



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

BATTLE OF DEGSASTAN

AETHELFRITH, PAGAN KING OF BERNICIA
'RAVIN AS A WOLF', 603AD

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The Battle of Degsastan. 603AD.

Introduction

Aethelfrith, pagan king of Bernicia - 'Ravin as a wolf'

The various clashes between the early Kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England were just as ferocious as those that would be fought against the later Viking incursions which began in the late 8th century.

Aethelfrith

The first of the great Anglo-Saxon Kings of the North, Aethelfrith, was also one of the last pagan English Kings. He was described by Bede as a powerful and ambitious warrior King who had subjected the Britons to more cruelty and ravaging of their lands than any other Anglo-Saxon leader.

Nennius called him Aethelfrith the Artful which more than hints that this was a cunning and dangerous man whom his enemies feared.

He reigned for twenty- five years and over that period he overran and occupied most of the lands between the river Solway and river Mersey and east to the river Trent. He was ruthless and slaughtered or enslaved his enemies. This was a King to be feared. Such was his impact on these lands and its peoples that the venerable Bede would take a passage from the Old Testament and applied it to Aethelfrith. He echoed the words of the Patriarch Jacob who said of his youngest son, "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoils"

Bede.

Bede, of course wasn't born until 673 AD. and, subsequently, did not write about Aethelfrith until long after this fearsome King had died, but it is clear that memory prevailed of this pagan warrior King and that his deeds and reputation were imprinted on the generations that followed.

There is a good reason as to why the placenames of the villages across the north of what is now England between the Solway firth and the river Mersey have English names and not British or Welsh ones and that reason is Aethelfrith.

To the North, in Dal Riata, the King of the Scots, Aedan mac Gabhrain, observed with some alarm, the growing power of the Anglian King. The Scottish King was a Christian, a follower of the Celtic church and a personal friend of St. Columba, the Irish saint and founder of the monastic settlement of Iona. Allied to the Britons of Strathclyde, Aedan was well aware of the disaster that had befallen the Celtic Britons at the battle of Catraeth (Catricken) which had occurred sometime between 570 and 600 AD. In that battle 300 British or Welsh heroes and their followers rode to defeat against the Angles, and whose glorious deaths against overwhelming odds, is immortalised in the Welsh war poem, the Gododdin.

Aethelfrith's father, Athelric, also known as Adda 'thick-knee' was the likely Bernician leader at the battle of Catraeth as it is recorded that he captured York in 580 AD.

King Aedan of Dal Riata

King Aedan of Dal Riata was rightly concerned about Aethelfrith's motives and expansionist policies The king sought the assistance of the remaining British peoples of the north and formed a coalition of Scots, Picts, Britons of Strathclyde and Irishmen from Tara (Now Ulster). The brother of the high King of Ireland, commanded the Irish contingent. His name was Mael Umai.

The Anglian army was led by Aethelfrith's brother, Theodbald and one Hering. The troops of these two leaders fought in separate divisions. Both leaders had brought their hearth-troops to the battlefield. These were professional warriors, who had sworn allegiance to their respective leaders and who would fight to the death if their leader was killed. Tradition demanded this. To survive a battle once your Lord had been killed was deemed to be an unforgivable disgrace.

It is believed that the Anglian army was smaller than that of Aedan's but it was battle hardened and experienced. In the manner of the Anglo-Saxons, the hearth troops rode to battle but dismounted to fight. The ordinary levies marched to war and fought on foot.

Aedan

Aedan's army likewise consisted of infantry but the Britons of Strathclyde were renowned for using cavalry and fought in the manner of the units of the late Roman army.

As is all too common with these ancient battles, details are often lacking but there are some records describing this particular engagement.

Aedan's army is believed to have been about 5000 strong whilst the Anglian army may have numbered 3000 men. These were large numbers for that period.

Bede claimed that the battle of Degsastan was one of the largest battles to have been fought in Britain since the Anglo-Saxons had arrived.

The Celtic army was slaughtered and Aedan escaped the scene with a few survivors. Aedan's son, Domingart, is believed to have perished. The Irish took very heavy casualties and some sources state that Mael Umai was killed though others suggest that he survived. The Angles took heavy casualties too and Theodbald and his hearth troops are all said to have perished.



Liddesdale today. A wild and lonely place.

The battle was obviously a brutal and bloody affair and one that influenced the future of northern Britain. Had the coalition won, then it is a possibility that Britain may have been divided into two almost equal halves with the Celts ruling the North and the Anglo-Saxon peoples controlling the south. The victory however ensured that Northumbria would evolve into the powerhouse of an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom over the course of the following century.

Bede recorded that after Degsastan, that no King of the Scots dare bring an army into the land of the Angles.

Some 300 plus years later, another coalition of Celtic peoples, this time allied with the Norse and Irish, would suffer an even greater defeat on the field of Brunanburh.

Where then was Degsastan? Again, we have a famous battlefield which has gone missing, as virtually all ancient fields of conflict in Britain have.

Daegsan Stane or 'Degsa's Stone' suggest that a local landmark such as a standing stone was the place of battle. Dawston Rigg in Liddesdale in the Scottish borders is the preferred candidate, but there is no actual physical evidence that currently supports this location.

