



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

THE BATTLE OF CHESTER

613 - 616

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The Battle of Chester 613 - 616

Introduction

Aethelfrith can be considered as the first great King of Northumbria. He was one of the last northern pagan Kings and he was descended from a long line of warrior ancestors. He detested Christian priests and had a reputation of being ruthless with both them and his other enemies.

Aethelfrith

He would reign for 25 years and in that time, he ensured that his realm stretched from what we now call the Scottish borders to the river Trent and west to the river Dee and the city of Chester.

603 AD

In 603 AD, his Northumbrian army had defeated a Celtic army consisting of Scots, Picts, Northern Britons and Irish at Degaestan. The defeat of the Celtic forces made Aethelfrith the most feared ruler in northern Britain but his ambitions were to spread his Kingdom southwards and he absorbed the Anglian Kingdom of Deira an area that covered what is now modern Yorkshire.

He then turned his attention to the west and set his sights on the Welsh/British city of Caer legion, modern day Chester.

We don't know what the 'Casus Belli' for his impending war was with the Western Britons and it may have just been part of his ambition to increase the size of his Empire but the armies would meet in battle outside of the city walls at Caer legion sometime between 613 and 616.

Different sources ensure that there is confusion pertaining to the actual date but we know that a battle did take place and the Anglo-Saxons of Northumbria were victorious.

No details of the actual battle exist, they rarely do, but physical evidence has been found which almost certainly proves that the battle was fought on the banks of the river Dee at modern day Heronbridge, between the walls of Chester and the present - day village of Eccleston.

The British forces and their Mercian Allies.

Chester was defended by Selyf ap Cynan, a prince of Powys. His Anglicised name would be Solomon. Bede calls the Aethelfrith's opponents 'Faithless Britons' but whether this refers to the Celtic church's rejection of the Catholic Roman church or, possibly, the Welsh refusing to pay tribute to the Northumbrian King cannot be ascertained. What is beyond doubt, is that Bede considered the Britons to be heretics. Arrayed against the Northumbrians were the forces of Powys led by Selyf ap Cynan, those of Rhos (Gwynedd) and Mercia, led by their King, Cearl. All the British leaders possibly died in the battle.

The battle of Chester's claim to fame relates to the story of the alleged massacre of British monks and priests. There are claims that anything between 200 and 10000 clergymen were massacred on the instructions of Aethelfrith but the figures are clearly exaggerated.

These clergy men had supposedly come from the monastery at Bangor on Dee, but that establishment could barely have supported 200 of them so figures in the high hundreds or thousands are not valid or even feasible.

That the clergymen were slaughtered is accepted, because the Welsh sources refer to the event as the massacre of the saints.

The story goes, according to Bede, that only one Welsh warrior, a man called Brocmail, was instructed to guard the clergymen, who Bede claimed were divided into seven groups, each with their own head priest and that each group contained at least 300 individuals.

One possible monk was one Iago ap Beli, from the Royal House of Gwynedd who had retired from a public life to serve the Church, a common practice during this period.

Aethelfrith, seeing these unprotected monks ordered his warriors to attack and slaughter them. Brocmail is claimed to have fled and that all the clergymen were then slaughtered without mercy. A later entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that 200 monks were put to death, which may be nearer the truth. Irish sources also quote this number.



Above. A possible scenario for the battle of Chester.

Britons/Welsh

The Britons/Welsh probably arrayed themselves across the fields in front of the modern-day bridge over the river Dee. Modern day Eaton Road follows the line of the ancient Roman road. It is possible that the British clergymen positioned themselves near to the river bank just under the modern bridge. The Northumbrians

likely positioned themselves in front of the earthworks which can be seen in the second field adjacent to the river.

Nothing more is known about the details of the battle, other than the Northumbrians were victorious and that Chester then became an Anglo-Saxon city.

The Anglo-Saxon chronicle records the following.

And her Æðelfrið lædde his færde to Legercyeestre, ȝ ðar ofsloh unrim Walena. ȝ swa wearþ gefyld Augustinus witegunge. þe he cwæþ. Gif Wealas nellað sibbe wið us. hi sculan æt Seaxana handa farwurþan. þar man sloh eac .cc. preosta ða comon ðyder þæt hi scoldon gebiddan for Walena here. Scrocmail was gehaten heora ealdormann. se atbærst ðanon fiftiga sum.

Æðelfrið

And here Æðelfrið led his army to Chester, and there slew countless Welsh. And came about Augustinus's prophecy, that he said "If they do not have peace with us, they will die at the hands of the Saxons." There also were slain 200 priests who came there to pray for the Welsh army. Scrocmail was called their leader, and he escaped as one of fifty."

1951

It was in 1951 that a number of skeletons were found at Heronbridge. They had been buried in the ramparts of a possible fort which

stood on an ancient Roman industrial site between the river Dee and Eaton Road, which runs from Chester to Eccleston. The bodies displayed evidence of violent trauma. The remains of the ramparts are visible, still, today. The area encloses some 15 acres, possibly a few more.

Radio – Carbon Dating

In 1951, radio-carbon dating was problematic, but further excavations between 2002 and 2007 revealed the remains of about 112 bodies. Again, the bodies showed signs of violent injury and some even displayed healed wounds which suggests that these were warriors who had survived previous battles.



The earthworks shown above is where the remains of 112 skeletons were recovered, all showing signs of violent trauma. Radio carbon dating shows that they had come from the North and that they had died in the early 7th century.

Radio carbon dating placed the age of the bodies at around 600 AD with a confidence factor of 94%. The remains also revealed that these people had come from the north of England, enforcing the fact that they were Northumbrians.



SKULL FROM HERONBRIDGE. LIKELY A NORTHUMBRIAN WARRIOR. MANCHESTER MUSEUM.

Burial also fits with Northumbrian disposal practices of the period as Deira still practiced cremation.

The discovery of the bodies was a chance find as it was the Roman site that was under investigation.

What was the aftermath of the battle of Chester?

It was once claimed that the battle of Chester resulted in the Britons of what is now Wales being cut off from the Celtic Kingdoms of the 'Old North' (Hen Ogledd). It may have caused some initial issues but the fact that the Kingdom of Rheged survived for another century and that Strathclyde survived as an entity until it was finally absorbed into the nation of Scotland in 1030, suggests that this was not the case.

As with most of these early medieval battles, it is nigh impossible to understand what actually happened and the chances of ever understanding the course of events is remote, none the less, the battle of Chester was an important event in the evolution of the British Isles.



Northumbrian dead from the battle of Chester
Image from Chester wiki site