hint at the fact that he may have been impotent.

## Reputation

Whatever Ivar's physical defects were, he was said to be a man of great cunning, ferocity and cruelty but he was also a man who was considered to be a tactical genius, a master strategist who won many battles. Some sources suggest that he was also a berserker.

He was also known as Imar, the founder of the Ui Imair dynasty, that claimed to be the rightful rulers of York, Northumbria and Dublin during the 9th and early 10th centuries.

Anlaf Guthfrithson, the Viking ruler of Dublin, who was defeated at the battle of Brunanburh in 937 AD, claimed to be of the Ui Imair, and this was a major factor as to why he challenged the Anglo Saxon King, Athelstan. He believed that it was his birthright to be the King of York.

Ivar the boneless developed a reputation that spread genuine fear amongst his enemies and in 865, he led the Great Heathen Army in the invasion of England.

## Revenge

King Ella of Northumbria, had been responsible for executing Ivar's father, Ragnar Lodbrok and Ivar sought revenge.

Some sources state that Ivar tried to negotiate with Ella and just demanded enough land as could be covered by a large ox hide, which was granted, whereupon Ivar had the hide cut into very thin strips and marked out the outline of a huge fort.

This is clearly a complete rehashing of the ancient story of the Phoenician Queen Dido, who employed the same tactic to found the Punic city of Carthage in the 9th century BC.

## Ivar and the Great Heathen Army

Ivar did invade Northumberland and he defeated Ella and is said to have executed him ritually by having him 'Blood Eaged'.

Ivar then led the Great Heathen Army and occupied Nottingham. He was besieged by Burgred of Mercia and Ethelred of Wessex. A truce was agreed and Ivar's army left Nottingham and reoccupied York.

In 869, the Great Heathen Army invaded East Anglia and defeated King Edmund. Ivar executed the King, who then became known as Edmund the Martyr. The king was buried in a town which carries his name today, Bury St. Edmunds.

## Irish Campaign

Ivar also campaigned in Ireland and was the confederate of another Viking warlord, Olaf the white.

They besieged the Britons of Strathclyde at their great fortress of Dumbarton in 870 AD

After four months the fortress surrendered. Ivar slaughtered many of the defenders and enslaved many of the survivors.

It is claimed that the Vikings filled 200 ships with booty and slaves, which they then took back to Dublin.

The King of Strathclyde, one Artgal mac Dumnagual was captured at Dumbarton. He was later murdered by Ivar as a favour to the Pictish King Constantine the 1st.

Constantine the 1st was the uncle of the later King, Constantine the 2nd, who would be defeated at the battle of Brunanburh in 937 AD.

## Tribute

Constantine the 1st would appear to have been subjected to paying tribute to the Vikings of Dublin as he is known to have killed Olaf (also known as Anlaf) the white, when the Viking Chieftain came to extract further tribute.

It is not known if Ivar tried to exact any form of revenge for the killing of Olaf the White.

## Death & Legacy

Ivar died in Dublin in 873. There is a possibility that his body was taken and buried at Repton in Derbyshire, as the body of a high status Viking warrior has been discovered there. A boar's tusk was found with the warrior's skeleton and was positioned to mimic his penis. The warrior had died violently and the wounds indicate that his genitals had been severed.

But how could this possibly be Ivar?

The saga of Ragnar Lodbrok states that when William the Conqueror became King of England, that he visited Ivar's grave and had it opened. Ivar, apparently, had not decayed. It's nonsense of course and it is highly unlikely that the warrior in the grave at Repton will ever be identified.

Whatever, happened to Ivar, his legacy is that he was a great and feared Viking warrior, who led an eventful and often violent life. Whether or not that made him any worse than many of his contemporaries, well you will have to decide that for yourselves.

Several sagas do state that he was 'boneless' but his reputation as a fierce and ruthless warrior hardly fits with someone who had a severe disability and mobility issues. Is it possible that he developed a debilitating illness such as brittle bone disease?