



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

SWEYN FORKBEARD

AND THE VIKING KINGS OF ENGLAND

Contents

Sweyn Forkbeard.....	3
Introduction.....	3
First Viking Age.....	3
The Dane-geld by Rudyard Kipling.....	3
1013, King Sweyn Forkbeard.....	4
991.....	5
1002.....	5
Ethelred.....	6
1015.....	6
Edmund Ironside.....	6
Cnut and Edmund.....	8
Death of Hardicanute.....	8

Sweyn Forkbeard

Introduction

Following Athelstan's victory at Brunanburh in 937 AD, a path lay open to a united England which would see a dynasty of Anglo-Saxon kings rule a country which had, after centuries of warfare with the Vikings finally defeated the northern menace.

First Viking Age

The so-called first Viking age had resulted in a much-changed nation with the population now including a substantial number of people of Viking stock especially in Northumbria and East Anglia, who had gradually, over the centuries become ever more entwined with the Saxon population. It can also be argued, that in Northumbria, that the mixing of both peoples had resulted in a people who were ferociously independent and who saw themselves as a race apart with many of the inhabitants considering themselves as a separate nation.

Athelstan can be considered the first true King of 'Englaland', as it was first called, but his reign was short-lived and the Vikings continued to present the fledgling nation with many issues and sporadic fighting would periodically occur.

The catalyst for the end of the first Viking war can be attributed to the death of the last Viking King of York, namely the infamous Harold Bloodaxe in 954 AD.

For a brief period, Anglo-Saxon ruled England had some respite from the Vikings but by the 990's Viking fleets began to appear in English waters and for the next quarter of a century, political instability and military crises caused by repeated Viking raids and attacks weakened the state and its ability to deal with the resurgent old enemy. Fortunes were paid in danegeld in an attempt to persuade the Vikings to leave the country in peace but the more money that was paid just encouraged further extortion which de-stabilised the nation.

The Dane-geld by Rudyard Kipling.

It is always a temptation to an armed and agile nation
to call upon a neighbour and to say: –
"We invaded you last night– we are quite prepared to fight,
Unless you pay us cash to go away."

And that is called asking for Dane—geld,
And the people who ask it explain
That you've only to pay 'em the Dane—geld
And then you'll get rid of the Dane!

It is always a temptation for a rich and lazy nation,
To puff and look important and to say: –
"Though we know we should defeat you,
we have not the time to meet you.
We will therefore pay you cash to go away."

And that is called paying the Dane—geld;
But we've proved it again and again,
That if once you have paid him the Dane—geld
You never get rid of the Dane.

It is wrong to put temptation in the path of any nation,

For fear they should succumb and go astray;
So, when you are requested to pay up or be molested,
You will find it better policy to say: —

“We never pay any—one Dane—geld,
No matter how trifling the cost;
For the end of that game is oppression and shame,
And the nation that plays it is lost!”

1013, King Sweyn Forkbeard

In 1013, King Sweyn Forkbeard brought things to a head by leading a full-scale invasion. Northumbria, submitted to him and as he moved south, most of the country did likewise.



Silver coin of Sweyn Forkbeard.

Sweyn had been raiding England since the 1003 and had amassed great wealth from the tribute he had collected.

Another Viking leader was also causing issues in England. He was Thorkell the Tall and he had landed in England in 1009 where he had remained until 1012. It's uncertain if Sweyn supported Thorkell but he certainly exploited the disruption that this Viking army had caused.



Silver penny of Ethelred the Unready.

The English King during this period was Ethelred the Unready. The name Unready is a play on the old English word '*unræd*' which meant, badly advised.

Ethelred was the son of Edgar the peaceful. His cognomen is misleading. He was a strong King who had maintained his military capability, thus preventing and deterring Viking interference. His son would not follow in his footsteps.

Ethelred was unable to emulate his father and it appears that he was indecisive and easily manipulated. Viking attacks became more frequent. In 987, the Vikings attacked Devon, the local Fyrd and the county's thegns fought them valiantly and then checked them at Lydford but this was the beginning of ever-increasing raids.

991

In 991 a Viking army fought a battle at Maldon and defeated the Anglo-Saxons. This was the event which prompted Ethelred to start paying the Vikings 'Danegeld'.

The attacks continued and the payment of 'Danegeld' just encouraged Viking raiding. In 1001, Devon was attacked again and the Vikings won a battle at Pinhoe.

1002

On the 13th of November 1002, Ethelred ordered the massacre of all Danes living in England. Saint Brice's day massacre as the event is now known resulted in possibly thousands of Danes, mostly people who had been settled in England for generations and who, by large, acknowledged Ethelred as King, being slaughtered.

Amongst those slain, reputedly, was one Gunhilde, the sister of the King of Denmark, Sweyn Forkbeard.



St. Brice's day massacre.

Danish armies would now raid England continuously and by 1013, Sweyn Forkbeard came with an invasion force himself. Most of the country submitted to him but an attack on London was beaten off. Thorkell the Tall had now thrown in his lot with Ethelred and he organised the defence of London. Sweyn withdrew but continued raiding other parts of the country. Ethelred's position was, by now untenable. He had lost the support of many of the Anglo-Saxon nobility who preferred Sweyn and saw him as a more worthy King. Ethelred and his sons fled into exile. One son, however remained. He was Edmund, called today, Edmund Ironside.

As fate would have it, Sweyn died on the 3rd of February 1014. He had ruled for just 5 weeks. His son Cnut was hailed as King by the Viking people of the Danelaw but the Anglo-Saxon Witan recalled Ethelred from his exile in Normandy. The Anglo-Saxon army deployed into the field forcing the Vikings and Cnut to flee.

Ethelred

Ethelred took many hostages and in an act of brutality he mutilated many of them.

Cnut fled back to Denmark where his elder brother had now been crowned as King and requested if it would be possible for them to rule jointly, His brother, Harold II refused the request.

1015

In the summer of 1015, Cnut returned to England leading a Viking army of some 10000 men. It mostly comprised of mercenaries and contained contingents of Swedish and Norwegian Vikings as well as Danes. Wessex submitted immediately and the Anglo-Saxon ealdorman of Mercia, Eadric Streona swore allegiance to Cnut and brought a fleet of 40 ships to join the Viking army. It is also believed that Cnut's army also had a number of the famed Jomsborg Vikings within his ranks.

Ethelred's response seems feeble. He could not raise a field army to oppose the invaders. Confidence in this Anglo-Saxon King was severely lacking.

Edmund Ironside

Edmund Ironside, however was admired and drew support. He and Uhtred (The real historical one) Earl of Northumbria, ravaged much of Staffordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire attacking supporters of Streona. Cnut had responded by placing appointing a rival of Uhtred's as Earl of Northumbria, namely Thurbrand the Hold. Uhtred abandoned Edmund and went to submit to Cnut but was murdered by supporters of Thurbrand, probably at the instigation of Cnut himself. This would start a blood feud between the respective families that lasted for decades.



Coin of Cnut, a silver penny.

Ethelred the Unready had died on the 23rd of April 1016 and Edmund was now proclaimed King London was by now under siege by the Vikings. Edmund Ironside then took action. He confronted a Viking army at the battle of Pensewood. The resulting battle proved inconclusive with neither side being able to claim a victory. A two-day battle then took place at Sherston, but again, neither side could claim a tactical or strategic victory.

Subsequently, Edmund defeated the Vikings at the battle of Brentford which forced the Vikings to abandon the siege of London and then to retreat into Kent. Edmund followed the Danes and confronted them at Otford. It was a Saxon Victory and now things began to look perilous for Cnut. Eadric Streona now went over to Edmund. Why Edmund accepted this Earls loyalty after his earlier treachery is not understood but it was a decision that the English King would live to regret.

On the 18th of October 1016 the Saxons and Vikings clashed at the great battle of Assandun. In the midst of the battle, Streona withdrew his forces which gave Cnut a victory. Edmund retreated to the west and based his army near to the forest of Dean. Another battle ensued which was also inconclusive. Edmund, however, is believed to have been wounded. There was now a status quo with neither side seemingly being able to deliver a killer blow. The rate of attrition in the sequence of battles must have severely depleted the resources on both sides.

Cnut and Edmund

Cnut and Edmund agreed to meet near Deerhurst in Gloucestershire, where it was settled that Cnut would retain all lands north of the Thames whilst Edmund would keep the south and London. It was also agreed that Cnut would become sole King of England upon Edmund's death if he died before the Viking leader. As the fates would have it, Edmund died in the November of 1016. Whether he died of wounds or was murdered cannot be verified but Wessex now accepted Cnut as King of all England.

Whilst Cnut was certainly a Viking King, his rule in England effectively caused a merging of the two peoples. He stopped any further Viking raids on England and he duly inherited the thrones of Denmark and Norway, including portions of what is now Sweden. England was now part of a Scandinavian Empire.

As with all medieval Kings, Cnut disposed of any Anglo-Saxon heirs to the throne and he did marry Ethelred's widow Queen Emma. England became prosperous under Cnut and he proved to be a good King, at least by the standards of the day. He would rule for 20 years.



This bone chest at Winchester Cathedral holds the remains of several Anglo-Saxon and Viking worthies, including those of Cnut and Queen Emma.

Two further Viking Kings would rule in England. Harold I Harefoot between 1037-1040 and Hardicanute, between the years 1040 and 1042.

Death of Hardicanute

Following the death of Hardicanute, the Dynastic house of Wessex was restored with Edward the Confessor as King. He ruled until January 1066 and was succeeded by Harold Godwinson.

Harold would defeat the last great Viking invasion at Stamford Bridge on the 25th of September 1066. Then we all know what happened on the 14th of October.

In all, Anglo-Saxon England was a relatively short-lived thing.