



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

THE LAST VIKING INVASION

THE BATTLE OF STAMFORD BRIDGE, 25/09/1066

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THE BATTLE OF STAMFORD BRIDGE, 25/09/1066

Introduction

The first recorded Viking attack on England occurred in 793. Some 273 years later, after endemic warfare, dynastic changes, a merging of Anglo Saxon and Norse culture and the triumph of the Christian Church over paganism, the Viking age in England effectively came to a bloody and dramatic end at great battle of Stamford Bridge.

The Battle of Stamford Bridge. 25th September 1066.

1066 is remembered as one of, if not the most dramatic years in English history. Three Kings would do battle for the Kingdom and the fate of the Nation would be decided at Hastings on the 14th of October, in a close run battle which would see William of Normandy ascend to the throne even though he would be plagued by revolts and rebellions by the Anglo Norse population for years to come.

The Anglo Saxons. Harold Godwinson

King Harold the 2nd, namely Harold Godwinson ascended to the throne of England upon the death of King Edward the Confessor on the 6th of January 1066.

Godwinson himself was half Danish with his mother being a blood relative of Sweyn Forkbeard, a former King of England, whilst his father, Godwin was the powerful Earl of Wessex.

Harold was a formidable military commander, impetuous and brave and had fought successful campaigns against the Welsh eventually defeating the belligerent Welsh King Gruffydd Ap Llewelyn.

He had also commanded an Anglo Saxon fleet, which in 1049, was sent to support the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry the 3rd, in his war against Baldwin IV, Count of Flanders.

Harold had been involved in the political intrigues that had existed at the Court of Edward the Confessor and had accompanied his father into exile in 1051, following his father's refusal to punish the people of Dover for attacking and beating up troops of Count Eustace of Boulogne who had landed at the port.

His father was pardoned a year later and Harold returned to the Royal court and by 1053, he had become the Earl of Wessex, thus becoming the most powerful man in England after the King.

The intrigues that had occurred within Harold's family were complex and included an incident, when his older brother, Sweyn abducted the abbess of Leominster and was punished by being sent into exile. Sweyn's lands were given to Harold and a cousin of his, called Beorn. This eventually led to a dispute between the three of them which resulted in Sweyn kidnapping and murdering Beorn.

Harold had a number of brothers, one of whom was Tostig, who would die at Stamford Bridge, fighting for the Vikings.

Tostig had been the Earl of Northumberland but was hated by his Anglo Norse subjects. He had assassinated political rivals, imposed oppressive taxation and had failed to deal with frequent and destructive raids by the Scots.

In October 1065, the Thengs of Northumberland took the city of York and killed many of Tostig's supporters and officials. They declared Morcar as Earl of Northumberland and he was supported by his brother, Edwin, Earl of Mercia.

Tostig was declared an outlaw.

Harold Godwinson met with the rebels at Northampton and realised that Tostig's position was untenable. On his return to the Royal Court, he persuaded King Edward to officially declare Tostig as an Outlaw. Tostig could now be killed by anyone.

Tostig would eventually flee to the Court of King Harold Hardrada in Norway who saw an opportunity to seize the throne of England. The die was cast. A Viking invasion was coming.

Across the channel, William, known as the Bastard, Duke of Normandy was also monitoring the political situation in England. He believed that he had a claim to the English throne and considered that he would be the rightful King upon the death of Edward the Confessor.

There is much dispute as to why William felt entitled to the Kingship of England.

The Normans recorded that in 1064, that Harold Godwinson had been shipwrecked on the coast of Normandy and that Harold had been taken hostage by the Count of Ponthieu.

William demanded Harold's release and the two are then said to have fought together, defeating Conan the 2nd, Duke of Brittany in battle. William knighted Harold for his assistance and plied him with gifts.

Harold supposedly swore an oath on holy relics supporting William's succession to the throne of England and offered his fealty.

There is also a suggestion that the Norman arch Bishop of Canterbury had told William, that his kinsman, Edward the Confessor had elected that William was his rightful heir.

These stories seem somewhat at odds with Anglo Saxon law. It was the Witan who elected any new King and he did not necessarily have to be the son of the previous King. Succession depended on ability and was not automatic.

Did William invent these stories to justify his later invasion and to gain the support of the Pope and the Church?

Harald Hardrada, Harald Siggurdsson, king of Norway. 1046 - 1066.

Hardrada, namely hard ruler, was the archetypal Viking. His story is one of high adventure.

He fought at the battle of Stiklestad in 1030, alongside his brother, Olaf Haraldsson (The future Saint Olaf). He was 15 years old. Stiklestad was one of the most important battles in Norwegian history.

Olaf was an aggressive and autocratic King. The enemy of the day were rival nobles, peasants and farmers loyal to King Cnut, king of England and Denmark. Olaf was killed and the rebel army gained a decisive victory. Norway became part of Cnut's Empire.

Harald fled into exile and became a mercenary in the east, serving, firstly as a commander in the armies of the Kievan Rus before making his way to Constantinople, and enlisting in the Varangian Guard. He eventually became a commander in the Guard and fought in the Middle East, Sicily, the Holy Land, Bulgaria and on the Mediterranean Sea.

Harald had fought against many peoples and had become a highly effective commander. When serving in the armies of the Rus he had fought against Poles, Pechenegs and other Steppe peoples. He also fought against the Byzantines or the Eastern Roman Empire.

When in Byzantine service he fought against Arabs and Saracens and against the Normans in Sicily. He also took part in the Byzantine operation to suppress a revolt in Bulgaria. In all, Harald is said to have taken part in 18 battles whilst in the service of the Byzantine Empire. Whilst fighting against the Bulgarians he acquired the nick name, 'Bolgara brennir' (Bulgar Burner) given by his skald. No details are known as to how he obtained this name but one can imagine why!

In 1041, the Byzantine Emperor, Michael IV died and Harald lost favour at the Imperial Court during what was a period of political discord between the new Emperor, Michael V and the powerful Empress, Zoe.

Various sources state that Harald suffered a number of fates when he fell out of favour at Court. One source stated that he was imprisoned for murder, whilst another states that he defiled a Noble woman whilst another states that he was accused of stealing treasure from the Emperor. We don't know what really happened and the allegations may have been designed to undermine his position in the Varangian Guard. One story states that he had been imprisoned but had escaped and that he, together with members of the Varangian Guard who remained loyal to him, captured the Emperor, Michael V and that Harald was responsible for personally blinding him.

It's unlikely that we will ever know the truth.

What is certain, is that Harald fled Byzantine service and returned, initially to the Kievan Rus, where he married the daughter of the Grand Prince of Kiev, Yaroslav the Wise. His bride was called Elisiv.

Harald then made his way to Sweden where he plotted to seize the Crown of Norway. His nephew, Magnus the Good, was the King of Norway and Denmark.

Magnus was under threat from a would be usurper, namely Sweyn the 2nd who claimed that he was the rightful King of Denmark. Harald made a pact with Sweyn in order that they could remove Magnus and take Norway and Denmark. War looked inevitable but Magnus refused to fight against his uncle and they agreed

to share the Kingdom. Harald agreed to share the incredible wealth that he had accumulated from his eastern adventures with Magnus in return for joint rule.

This sudden change in alliances now made Harald an enemy of his former ally, Sweyn, who had seized power in Denmark.

After a year of sharing the Kingdom, Magnus suddenly died and Harald found himself the sole King of Norway. The year was 1047.

Harald now claimed the Danish throne and for the following 17 years he launched attacks on Denmark. The ensuing war was bitterly fought and many battles were fought. Several Danish cities were sacked but Sweyn refused to yield or surrender. Sweyn was driven into exile in Sweden for a short period but he continued the war because he had the support of the Danish people as he was renowned for his generosity and kindness, whilst Hardrada was feared because of his uncompromising nature.

In 1064, Harald gave up his claim to the Danish throne and acknowledged Sweyn as the King of Denmark. Sweyn also acknowledged Harald as King of Norway. After 17 years of brutal warfare, Harald had gained nothing.

Tostig arrives at Harald Hardrada's Court

After being outlawed Tostig had fled and sought refuge in Flanders. He gathered his dispersed loyalists and began to raid southern England. He was eventually defeated by Morcar of Northumbria and Edwin of Mercia and was forced to flee to Scotland where he took refuge with King Malcolm. He spent the summer of 1066 there before sailing to Harald's court in Norway. Tostig persuaded Harald to invade England and offered him the Crown.

A fleet and an army was raised and in September 1066, the Vikings and their traitorous ally, Tostig, sailed into the river Humber.

On the 20th of September 1066, the Vikings defeated the Earls Morcar and Edwin at the battle of gate Fulford.

The Vikings and Tostig then moved to Stamford Bridge, just several miles away where they made camp and accepted the surrender of York.

The Viking fleet remained at Ricall, just under 10 miles south of York.

Harold Godwinson's 'Blitzkrieg' The coming of the English.

Harold had raised the Anglo Saxon army and had it stationed on the south coast awaiting the expected invasion from Normandy. He became aware of Hardrada's invasion in early September. The Vikings had sacked and burnt Scarborough and then defeated a local force in battle somewhere in the Holderness area.

Harold Godwinson, believing that the bad weather at that time had made the expected Norman invasion unlikely, took his forces north to York.

This forced march was an incredible feat for its time. The Anglo Saxon army left London on the 21st of September and arrived at Stamford Bridge on the morning of the 25th. A distance of nearly 200 miles. The Vikings were taken completely off guard.

Harold Godwinson had a reputation for taking immediate fast moving action. Tostig should have remembered that!

The battle of Stamford Bridge. 25th September 1066.

The Viking army was encamped on the eastern side of the river Derwent. The only way that they could have been attacked was by an enemy forcing a crossing at a narrow wooden bridge. The Vikings were encamped on an area known today as 'Battle Flats, a large expanse of open land which sloped down to the river.

On the day of the battle, it was a hot day and most of the Viking army was possibly still asleep when the alarm was raised. The first thing they would have seen was a large dust cloud over the road from York and then the sunlight reflecting off weapons and armour.

A large part of the Viking army was at Ricall, 10 miles away, and Hardrada desperately sent a rider there to summon reinforcements.

It appears that Hardrada was taken totally unawares of Godwinson's forced march and that he had believed that the English were still on the south coast. It is likely that the Vikings were awaiting the outcome of the

expected battle between the English and the Normans, knowing that the ferocious reputations of both armies would result in huge casualties and that the victor would be seriously weakened and ripe for an overwhelming attack and subsequent destruction.

The Anglo Saxons came on at pace. Legend states that a Norse warrior held the bridge, alone, whilst the Vikings formed up in battle array. This seems unlikely, because if the bridge had been so narrow, surely the Vikings would have held the eastern bank rather than forming up a half mile or so away on the flats. This lone warrior is said to have slain several Anglo Saxon warriors before he was stabbed in the groin from below the bridge, but in reality any defender would have been brought down by several thrown spears or died under a hail of arrows.

The Anglo Saxons quickly crossed the river and formed their battle lines, facing the Viking host. Harold offered Tostig clemency if he surrendered but Tostig asked him as to what he would offer Hardrada. Harold is reputed to have said that he offered him six feet of English earth or as much as it would take to bury him as he was bigger than most men. Tostig refused the King's offer.

At the mooring ground of the Viking fleet at Ricall, there was mass panic when the rider delivered his message that the Anglo Saxons had arrived. It's doubtful if most of the army at Ricall had access to horses so they had to run the 10 miles to the battlefield. It is recorded that they did so, but that most of them had to leave their armour at the camp.

As with all early medieval battles, detail is suspect. Later Norse sagas suggest that the Anglo Saxons fought as cavalry, and whilst they were developing cavalry, Anglo Saxon armies were mainly comprised of infantry. Other records state that the Vikings formed their customary shield wall and that, in this case, that it formed a huge crescent shaped formation. Horses will not run into tightly packed formations and if the Vikings were formed into a crescent shaped formation, surely any cavalry would have attacked the rear of the flanks?

The Anglo Saxons appeared to have outnumbered the Vikings when the battle started and it is likely that a vicious attack on the Viking shield wall took place. Given the Vikings had been taken completely by surprise, it is likely that many of them had not had time to don their armour. No factual details are known, but there would have been a hail of missile weapons thrown at the shield wall before the attack was pressed home.

The great Viking adventurer, King Harald Hardrada was hit in the throat by an arrow and died, Tostig is said to have taken command of the Viking force and some sources suggest that Harold offered another truce, but whatever occurred, the Anglo Saxons overwhelmed the Vikings who were slaughtered in great numbers. It is even possible that Tostig was killed by Harold himself.

The exhausted Viking reinforcements arrived too late to save their army from defeat. Their leader was one Eystein Orri. Tradition states that Orri's men launched such a vicious attack on the Anglo Saxons, that it is remembered as 'Orri's storm', but the truth is, the Vikings were slaughtered.

Hardrada's fleet was said to have numbered 300 ships. On average, Viking longships carried 40 men, thus hinting at a possible force of 12000 men. Even allowing for less men, Hardrada had brought a large force to England. He'd lost hundreds of men at Fulford too and it is believed that the Viking survivors, swore oaths to Harold in order to secure their conditional release and return to Norway. Only 24 ships were needed to transport the survivors home.

It is really possible that the battle of Stamford Bridge was larger than the forthcoming battle of Hastings.

Three days after the battle of Stamford Bridge, on the 28th of September, Duke William of Normandy and his army landed at Pevensey Bay.

Harold Godwinson took his army south to Sussex.

Footnote.

Harold Godwinson, the last Anglo Saxon King of England died at Hastings and a new, Norman, dynasty would now rule.

The Vikings would never prove to be a viable threat to the kingdom of England again, though their were occasional raids which were mostly piratical in their nature.

The Anglo Saxons would cause several rebellions and there would be a further battle between them and the Normans at Appledore in Dorset in 1069, when Harold Godwinson's sons fought against the Normans and the Dorset Fyrd. (Anglo Saxon shire levy) They were defeated and Harold's sons fled to Ireland.

Harald Hardrada's old enemy, Sweyn the 2nd of Denmark had decided to support the case of the surviving legitimate Anglo Saxon heir, Edgar Atheling, and in 1069, he brought a Danish fleet up the Humber and took the city of York.

King William (the conqueror) offered him money to abandon Edgar, which he did. Edgar fled to Scotland.

The Viking age in England was over.