



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

BATTLE OF HOLME

AND AETHELWOLD'S REVOLT 899 - 902

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The Battle of Holme

Introduction

Aethelwold was the only surviving son of Alfred the Great's brother, the former King Aethelred the first of Wessex.

When Aethelwold's father died, he was considered too young to have been a suitable King, which led to the Witan of Wessex electing Alfred to the throne.

Edward

When Alfred died on the 26th of October 899, his son Edward known as the Elder, was elected as King of the Anglo Saxons, though he would not be crowned until the 8th of June, 900 AD.

Aethelwold believed that his claim to the throne was valid and that it superseded that of Edward. What he didn't comprehend, was the fact that Alfred's successful establishment of an Anglo Saxon realm incorporating Wessex and Mercia had begun to unify the nation and though still in a formative stage, Anglo Saxon power was both growing and now capable of resisting and defeating the Norse and Danes.

Aethelwold misjudged the legacy left by Alfred. He wanted the crown, after all he was an aetheling (Prince) and believed that it was his birthright.

Aethelwold

Aethelwold had some support and upon the crowning of Edward, he went into open revolt. His father, King Aethelred had been buried at Wimborne in Dorset and this was the first place that Aethelwold occupied before seizing Christchurch.

Edward the Elder gathered an army and moved it to Badbury. It appears that Aethelwold refused to meet Edward in battle and he fled to York where the Danes of Northumbria proclaimed him King of Wessex. The Danes saw the advantage of placing a 'puppet' King on the throne and saw an opportunity to attack Edward's realm.

Aethelwold also made an alliance with the Danes of Anglia and in the autumn of 902, he attacked Essex and then began raiding deep into Mercia and even attacked as far west as Cricklade in Wiltshire.

Edward retaliated

Edward retaliated by attacking the Danish settlements in Anglia. The rebel Saxons and the Danes were forced to return to Anglia in order to defend their settlements and to confront Edward and his army. Edward became aware of the approach of Aethelwold and his army and retreated northwards along the great north road. It is likely that he had selected a site from which to give battle.

The Kentish Fyrd, however, refused to follow Edward northwards and set out to confront Aethelwold. The site of the battle is disputed but it may well have taken place in the area of Glatton Lane near the village of Holme, Huntingdonshire, in what was then fenland.

13th of December 902

The battle took place on the 13th of December 902.

As with most early medieval battles, detail is lacking and often contradictory. The Anglo Saxon chronicle states that the men of Kent gave battle to the Danes and that a fierce and bloody confrontation took place. In the end the Danes were said to have held the ground at the place of slaughter, yet their army had been so severely savaged by the Kentish Fyrd, that it was now impotent and no longer a viable fighting force. The Danish King of East Anglia, Eohric lay dead as did the would be usurper, Aethelwold. Other Danish leaders and members of their nobility also died. The Anglo Saxon chronicle names them as Yusopa, Ocytel, both Danish nobles, Beorhtsige and Beornoth, rebel Saxons.

The named noble Anglo Saxon dead are named as Sigehelm, Cenwulf, Eadwold, Sigewulf and Sigeburth. The fact that so many of each army's leaders are known to have died shows that this was a vicious fight with neither side willing to yield.

The battle of the Holme was very much a Pyrrhic victory for the Danes but it ended what was a Civil war and nullified the Danes of East Anglia.

Whilst it appears that Edward the elder and the men of Wessex did not become involved in the fighting at the Holme, there is some inference that his failure to bring his army to the fight and to support the men of Kent resulted in an undermining of his authority, especially in Kent and Essex.

919

In 919 Edward the Elder married his third wife, Eadgifu, the daughter of the Kentish leader, Sigehelm, who had died at the Holme. In the years after the battle, Edward had continued to keep the Vikings in check and had inflicted a heavy defeat on them at Tettenhall in 910, with the help of his sister, Aethelflaed, of Mercia. The wars with the Danes continued but by 917, Edward and Aethelflaed were getting on top of the struggle and a Danish army was heavily defeated at Tempsford.

In 918, the Danish Vikings of York submitted to Aethelflaed in order to obtain protection from the Norse Vikings from Dublin.

By 918, all peoples south of the Humber had submitted to Edward's rule. Saxons and the Danes of the Danelaw were now becoming integrated. Edward had successfully completed the conquest of the Southern Danelaw, which was now an Anglo Saxon protectorate.