



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

OWAIN THE FIRST

OF STRATHCLYDE

Versioning

Version

Draft

0.9

1.0

Date

27 July 2020

28 July 2020

29 Nov 2020

Comments

Original Draft

Reformatted

Initial Publication

Contents

Owain the First of Strathclyde.....	4
Introduction	4
The Picti or Picts	4
6th and 7th centuries	4
Discovering Owain.....	5
Athelstan	5
The Road to Brunanburh	6

Owain the first of Strathclyde

Introduction

Owain Ap Dyfnwal was a Northern British King who fought alongside Anlaf Guthfrithson and Constantine of Alba at the battle of Brunanburh in 937 AD.

He was king of Strathclyde, a kingdom of indigenous Britons, who's Kingdom was formed during the post Roman period when the ethnic groups of the British Isles fought to create independent countries during a period of political instability and foreign invasion.

The Picti or Picts

The Picti or Picts were the dominant power in what is now northern Scotland whilst Strathclyde (Strat Clut). Stretched from the lower valley of the river Clyde southwards into what is now Cumbria and the Lake District.

To the Anglo Saxons, they were known as the Straecledwealas (the Strathclyde Welsh) but they called themselves Cumbri, which meant 'fellow countrymen'. When you look at the modern Welsh name for Wales, Cymru, you clearly see the connection.

They had their Capital at Govern, now a part of Glasgow.

Like all of the emerging nations, the Kingdom of Strathclyde fought parochial wars against their neighbours like the Picts, who were a collection of indigenous tribes who had originally combined into a confederation to resist the Romans and who were named, collectively, by the them as Picti (painted people) in the late second century. Tribes with names such as the Caledonii, the Selgovae, Damnonii and the Taexli amongst many others, were universally considered to be Picts by the Romans.

On their southern and eastern borders, the people of Strathclyde had to contend with the latest post Roman invaders of Britain, namely the Anglo Saxons. The Northumbrians were Strathclyde's competitors for centuries and at the height of their power, their border reached to the Firth of Forth. Edinburgh (Edin's burh) was founded by the Anglo-Saxons.

6th and 7th centuries

In the 6th and 7th centuries, an Irish tribe, the Scots, carved out their own Kingdom in what is now Argyle, called Dal Riata.

These Kingdoms would sometimes be allies or sometimes they fought each other but in the 9th century a new people would arrive and set in motion a chain of events which would change the British Isles forever. The Vikings had come.

Pertinent to this story, is the situation in Strathclyde in the 10th century. The Kingdom would find itself allied to the Scots and the Hiberno Norse in a war against the Anglo Saxons, led by King Athelstan. At this time, the Picts and the Scots were now forming into one people and the Scottish King, Constantine, could claim to be the first King of the Scots, whereas, his Grandfather, Cinead mac Alipin was the last great King of the Picts.

The Viking incursions had been the catalyst for the decline of the Picts, with the Shetlands, Orkney Islands and the Hebrides becoming Norse. Caithness and Sutherland would come under Norse control, forcing the Picts and Scots to unify.

Discovering Owain

Not a great deal is known about Owain and we don't know when he succeeded to the throne but it is possible that in 918, that he was present at the battle of Corbridge, when Strathclyde, Alba and Mercia fought a battle against the Vikings at Corbridge. The Mercians were led by Aethelflaed. It is not known if Owain was King of Strathclyde or as to whether he was the heir in waiting, and in fact there is no known record naming the leader of the Strathclyde army, so we cannot be sure.

At this time, the people of Strathclyde seemed to prefer to call their Kingdom Cumbria.

At some time after June in 918, there was a devastating attack by the Vikings upon Strathclyde. Aethelflaed had promised before her death (June 918) to aid Strathclyde if it were to be attacked but there is no record of a Mercian army having gone to the Kingdom's assistance.

By 920, the Anglo Saxon chronicle records that all the Northern Kings including Strathclyde's acknowledged King Edward the elder as their overlord but there is no evidence which suggests that Edward had led any campaign in the north, so it is possible that his overlordship was sought and accepted by the Kingdoms as a security measure to prevent warfare amongst themselves or to gain a powerful ally against an external threat, namely the Vikings.

We know that Ragnall, the Viking ruler in York, also acknowledged Edward as overlord so with all three northern powers allied to Edward, anyone attacking one of his allies was, basically an oath breaker and a rebel.

Athelstan

Athelstan succeeded to the throne Mercia upon Edwards death in 924 AD and then to the throne of Wessex 13 months later. Now the Anglo Saxons were the dominant force within the British Isles. On their own, none of the other nations could compete militarily against them.

In 927 AD, the Viking ruler of York, Sihtric died and the throne was seized by one Guthfrith, the Viking ruler of Dublin. Athelstan went north immediately. No record of any fighting is known and it appears the Guthfrith fled. Guthfrith, of course was the father of Anlaf Guthfrisson , who Athelstan would defeat at Brunanburh in 937 AD.

It appears that Guthfrith sought refuge in either Strathclyde or Alba. Athelstan demanded that the respective Kings hand him over.

They didn't and we know that Guthfrith was back in Dublin in late 927 AD.

The fact that Athelstan had crossed the Humber with an Anglo Saxon army, the first king of Wessex, ever to have done so, must have concerned the Northern Kingdoms who were now in no doubt about Athelstan's capabilities and determination.

Athelstan summoned all the Kings of Northern Britain to meet him at Eamont where they swore fealty to him. Several Welsh rulers may have attended too but Athelstan held a separate meeting with them at Hereford later that year.

In 934, Athelstan invaded Alba and Strathclyde and ravaged the Kingdoms. No record of what caused this is known. No records of any battles fought are known either. The invasion was a sustained assault upon Alba and Strathclyde both brutal and devastating and the Kings of Alba and Strathclyde soon came begging for peace.

Had Athelstan demanded too much tribute? Why had the Northern Kings broken their pledges made at Eamont? We just don't know.

They submitted to him and there is little doubt that punitive penalties were imposed. The road to Brunanburh was now appearing.

The Road to Brunanburh

In 937, Anlaf Guthfrisson, Constantine of Scotland and Owain of Strathclyde went down in defeat to Athelstan at Brunanburh.

Owain may have died in the battle. Some sources suggest this.

Others indicate that he survived.

Why had these former enemies formed a coalition to take on Athelstan? Did the Northern Kings see an opportunity to support a Viking ruler in control of Northumberland and to create a buffer state between them and the Anglo Saxons, Possibly?

Athelstan died in 927 and Anlaf was back in York within weeks. If Owain had survived Brunanburh as Constantine certainly had, he was ruling his Kingdom and appears to have lost no territory. Why had Athelstan not attempted to overpower the Northern Kingdoms, immediately after Brunanburh? Again no documentary evidence is known which could answer these questions.

Athelstan's successor, Edmund took two years to rid York of Anlaf. In those two years Anlaf had seized the area known as the five boroughs of the Danelaw, namely Leicester, Derby, Lincoln, Stamford and Nottingham.

Immediately after ridding himself of Anlaf, who was killed raiding in Northumberland in 941, Edmund struck a deal with Constantine's successor, Malcolm the 1st to attack and subject Strathclyde and to rule it on behalf him. One Owain was the ruler of Strathclyde, but we can't be sure if this was the same Owain who had fought at Brunanburh. There is no record of what happened to this Owain, but two of his sons were captured and Edmund ordered Malcolm to blind them.

Opportunists, the lot of them.

This proved to be the beginning of the Scotland that we know today and Strathclyde became a region of that country