



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

# RAGNAR LODBROK

MAN, MYTH OR TALL STORY

# Versioning

<b>Version</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Draft	14 December 2020	Original Draft
0.9	15 December 2020	Reformatted
1.0	16 December 2020	Initial Publication

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# Ragnar Lodbrok – Man, Myth or Tall Story

## Introduction

The popular TV series 'VIKINGS' has ignited a renewed interest in the period of early medieval history and whilst entertaining, many of the characters are fictitious and most of the events never occurred in the fashion in which they have been portrayed even if they occurred at all.

### Ragnar Lodbrok

Ragnar LODBROK (hairy britches) cannot be confirmed as having been an actual person. Some sources suggest that he is an amalgamation of several various individuals, a Scandinavian version of a Robin Hood type legend.

There is, of course, the Ragnar saga, which claims that the great man was linked to the Volsung saga ( a 13th century poem about a dragon slayer and a cursed magical ring) but his connection to this has obviously been invented to enhance Ragnar's heroic ancestral lineage. Ragnar was said to have attained Kingship in both Sweden and Denmark but this cannot be verified from any known records.

The legendary sons of Ragnar, or at least the individuals who claimed to be his sons, most certainly were historical individuals whose actions and adventures are pivotal to the Viking age in Britain and Ireland and whose feats have been recorded in various medieval chronicles and Viking sagas but even so, contradictions abound with regards to all of them.

### The sons of Ragnar

Bjorn Ironside, Ubba, Ivar the boneless, Halfdan, Hvitserk and Sigurd snake in the eye all existed and were siblings.

Bjorn would eventually become King of Sweden and would die in his bed, Ubba would be killed at the battle of Cynwit, in Devon, in 878AD, Ivar and Halfdan would command the Great Heathen Army ( The Mycel Haethen Here) which operated in England between 865 and 878 AD. Halfdan would eventually die fighting rival Vikings at the battle of Strangford Lough in what is now Northern Ireland, in 877AD, whilst Sigurd snake in the eye, may have become a King in Denmark in or around 873AD. Ivar the boneless would die in Dublin in 873AD. His body may have been taken to Repton in Derbyshire for burial but this is not proven as of yet. Hvitserk's death is debatable. One source suggests that he died fighting at Strangford Lough along with his brother Halfdan whilst another source states that he was killed fighting for the Kievan Rus. Captured by the enemy, legend states that he was burnt at the stake on a pyre of human bones.

### Vikings TV series

In the series Vikings, a woman called Lagertha is portrayed as the wife of Ragnar and the mother of Bjorn. It is almost certain that Lagertha the shield maiden is purely fictitious and never existed.

Ragnar may have had three wives but his third one is known to have been called Aslaug and she was the mother of Bjorn Ironsides, Ivar the boneless and Sigurd snake in the eye. Aslaug may have been Halfdan's mother but this cannot be confirmed. Hvitserk's mother is, likewise, unconfirmed.

Looking back to the deeds of Ragnar, he supposedly conducted several successful raids in England as well as having laid siege to Paris in 845 AD. The Vikings certainly did lay siege to Paris and managed to enter and sack the city before being paid off to leave by the Frankish King, Charles the simple. The price was an incredible 7000 pounds of gold and silver.

### Ragnar's death

Ragnar's death is said to have come at the hands of the Northumbrian King, Aella, sometime between 852 and 856 AD. Captured by Aella, Ragnar was allegedly thrown into a pit of snakes. Whilst Britain does have a species of poisonous snake, the adder, it is unlikely that this form of execution was a viable method to use.

The odds favour this event as a legendary myth designed to enhance the reputation of Ragnar. A heroic and unusual death that would instantly be remembered?

One source records that when he learnt of his impending fate that he made two comments, namely “Laughing shall I die” whilst the other was “ Oh, how the little piggies will grunt if they knew how the old boar suffers”. The latter phrase obviously a threat to Aella, that his sons would extract revenge.

It is more likely that Ragnar met his death raiding the Irish or English coasts of the Irish Sea.

### **Norse sources**

Norse sources (The tale of Ragnar’s sons) state that King Aella of Northumbria was captured by Ragnar’s sons and that he was tortured before being subjected to a ritual killing, namely he was ‘blood eagled’ ( see separate article about the blood eagle). Anglo Saxon sources, however, state that he was killed in a battle at York on the 21st of March 867AD.

As with so many events that occurred during the early Viking period, conflicting stories and monastic records are confusing and the sagas really were not written down until the 13th century. It’s doubtful that we will ever know the true sequence of events or as to which historical figures actually lived or which of them were mythological legends.

You’ll have to make your own mind up.