



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

THE BATTLE OF CYNWIT

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The Battle of Cynwit – AD878

Introduction

The defeat of Ubba Ragnarsson and the Vikings

The battle of Cynwit is a little known engagement yet it was important for a number of reasons. Ubba Ragnarsson, son of the legendary Ragnar Ladbok and brother to Ivar the boneless, Halfdan Ragnarsson, Sigurd snake in the eye, Hvitserk and Bjorn Ironside, landed with an army in Devon. The Vikings are said to have arrived in a fleet of 23 ships and to have numbered 1200 men.

Asser

Asser, King Alfred's Welsh priest and chronicler recorded that the West Saxon army, commanded by Odda, the Ealderman of Devon had occupied an ancient fort overlooking the beach where the Vikings had landed. The location is debated but it is likely that the location is Countisbury hill, which rises above Lynmouth bay in North Devon. The hill rises to a height of some 254 metres and an ancient Iron Age hill fort stands on an area known as wind hill.

The size of the Anglo Saxon Force is unknown but they were positioned in a formidable position but their one potential weakness was that they had no source of fresh water.

Ubba

Ubba had his forces surround the hill fort and allegedly make preparation to lay siege to it. This opens up a number of possibilities. The Vikings were not renowned for executing sieges. There were exceptions, the siege and storming of Paris in 845 being one of them, but usually they preferred to fight in open battle or storm a defended position in the hope of overpowering it quickly.

Laying siege required them to surround a defended place, lay in sufficient provisions for their own army and risk disease and food shortages if it became protracted. The risk of an enemy relieving force was also a consideration so expediting the defeat of an entrenched enemy was critical.

As usual, no detailed account of the battle is known. The Anglo Saxon chronicle only makes a brief reference to it, yet, in reality this would be an important Anglo Saxon victory because of three pertinent factors. Firstly, this would be the first time during the reign of King Alfred, that a west Saxon army would defeat a Viking force without the King being present. Secondly, the Anglo Saxons captured the 'Hrefn' or raven banner.

The loss of the banner by the Vikings would have likely been seen as a disgrace and shameful, a bit akin to a Roman Legion losing its eagle standard, but what is poignant about this reference, it is the only occasion recorded within the Anglo Saxon chronicles of a Viking battle standard ever being captured, which is surprising, given that the Saxons inflicted more defeats on the Vikings than they, themselves, suffered. Thirdly and most significantly, the King himself was still taking refuge in the marshes of Athelney in Somerset after having been driven from the Royal estate at Chippenham, in early January. Wessex and Anglo Saxon England's existence was hanging by a thread. A Saxon defeat at Cynwit may have been fatal to the survival of Wessex and Anglo Saxon England.

If the Viking army had numbered 1200 men, then an attack on a defended position would be a precarious risk which would likely result in significant losses. We know that the Vikings were often reluctant to engage an enemy unless they thought that the odds were in their favour as they were critically aware that heavy losses could not be replaced and that even if they gained a victory, that they were then extremely vulnerable to further attacks from local populations or enemy reinforcements.

A high rate of attrition was something Ubba would not want to risk.

We don't know the size of Odda's force but it is assumed that the Devon fyrd was still a viable fighting force and it is likely that men from the surrounding shires could have been present. It's likely that Odda's force was similar or even larger than that of the Viking's but it is equally likely that the Vikings had the more experienced and battle hardened warriors.

Cornwall

Cornwall, a Celtic kingdom and an adjacent realm had supported the Vikings in 838 and had fought for them at the battle of Hingston Down against the West Saxons.

In the ensuing battle the Saxons defeated the combined Viking and Cornish armies. The Britons or Welsh of Cornwall would never again raise an army against Wessex.

Prior to the battle of Hingston Down, Cornwall had been attacked by King Egbert back in 814. The Saxons had ravished the land but had not been able to subjugate the Cornish. It's not clear as to what happened after this event, though the Cornish must have been simmering with resentment,

Whatever did go on resulted in a further battle between the Cornish and Wessex in 823 or 825 AD at Galford, which resulted in another Saxon victory.

Cornwall, at this time, may have been under the nominal control of Wessex but it was still Celtic in culture and in 878, given Alfred's then current position, there may have been a possibility that the Cornish would see an opportunity to overthrow the Saxon yoke, though there is no evidence that they supported Ubba at Cynwit.

It is believed that Odda led his warriors out of the fort and that they launched an unexpected attack upon the Vikings. Ubba was slain along with a thousand of his men. No mention is made as to what happened to the surviving Vikings or as to whether or not their ships were captured or burnt.

This moral boosting victory was the catalyst for Alfred's own rise back to prominence and in May 878, he won a major battle against Vikings at Edington. The resurgence of Wessex had begun.

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